

# Principals' Perspectives on Pupils' Social Learning in Swedish School-Age Educare

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**Abstract:** This article aims to investigate social learning in the Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) from a number of principals' perspectives. An abductive approach has been adopted to analyse the data from individual interviews with seven principals in school-age educare. The results are understood through an interactionist perspective, with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological system theory as a raster, which gives a didactic view on the principals' governing of the SAEC. Three themes were identified in the principals' perspectives, which are *the core aim of the work in the SAEC*, *the staff's approach* and *pupils' democratic learning*. The results suggest that the perspective of the principals is characterized by having the pupil in focus.

**Keywords:** school-age educare, social learning, principals, system theory

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate social learning in the Swedish School-Age Educare (SAEC) from the perspective of principals. In Sweden, the SAEC is integrated with compulsory schools, it is regulated by the same legislation, The Education Act (SFS 2010:800), and the activities are guided by the same curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2019). SAEC centres also share premises with schools and the same principal most often leads them. The Swedish Education Act (2010:800) states, that to become a principal, it is required to have pedagogical insight, gained from both education and experience. Also, the principal must attend The National School Leadership Training Programme as soon as possible, and the programme must be completed within four years from entry into possession of service.

The core content of the SAEC activities is specified in the curriculum (SNAE, 2019). The activities are termed *educational programme*, with a pronounced role to complement pupil's learning in school. This indicates a knowledge-based focus, which has grown in recent decades (Haglund, 2009; Hjalmarsson, Löfdahl Hultman & Warin, 2017; Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014). Nevertheless, the curriculum emphasises a practice with focus on social learning, such as group-related activities and pupils' sense of security and wellbeing. In the section of the

SAEC, the work to enhance pupils' peer relations is further emphasized. However, the curriculum does not entirely clarify the assignment, that states that care, development and teaching should constitute a whole (SNAE, 2019). Thus, there is room for interpretation in the curriculum, which may cause uncertainty in implementing the practice. The SAEC teachers are on the one hand required to supplement pupils' knowledge-based learning in school, and on the other hand required to work according to a curriculum that highlights social knowledge. Thereby, according to Lager, Sheridan and Gustafsson (2016), a tension between an individualised quality discourse and the social pedagogical approach is revealed.

Additionally, there is an organizational expectation on SAEC teachers to participate during the school day, which Andersson (2014) describes as a grey area in their work, as well as a structural difficulty. When SAEC teachers participate in school, their main responsibility to manage after-school care and activities is affected. This is an obstacle in the assignment, for which, according to Andersson (2014), management has a lack of understanding. Concerning the management, Jonsson and Lillvist (2019) express the importance of the principal as a pedagogical leader, especially regarding the guidance of the staff in developing the work in the SAEC. Alongside with the above described uncertainty in the assignment, this can be a conceivable problem, since a certain amount of understanding may be required to be able to organize and guide the staff to develop the work with social learning in the SAEC. This places the focus on the principal's perspectives of the work in the SAEC, since it is the basis both for how to organize the SAEC and how to be a pedagogical leader.

Although the research on the SAEC has increased in recent years, there is a gap in terms of the principals' perspectives. Therefore, according to the aim of this article, a number of principals' views of social learning in the SAEC are investigated. The research question is as follows: *What characterizes the principals' perspectives of social learning in School-Age Educare?*

## Social Learning

Social learning can be considered as the process, in which a pupil is provided the opportunity to develop social competencies, by the interaction with others. As explained by Fallis (2002), social learning means to acquire social skills and social knowledge, by communicating and by taking active part in the current context. Social skills comprise abilities that are necessary to participate in functional, social interaction, such as to understand rules, and to relate to moral and values. Further considered to be parts of social skills, are behaviors related to relational making, for instance impulse control and problem-solving ability (Saracho & Spodek, 2007b). Also included in social learning, is socially acceptable attitudes, which Saracho and Spodek (2007c) explain as to have a friendly approach to others. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) highlight outcomes of social learning, as the long-range commitment to the well-being of others, extending from social settings, such as child-care settings, to the well-being of the society as a whole. Additionally, guidance and feedback on their acts, help pupils to learn and understand their surrounding environment and their relation to it, as well as they learn to understand themselves (Saracho & Spodek, 2007a, 2007b).

## International Perspectives on School-Age Care

Many countries provide school-age-care (SAC), and yet there are big differences between what is offered, as well as differences concerning the aim of SAC. Like the Swedish one, the international research field is growing. However, what is discernible is that social learning is in focus to various degrees in SAC practices outside Sweden.

Haglund and Anderson (2009) compare the American after-school programs (ASP) to the Swedish SAEC. They highlight both differences and similarities, though the two contexts are both established to enhance children's development and to be a societal support to families. Thereby the ASP can be said to aim at both educating and developing children's social skills (e.g. Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010; Wade, 2014). Concerning the Australian equivalent, Cartmel and Hayes (2016) note that SAC is foremost viewed as a child-minding service. However, they underline the SAC services' potential to contribute to children's good overall health and wellbeing, for example by building social competencies. In a study by Winefield et al. (2011) it is shown that SAC have the ability through certain programmes to improve children's emotional, cognitive and social development. Further, such programmes seem to entail a positive outcome for the children and their families (Dockett et al., 2014). According to Cartmel and Hayes (2016), this points to the potential of quality SAC services to enhance the emotional, cognitive and social development of a child.

In the European setting, there is also a large variety in SAC among the 27 EU member states (Plantenga & Remery, 2017). Although the SAC services' main target is working parents, the differences in user rate depend on several factors. Plantenga and Remery (2017) point out that a low user rate is difficult to interpret, as it may indicate limited availability as well as a situation of less demand, for example for cultural reasons. The opportunity for SAC to contribute to the social, cognitive and emotional development of the child is, however, also highlighted by Plantenga and Remery (2017).

In the Nordic countries, there is an explicit pedagogical discourse in SAC (Pálsdóttir, 2012) with a focus on children's overall development. Denmark and Norway, like Sweden, regulate the activities with specific documents. However, along with Finland, Denmark and Norway are more focused on recreation, play or individual competences and development (e.g. Pálsdóttir, 2012; Strandell, 2013). In Iceland there is no agreement on the purpose of SAC, according to Pálsdóttir and Kristjánisdóttir (2017), who still highlight the fact that the SAC centres have become a central venue for Icelandic children. Pálsdóttir and Kristjánisdóttir (2017) further argue that the SAC centres play an important role, as a place where school-age children can develop their social skills.

The pedagogical discourse that Pálsdóttir (2012) attributes to the Nordic context includes a broad meaning of education and care, with a social pedagogical approach. This discourse can be derived from Fröbels preschool pedagogical theories, also to be regarded as the basis for the focus on social and relational learning. The social pedagogical approach is often described in research of the Swedish SAEC, which brings us further to the next section, concerning the Swedish School-Age Educare.

## Social Learning in the Swedish School-Age Educare

The Swedish SAEC practice is grounded on a social pedagogical tradition (e.g. Ackesjö, Nordänger & Lindqvist, 2016; Lager, 2019; Rohlin, 2000). As initially outlined, the SAEC traditionally is a place for pupils' social learning, based on group-related learning and development.

Research has shown that SAEC teachers believe social learning to be an overall goal for the activity, although the understanding of social learning in implementation and planning differs. For example, Pálsdóttir (2014) highlights SAEC teachers' stressing the importance of social learning in SAEC activities but explaining the peer group to be the most important for developing social capabilities. For that reason, the SAEC teachers do not take part in children's interaction and play but mainly plan for children's social activities.

In Haglund's (2015) study, SAEC teachers focus on pupils' wellbeing and their opportunity to participate in free play. In the same way as highlighted by Pálsdóttir (2014), the SAEC teachers in Haglund's (2015) study stay in the periphery of the pupils. Furthermore, they express themselves as not being very important to pupils' learning (Haglund, 2015). Dahl (2014) points out that SAEC teachers, who further describe social learning primarily as working with children's relations, emphasize the SAEC centres' suitability for children's social learning. Moreover, relations are considered unpredictable and difficult to include in a specific subject; hence the focus of the SAEC teachers in Dahl's (2014) study seems to be directed on the individual and not the environment or the peer group. According to Lager (2015), the work with children's social learning is focused on the opportunity to make new friends. Therefore, the SAEC teachers plan activities with a starting point in stimulating social and relational abilities. However, despite the teachers' intention to support children in making friends, social understanding and understanding of group related issues is, as described by Lager (2015), expected to occur without teacher interference, in the daily interaction between the children.

To sum up, the research indicates that social learning in the SAEC seems to be somehow put to one side in planning and conducting the SAEC activities. Although it is not disregarded, social learning does not appear consciously with the activities. The explanation for this can be found in various factors in the conditions of the SAEC activities, which will be further explored in the next section.

### Conducting the Work with Social Learning in the SAEC

There are challenges in the SAEC, related to the organizational and structural basis. The structural conditions in the SAEC centres are described as problematic in several studies. There are issues described which may contribute to the fact that certain activities for social learning are not conducted. Pálsdóttir (2014) for example, points out the lack of facilities and the workload as obstacles in the SAEC centres. Further highlighted is the idea of the SAEC centre being a place for recreation, thereby a place where children's free play and free choices ought to be encouraged, which becomes an opposition to controlling the activities. Andishmand (2017) underlines the SAEC centre as an important arena for social learning, yet at the same time highlights how large groups of children constitute an obstacle for creating a good learning environment. Partly in contrast to this, Lager (2019) suggests that

group size, limited time for planning and unclear tasks are contributing factors to the SAEC teachers' focus on working only with social relations. However, the challenges due to the conditions are prominent and Lager provides the interpretation that the conditional factors entail SAEC teachers not being able to cope with further content from the curriculum.

Collegial discussions can contribute to positive outcome, concerning the SAEC activities (Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014). However, as Dahl (2014) makes visible, owing to the lack of collegial discussions on the contents of the SAEC activities, it becomes evident that there are shortcomings in describing, analysing and developing knowledge of children's relations. Dahl (2014) implies that this is an effect of the absence of a professional language, and further, that a professional language about children's relations seems to be missing among SAEC teachers. Regarding the SAEC teachers' visions, Närvänen and Elvstrand (2014) stress collegial discussions for making progress, arguing that the visions are crucial for how learning will be enabled in the SAEC. They further claim that continuous collegial reflection on the activities contributes to awareness and development of the working environment. However, as highlighted by Jonsson and Lillvist (2019), the collegial discussions most often have a practical content. They also found that SAEC teachers did not consider social learning as a necessary topic in their collegial discussions. Nevertheless, the SAEC teachers expressed social learning as being the purpose of the activities and articulated that their work was based on common beliefs. This indicates an implicit understanding of what is imbuing their work with social learning. Further suggested by Jonsson and Lillvist (2019) is that the content of the SAEC staff's collegial discussions depends on whether the principal is participating or not.

Haglund (2018) highlights difficulties in the working situation of an SAEC teacher not reaching the goals. The ambition, both of the teacher and of the curriculum, is a high quality pedagogical activity, but the SAEC remains predominantly a care-giving institution. Owing to the fact that the responsibility of what is prioritized in the SAEC centres has been transferred from the state to the municipality, points at the socio-political agenda as being superior to the educational agenda, according to Haglund (2018). Additionally, Haglund (2018) highlights that the teachers' work is accentuated as a result of how the principal leads and follows up the work of the SAEC teachers. Along with the above, this turns the focus to the principal's role as the manager of the SAEC.

## The Principal's Role in SAEC

The teachers' ideas are noted to have significance for their work, but besides their visions, the school's vision is also noteworthy. According to Hemmings (2012), school success is closely related to a distinct vision. Clearly articulated visions contribute to good opportunities to promote learning, based on the curriculum, to reach the set goals. A vision can also counteract confusion concerning the work with learning activities. Further, Hemmings highlights the connection between the quality of a vision and the school's organizational structure.

Both a school's vision and organizational structure can be derived from the management and the management's work with the staff group. In both schools and SAEC, management is connected to the principal's leadership. Löwstedt (2018) claims that supportive learning cultures as well as high quality teaching is shaped through the pedagogical leader-

ship of a school leader. Pedagogical leadership is defined by Ståhle and Eriksson (2018) as direct or indirect, whereas the latter relates to how principals make teaching and learning possible, through the organizational structure. The direct leadership includes the principal's engagement in and feedback on the core processes of school (Ståhle & Eriksson, 2018), which is consistent with leading the SAEC as well. The principal's participation and views will colour the contents of the collegial discussions in the SAEC centre, thereby contributing to the staff's visions of the SAEC activities and consequently to the conditions for pupils' social learning. Thus, to understand the work with social learning in the SAEC, the perspective of principals needs to be observed.

## Theoretical Point of Departure

This study takes an interactionist perspective, with the theoretical point of departure in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) bioecological system theory. For this study, the bioecological system theory gives the opportunity to view social learning in the SAEC didactically, from a number of principals' perspectives. Their views will influence how they control the SAEC, which in turn will influence how the practice is carried out by the staff. Accordingly, the principals' views will affect the conditions for pupils' social learning, which contributes with a didactic perspective on the school leadership.

In the bioecological model, interrelated levels of both close and more distant factors affect learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). The microsystem, including teachers and peers in the SAEC group, the teachers' collegial group or the principal and teachers, can be seen as a pattern of roles, relations and activities between those included in the context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). *Roles* are behaviours and expectations, connected to an individual's role in society, which affect actions as well as thoughts and feelings, based on how one is being treated by others. This further entails the development of *relations*, involving other individuals. To increase complexity in relations, reciprocity is significant, and children especially benefit from the guidance of adults. What can be considered as *activities* involves behaviour in processes with a specific goal and with a time continuum. The micro-environment's characteristics can lead to both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes.

The *mesosystem* contains the relations between different microsystems, for example the relation between pupils and staff in the SAEC centre. The *exosystem* gives an indirect effect on the individuals, with no room for direct mutual influence. For the SAEC centre this may consist of the staffing and the working conditions, as well as the local school's economy. The *macrosystem* is the most distant level, affecting the individuals indirectly through laws, culture and the societal climate. This includes how social skills are described and valued in the SAEC curriculum, and thereby mirrors how social skills are valued in society, guiding the focus of the SAEC practice. Surrounding these four systems is the *chronosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), with the aspect of time, influencing all the other systems over both the short and the long term.

In this article the principals' perspectives are understood as an expression of the macrosystem. However, their perspectives may consist of various parts of the bioecological model, thus, regarded to construct the basis for leading the work with social learning in the SAEC.

## Methods

This qualitative study is based on individual interviews with principals in the Swedish SAEC centres. The principals have various teacher educations, such as compulsory school teacher, upper secondary school teacher, special needs education teacher and SAEC pedagogue. Their occupational backgrounds comprise work as special needs education teachers, compulsory school teachers and SAEC pedagogues. All have completed, or is currently participating in, the National School Leadership Training Programme. The professional experience includes several years as school leaders, of which 1-4 years in the current service, as principal or assistant principal in primary school. To answer the research question, an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) was adopted. That is, there were no predetermined concepts to investigate their perspectives on social learning. In order to gain deeper insights into Swedish SAEC principals' views on social learning, individual interviews were conducted with seven principals. Initially 47 principals in a mid-Swedish region were contacted by email. The initial selection was based on their role of being the principal of leisure time centres for pupils aged 6-9 years. Of the 47 contacted principals, seven agreed to participate. The sample can thus be viewed as a convenience sample (Bryman, 2016) because those being available, based on their interest, were those who participated. The principals worked in four different communities in a mid-Swedish region. Their professional backgrounds vary, from SAEC teachers and primary school teachers to high school teachers and special educational needs teachers. Their professional experience encompassed 2-9 years as a principal or school leader, with 1-4 years in the current assignment. All principals were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants, and they all gave their written consent before participating.

The interviews were conducted at each principal's workplace, and ranged from 55 to 60 minutes each, except for one shorter interview of 35 minutes. The interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone and parallel notes were taken to support the opportunity to follow up with in-depth questions. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, with an interview guide (Bryman, 2016) as the basis for the dialogues. The interview guide was used with the intention to ensure that the issue was addressed.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analysed with an abductive approach (Bryman, 2016). The analysis was thereby carried out as an exchange between the data, the theoretical perspective and previous research. At first the transcripts were read thoroughly to identify elements related to the purpose and research question of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These elements then were sorted together in groups and coded, based on similarities and differences. The codes were not defined in advance but emerged from the data material (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In further readings the codes were categorized into the three themes, *the core aim of the work in the SAEC centre*, *the staff's approach* and *the pupils' democratic learning*, concerning what appeared to characterize the principals' perspectives on social learning in the SAEC centre. Throughout the analysis process, the data and the emerging codes were considered based on the bioecological model, to develop the theoretical understanding of the principals' perspectives. The codes and the elements of the codes, were continuously compared to the meaning of the concepts micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem, also to the meaning of the concepts roles, relations and activities, to determine which part of the model they belong to.

In this study the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (2017) were followed. All principals were informed about the aim of the study, in writing and orally, and they all gave their written consent to participate, before the interviews took place. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw their participation, without any explanation or followed by any negative consequence for them. Further, they were informed that their identities would be confidential, and that all data would be anonymized in the forthcoming presentation of the research results. Also, they were informed that the data would only be used for research and handled with care.

## Results

In this section the results are presented, based on the themes produced in the analysis, to answer the research question of what characterizes the principals' views on social learning in school-age educare. The results display the principals' common view of social learning, in which three themes appear. The themes apprehend the principals' views on the general purpose of the educational programme in the SAEC, their views on how to accomplish the work with social learning and their views on what the pupils can achieve thereby.

### Social Learning as the Core Aim of the SAEC

The results imply that the principals express mutual descriptions of social learning to be the core aim of the educational programme in school-age educare. The overall purpose is stressed to be educating community citizens, which is highlighted in the following quotation:

*... our assignment in school is to create social human beings, who function in society. (Principal 7)*

One part of being functioning is explained as the pupils' ability to adapt to others in the group. The group is accordingly declared to be the basis for the work with social learning in the educational programme. In this work, social interaction and group dynamics are highlighted. The pupils' groups are described as representing society in smaller formats, in which the work should aim to promote individual wellbeing and group security. The reciprocity between the individual and the group is illuminated in the following quotation:

*... to enable social learning is about seeing the needs of each individual and trying to develop it, based on the group. (Principal 6)*

The work with social learning should, according to the principals, be consistently ongoing and comprise all pupils, all the time. The all-encompassing perspective is further revealed in the principals' descriptions of how they consider the work to be done, which brings us to the next section and the second theme.

### The Work on Social Learning should be Based on the Staff's Approach

With reference to the principals' views, the results give the considerations of how to work to promote pupils' social learning. The principals express that the work should be based on the staff's approaches, above mentioned as an all-encompassing perspective, which is illustrated in the following quotation.



*Somehow, I think, everything you do and everything you say to the pupils is social learning in some way. (Principal 5)*

The principals' descriptions reveal two subtopics that they regard as the basis of the professional approach in SAEC. These subtopics indicate the principals' view of the staff's expected general approach to the pupils, along with the view of the staff's leadership approach. The subtopics will be presented below.

## The General Approach

The principals' expression of the general approach accentuates a democratic way of conducting the work with social learning in SAEC, that is, explained by the principals as the staff taking a common point of departure in fundamental values. Differences between humans are highlighted as a basic starting point, which the staff are expected to consider by communicating the equal value of all people. This is exemplified in the quotation below:

*... the equal value of all people, that is the fundamental value of our society [...] it is really important to discuss that we are all humans with equal value. [...] We look different, we believe different, that does not matter, we are all humans. (Principal 5)*

As a result of the right to be different, the freedom of opinion is mutually expressed. The respect for freedom of opinion is defined as important, which is highlighted in the following quotation:

*...we live in a democratic society and we are allowed to have different opinions, which is okay. Your opinion is as important as mine is, even if we do not think the same. (Principal 3)*

With this democratic starting point, the group's common development is prominent in the principals' perspectives of how to accomplish the work with social learning. The principals articulate the importance of creating a sense of community among the pupils in the group, thereby enabling a team spirit. To accomplish that, good relations appear to be considered as a useful tool. The principals put emphasis on the staff's relational work in the pupils' group, in order to increase the wellbeing of each pupil. The relational work is expressed with the staff showing care, by looking after the individual with a genuine interest.

A prerequisite for staff to create good relations, according to the principals, is communication, which is illustrated in the quotation below:

*... I have to start talking, to have a dialogue with the children, in order to create a relation. (Principal 2)*

Not only do the principals give prominence to talking to the children, the quotation above also shows that the work is expected to incorporate the reciprocity of a relation, by having a dialogue. In the descriptions of the dialogue, the staff being responsive in communication is stated. Moreover, what is emphasized concerning communication is that the staff need to communicate with clarity, which leads us to the subtopic of the next section, where the leadership approach is presented.

## The Leadership Approach

This theme, which includes the staff's approach, depicts an approach that is defined to be concerning how the staff are expected to apply their pedagogical leadership. The results show

that the principals assume the staff to be guiding role models, in the work with pupils' social learning. In order to be a guiding role model, the principals give prominence for the staff to be actively participating with the pupils. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

*By being active yourself, as a pedagogue, and for example showing the pupils how to talk to one another [...] that you are simply involved. [...] Being present as an adult is that you simply show yourself. Additionally, control a little. (Principal 4)*

It is suggested by the principals that the staff control the pupils with a gentle hand yet set boundaries and are consistent in their way of guiding them. Thereby mental presence on behalf of the staff is necessitated, expressed to enable the possibility of working preventively. The principals advocate the staff's ability to have an overview, along with the power to act.

The principals' descriptions of how to work additionally suggest the idea of what the work can be expected to lead to, regarding pupils' social learning, which is the topic of the next section, bringing us further.

### Pupils' Democratic Learning in Focus of the Work on Social Learning

With the group and the social interaction as the basis of all the work in SAEC, the results indicate what the expected social learning could lead to, owing to the staff's general approach.

The principals give prominence to democratic values among pupils and express that pupils need to develop respect for differences among people, along with an understanding and respect concerning the equal value of all people. In the following quotation, the democratic perspective is indicated.

*... to understand that we may have different opinions. [...] ... we do not necessarily like each other, but we respect each other. We have the right to be different from each other. (Principal 2)*

Along with the understanding of the equal value of all people, the results indicate that the pupils' social learning should encompass the understanding that "differences can actually enrich" (Principal 5).

The results also show that the principals value pupils' communicative abilities in social learning. These abilities include knowledge of how to speak to and about each other, how to take turns in conversations and how to listen to other people's opinions. The principals underline mutuality in communication, which is clarified in the following quotation:

*... to listen to each other, which is not to be quiet, but to give something instead, to ask questions and to be interested in each other. (Principal 1)*

Moreover, the expectance to listen to each other is pronounced as a way of training empathetic ability, also stressed to be important for the pupils to function in the group. According to the principals, empathy includes good behaviour, which is to take other people into consideration and to respect the integrity of others. A generally held standpoint is that good behaviour includes not offending peers or adults. It is also stressed by the principals that it is important for pupils to be aware of the limit of what is perceived as fun or not, by peers, in other words to know the boundaries of coexistence.

The principals also underline the importance of reasoning about different views. This can be taken to suggest that they understand conflicts as a possible good, as well as an expression of the democratic aspect of staying in SAEC.

*Somehow, we need to teach the children that a conflict is not something of evil, it does not necessarily imply something... bad. It is just a way of actually relating to the social context. (Principal 7)*

The quotation above reveals the view of conflicts as a natural part of social interaction. The results suggest that the principals find it important for pupils not to be afraid of trying to solve conflicts themselves.

The principals propose pupils' good self-esteem, their impulse control and their sense of security as the basis for developing a functional group climate. These results demonstrate the principals' shared view of the pupils' self-knowledge related to the work with social learning.

*Acquiring social skills is... to learn to believe in yourself. That is central! [...] And having the courage to express your thoughts. [...] Simply to dare to be you. (Principal 6)*

The quotation above illustrates the principals' beliefs that social skills are based on positive self-esteem. That is further on suggested to contribute to the common wellbeing in the SAEC group. Concerning pupils' self-knowledge, the principals highlight that the ability to reflect contributes to pupils' increased knowledge about themselves. Reflection is also pointed out as developing pupils' understanding of what consequences their responses to others will have and thereby how they will affect others, in words and actions.

## Summary of the Results

In summary, the results of this study show three themes as the principals' perspectives on social learning in the SAEC. The first theme encompasses the principals' expression, that social learning should be the core aim of the SAEC, and that the work with social learning should comprise all pupils in a consistently ongoing process. Secondly, the staff's approach should be the base for the work on social learning. In this, the general approach is accentuated with a democratic way of working, and the leadership approach is expressed with the basis in the staff as guiding role models. The third theme shows the pupils' expected learning, with an emphasis on democratic values, with a starting point in the SAEC pupils' group.

## Discussion

This study investigates seven principals' views on social learning in the SAEC. The perspectives that characterize the principals' views represent the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which is what can be assumed to be expressed in practice in leading the work in SAEC. At the same time, various parts of the bioecological systems are evident in what constitutes the principals' macrosystem.

## Social Learning as the Overarching Aspect of the SAEC Practice

The results show the principals' views on social learning to be an overarching aspect of all the activities. Through a bioecological perspective, this can be understood as an illustration of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), where fundamental values are anchored and

function as a cultural blueprint of SAEC. The principals' descriptions of social learning as the core aim of SAEC suggest the purpose of the educational programme to be value based. They also suggest the work with social learning to be consistently ongoing, which shows the aspect of time, the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Further, the results can be understood as an expression of the social pedagogical tradition described in previous research (e.g. Ackesjö, Nordänger & Lindqvist, 2016; Lager, 2019; Rohlin, 2000), likewise a place for pupils' social learning.

### Actively Participating Staff to Guide the Pupils' Social Learning

Though the staff's approach can be referred to the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), the principals' descriptions of how to work relate to the microsystem, consisting of pupils and staff in the SAEC group. The results from this study show that social learning is expected to take place in the environment closest to the pupils, in their daily activities, which is similar to previous research (Dahl, 2014; Haglund, 2015; Pálsdóttir, 2014). However, the principals in this study expect the staff to participate actively among the pupils as well, which contrasts with how SAEC staff have expressed their role, related to pupils' learning (Haglund, 2015; Lager, 2015; Pálsdóttir, 2014). The principals' expectation on staff to actively participate can also be regarded as a promotion of social learning in terms of being role models, which is not reasonable without participating. Consequently, the principals explain the staff's approach to direct the work.

The principals highlight the work with social learning to be done with the basis in fundamental values, which are deduced from the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The fundamental values are anticipated by the principals to be expressed in the microsystem through the continuous processes of work on the pupils' social learning. This work can be described as the *activities* in the microsystem, in the bioecological system highlighted as processes involving behaviour. Therefore, what must also be considered is the importance of both continuity and a specific goal, concerning these processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), to optimize the pupils' social learning. One way of addressing this could be to clarify and put into words what the intention of the work in SAEC is, which also could be regarded as a didactic reflection upon the practice.

The results of this study give an indication of the principals' opinion of the importance of the staff to take part in pupils' social learning. This differs from previous research (Haglund, 2015; Lager, 2015; Pálsdóttir, 2014), which implies that staff above all consider social learning to emerge among the pupils. The results of this study show an expectation on the staff to prioritize interaction with the pupils, which with the bioecological theory as a raster can be explained as an expression of the microsystem's *roles*, as an expected behaviour in the context of SAEC. However, the results have no conformity with previous research (Haglund, 2015, Pálsdóttir, 2014) on the staff's perspectives, which highlights the staff's beliefs that they are less important to pupils' learning, which may cause them to interact less extensively. According to my interpretation, this difference, between the staff's perspectives and the principals' perspectives, points to the importance of the fact that principals need to ensure to be aware of what the SAEC staff's views are, concerning the work on social learning. The communication, the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), between different microsystems is necessary to illuminate what is forming the basis of the work in the SAEC.

Further, the principals' relational considerations concerning the staff's work with social learning is prominent, and can be viewed as the relations, described as a part of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Relations have a great impact on learning, above all through the reciprocity between those participating in interaction. Deeper relations will develop through the interaction, according to the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which also stresses that children benefit from adult guidance. This is suggested in the results of this study, in the principals' endorsing the idea of the staff as guiding role models. In this work, the principals put forward democratic values, relational work and communication to promote the pupils' individual and common social learning and development.

Based on the above, it may be understandable that the principals do not express an expectation on the staff to organize specific activities, to promote social learning. Instead, social learning itself can be viewed as a continuously ongoing activity in SAEC. Thus, the necessity to declare what social learning should embrace and to communicate it, between the microsystem's school leader and staff group, is again evident.

The results do not illustrate any standpoints concerning the conditions of SAEC. This is not necessarily an implication of the principals' disregard concerning the conditions or their lack of understanding concerning the obstacles in the SAEC assignment (Andersson, 2014), when leading the work on social learning. The conditions of SAEC are related to the exosystem in the bioecological model, in research (Haglund, 2018; Jonsson & Lillvist, 2019; Lager, 2019) often described as challenges. However, the results could be explained with the focus of this study, which is to highlight what characterizes principals' perspectives on social learning in SAEC. Thus, the somehow problematic conditions are not in focus in the principals' perspectives, but instead the opportunities in the relations between the staff and the pupils, as well as the pupils' potential learning. Thereby it may also be understood that the expectations on the staff are high, which in turn can be interpreted as the principals' confidence in the staff's abilities to work with pupils' social learning.

## The Work and Learning as an Interaction

The results propose education of community citizens as the aim of the work in SAEC, which was earlier outlined as being expected to address all pupils all the time. The principals expect the work to be based on social learning, as the overarching goal as well as the starting point in the educational programme. The staff's approach is, stressed by the principals as what should govern how they relate to pupils; through active participation, the staff are expected to be guiding role models in the daily activities. Thereby the interplay between the staff's expected work approach and the pupils' expected learning outcome seems to be something that goes hand in hand; what the pupils may become can be viewed as a reflection of the staff's work.

The results illustrate that the various systems of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) are interrelated in a continuous interaction. The principals' perspectives on social learning in the SAEC centre, with emphasis on relations and communication in active participation with the pupils, can be interpreted to illustrate an interactionist thinking. Consequently, the roles, relations and activities in the SAEC pupils' microsystem, can be interpreted as expected to contribute towards developing the pupils' macrosystem, where their fundamental values function as the societal blueprint (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The principals' views on social learning make visible the interplay between roles, relations and activities, which have the greatest impact on pupils' learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Admittedly, the results show the principals' focus on the expected work, with an emphasis on what the staff are expected to do in the SAEC practice, as well as what the work should be based on. In this, social learning is both an overarching aspect, the starting point and the consistently ongoing activity. However, according to the perspective that the work with social learning should continuously encompass all pupils, it also places the pupils in focus. Therefore, to sum up, the answer to the research question is that the principals' perspectives on social learning in SAEC is characterized by a focus on the pupil throughout the daily work in SAEC.

## Concluding Remarks and Future Research

This study contributes knowledge about a number of principals' views on social learning in SAEC. However, the results are derived from a small sample, and there is no intention to generalize.

Additionally, the results from this study differ from previous research, which can be understood from the fact that previous studies have studied SAEC from the staff's perspectives, while in this study the focus is on describing the perspectives of a number of principals. Nevertheless, this is a noteworthy difference, since the principal is the one who leads the work in SAEC. Thus, the difference between the perspectives of the principals and the staff raises the question about how principals communicate with the staff group, and to what extent the principals participate in the staff group discussions. Hence, the results may be a starting point for practitioners' reflections upon the didactic intentions of the SAEC, followingly also to discuss different perspectives, to promote consensus on the assignment. The results also contribute theoretical understanding of the SAEC as a system, and the reciprocity between the elements that guide the work in the SAEC. Thereby, the theory contributes a holistic perspective on the SAEC, which gives the opportunity to identify areas for improvement, at different system levels.

Regarding the work in SAEC as a result of how the SAEC centres are directed by the principal (Haglund, 2018), the principal's actual opportunity to shape supportive learning cultures (Löwstedt, 2018) through the leadership (Stähle & Eriksson, 2018), can give reason to be further explored.

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