



## ARTICLE

### Meaningful leisure time in school-age educare: the value of friends and collective strategies

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## Meaningful leisure time in school-age educare: the value of friends and collective strategies

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate how children perceive and experience their opportunities to create meaningful leisure time in Swedish school-age educare. In this study, children's perspectives on meaningful leisure time are investigated through interviews with 170 children aged 6-11 years in 45 groups. The theory of structuration is used to analyse children's agency in relation to structure, and the findings are presented as four different practices and themes: *Strategic actions in collective practices*, *Shared meaningful leisure time in normative practices*, *The struggle for meaning in individual practices*, and *Lack of affordance in meaningless practices*. The results are discussed in relation to children's agency and the conditions for daily practice, which show that children use both individual and collective strategies as well as resistance to create meaningful leisure time. In addition, the study also shows that in a collective organization, friends are the children's most important resource in school-age educare. The result is interpreted with help from a dualistic perspective on how meaningfulness is created.

**Keywords:** school-age educare, children's perspectives, meaningful leisure time, strategies, structuration

## **Introduction**

“Meaningful leisure time” is a key concept in policy texts for Swedish School-Age EduCare (SAEC). It was introduced 50 years ago (Swedish National Government, 1974:42) as children’s meaningful leisure time in relation to the home and family but is now manifest as meaningful leisure time beside learning and development in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and in the curriculum for SAEC (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). Swedish SAEC has more than one hundred years tradition for school-age children’s care, but since the 1960s, it has been a societal institution to support families and parents’ ability to work and study. Since the 1990s, the SAEC is part of the national educational system with a common national curriculum emphasising learning and development besides meaningful leisure time and recreation. Our purpose in conducting this study is from the children’s perspective to investigate how they perceive and experience their opportunities to create meaningful leisure time. Meaningful leisure time in SAEC, viewed from the children’s perspective, is an unexplored field. In educational research on policy and practice, teacher practices, and/or policy texts, such as curriculums, are often examined (Moss, 2002). In this interview study with children, we instead examine children’s perspectives on SAEC practices in relation to the policy of offering them meaningful leisure time. This is vital since today there are 493,000 children (over 80%) aged 6-9 years old enrolled in Swedish SAEC (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020). Moreover, the major educational policy change in the last 20 years, mentioned above, where SAEC has been integrated into the educational system and compulsory school, has resulted in a shift in pedagogical practice, from leisure and care to education and teaching (Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2020).

The key concept of “meaningful leisure time” can be understood as meaningful in a subjective way, that a person’s own view of what is meaningful in life is sufficient (Taylor, 2008). Wolf (2016) argues that meaningfulness can also be understood in a more dualistic way, meaning that what is meaningful for one person has to be considered in a broader perspective to be attractive also in a more objective way. We argue that in the recurrently revised policy for SAEC, since its integration with compulsory school, the implementation of this key concept has undergone a change in focus from the child’s leisure to the notion that leisure should be meaningful in relation to prescribed contents.

During these 20 years of policy change, SAEC has had reduced possibilities to live up to quality standards, and there have been several cuts in structural factors such as child/staff ratios, spatial environments, and qualified staff (Andersson, 2020; Lager, 2015). Recently, quality and equality in SAEC have been investigated by the Swedish Government Official Reports (2020:34) which support this finding. The investigation proposes actions concerning, for example, limiting the size of the groups of children and further education for staff and management. These two main changes for SAEC – the new educational policy and economic cuts – may have changed children’s possibilities of creating meaningful leisure time. Therefore, one of the key drivers of this piece of research is to examine how children view their opportunities for creating meaningful leisure time and what strategies they use, as well as what resources they have access to within SAEC’ pedagogical practice.

With this background in mind, we find it important to explore children’s perspectives in researching how policy changes and reduced structural aspects together create conditions for meaningful leisure time in

SAEC. In addition, from 1 January 2020, the Rights of the Child Convention became law in Sweden, and this shed new light on children's play, leisure, and recreation (UNICEF, 2009, §31). Based on the policy changes described above, the key concept of meaningful leisure time and children's rights, our aim in this study is to investigate how children perceive and experience their opportunities to create meaningful leisure time. The following research questions are raised:

- Which strategies and resources do the children use to create meaningful leisure time?
- Which opportunities and restrictions do the children experience regarding meaningful leisure time?

In this study, children's perspectives and strategies on meaningful leisure time are investigated through 45 group interviews with 170 children, aged 6-11 years. A contextualisation of meaningful leisure time in policy and research follows this introduction. Subsequently, a theoretical synthesis consisting of Wolf's (2010, 2016) theory on meaningfulness, Stones' (2005) structuration theory and Swain's (2004) perspective on children's strategies is presented, followed by a section describing how we conducted the interviews and the analytical process. The findings are presented as four practices of children's meaningful leisure time and then discussed as children's strategies and agency in relation to the conditions in SAEC daily practice.

### **Meaningful leisure time**

Meaningful leisure time is, as mentioned earlier, a concept used in Swedish policy for SAEC but one which lacks an explanation for a deeper understanding. The use of the concept meaningful leisure time in Swedish SAEC can however be traced back to the 1970s (Swedish National Government, 1974:42). Meaningful leisure time in Swedish SAEC is researched early by Jansson (1992) and Flising (1997). Jansson reports that both children and staff associate meaningfulness with an experience rather than a prescribed content. Meaningful activities are recurrent, cohesive, and mutual for children and staff. Flising reports meaningfulness from the child's perspective as "somewhere to be, something to do, and socializing" (1997, pp.106-107). He concludes that meaningfulness is the quality criterion of most importance to the children. In a recent study Lager (2020) reports diverse possibilities for children's meaningful leisure time. The staff's relational work with children, as well as with surrounding institutions, creates different conditions for children's opportunities to create meaningful leisure time. In another study of the child's perspective, Dahl (2011) shows that the most meaningful aspect of SAEC is friends.

In addition, Haglund (2009) discusses the concept of leisure in relation to SAEC practices. He argues that leisure is not defined in the curriculum, but he discusses an interpretation of meaningful leisure time as being associated with the possibility of time for valuable activities. Haglund asserts that this is the result of a strong schoolification of SAEC.

It is noteworthy, that meaning is discussed by Klerfelt and Qvarsell (2012) as a matter of children's culture, and children's right to express themselves. Rohlin (2013) associates meaning with something created by children and argues for multimodal thinking and aesthetics practices as valuable for SAEC.

To sum up, what meaningful leisure time in SAEC can be, and how it can be created, is rarely researched, and studied even less from the child's perspective. There is thus a need for more research about the key concept of meaningful leisure time within SAEC, and especially from the child's perspective with a focus on their institutional and everyday lives, which is the focus in this article. This makes it interesting and important to investigate how children perceive their opportunities to create meaningful leisure time.

### **A philosophical perspective on meaningfulness**

To extend our understanding of what meaningful leisure time can be, and to contribute new knowledge, we have chosen to use the philosophical perspective on meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is researched, for example, by Wolf (2010) who believes that meaningfulness and meaning arise from loving objects that are worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way. Characteristic for this view of meaning is that it involves both subjective and objective elements, which are inextricably linked. According to Wolf (2010), human motivation is often categorized in two ways, selfish (self-interested) or altruistic (concern for the well-being of others), while she points out that these two motives do not fully capture the causes of what drives us in our lives.

Wolf (2016) stresses two perspectives concerning meaningfulness in life: *volunteering*, and *civic activity*. The *voluntary* aspect is not just a question of participating voluntarily; it is also a context for doing something together with others who do the same activity voluntarily. This togetherness makes it meaningful in a wider sense. The *civic activity* is about engagement in something that has value outside oneself. Doing something for others outside one's own family seems to generate a special source of meaning; the subjective meaning is linked to what is meaningful also to others. We believe that this way of perceiving meaningfulness in a dualistic manner can deepen our understanding and contribute knowledge about how children perceive that they can create meaningful leisure time in SAEC.

### **Structure, agency, and strategies in SAEC practice**

In combination with Wolf's (2010; 2016) dual perspective on meaning this article is theoretically grounded in Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which Stones (2005) has further developed. Through the concept of duality of structure, Stones (2005) describes how structure makes people, and people make structure. From this perspective, structures will shape the social interaction between staff and children and between the children at SAEC, which in turn leads to a reproduction of social relationships and institutional patterns.

In Stones' (2005) version of structuration theory, he distinguishes between external structure as a condition for action and internal structures within the agent. External structures exist autonomously from the agent-in-focus and can be described in terms of a structural context of action faced by the actor. The external structure can either facilitate or frustrate the actor's purposes, and its impact on the internal structure can be described as a structuring of the actor.

Internal structures are linked to actors and can analytically be divided into two components, conjecturally, specific internal structures expressed as rules and resources and general-dispositional

structures or as Bourdieu (2019) describes it, as habitus. Stones (2005) considers the child as an active actor who through their actions either routinely, reflexively, strategically, or critically uses their internal structure as resources. When rules and resources are related to each other, structures are created and contribute to the reproduction of social systems and institutional practices.

According to Giddens (1984), rules can be linked to invisible, underlying codes that arise in everyday interaction. Practice is structured by routines and can have unintended consequences, meaning that the staff are unaware of its consequences when they try to handle their own and the children's everyday life. Unspoken routinisation in practice reproduces the structures, and what is done in institutionalized practice is deeply embedded in time and space.

### **Children's agency and strategies**

Children are seen as central actors in their everyday lives, and this fact highlights their right to be part of decisions that concern them. We thus assume that children and teachers within the SAEC interact as human agents through a duality that is culturally embedded. This in turn produces a routinisation of practice with opportunities, strategies, and restrictions regarding children's agency. Therefore, to be able to understand the child's perspective, it is important to analyse and understand the structuration of SAEC.

Through their internal structures, children use internal strategies to handle the external structure expressed as routines and norms, number of staff, time and space, socio-material conditions such as arts and crafts materials and thus contribute to the structuration of SAEC. In relation to the internal structure, we make a distinction between resources and strategies, where resources can be, for example, the peer relationships that are available to the children, and strategies are the processes by which the children use these resources (Swain, 2004).

The concepts of power and agency are related to each other. The child has a transformative capacity in that they have the power to intervene or an opportunity to refrain from the intervention, i.e., the child has an opportunity to act differently as there is always an opportunity for resistance. Through this duality, structures will be reproduced or changed and consequently, children's actions and resistance will be a part of this structuration in time and space and create conditions for agency and meaningfulness.

### **Method**

Methodologically, focus group interviews with 170 children in 45 groups (age 6-11), in twelve different SAEC settings were conducted. The interviews with the children focused on what the children wanted to tell us about their everyday life in SAEC, what they usually do, what they like/do not like to do, about rooms, materials, routines, and staff. Focus group interviews allow children to tell their own stories, express their opinions and the method is, according to Hennink (2014), very suitable for producing data regarding children's own perspective.

The current research process includes a continuous evaluation of design, data production, and analysis, which makes it possible to adjust planning and opens for further data production. This has meant that

the team members (two researchers) have read the transcribed interviews, identified empirical patterns and concepts, and have developed reflexive themes and interpretations. Throughout this analysis, we have also identified children's strategies and possible resistances.

In line with the Swedish Research Council's (2017) ethics rules, all children who participated in interviews did so voluntarily and had written consent from their parents. The children could also choose to interrupt the interview if they wanted to, and if they changed their mind right before the interview, that was not a problem. When the interviews started, the researcher (Lager) had been with the group at SAEC for two or three days, so they had a chance to interact and talk with the researcher before the interview. Participating settings consisted of twelve different SAEC settings, which together give the material a rich variety in terms of localities, spatial environments, the staff and their education, and the age and number of the children. Table 1 below shows the 12 SAEC settings, number of interviews, children, their age, and strategic selection of SAEC settings.

Table 1: settings, number of interviews, children, and their age in the study.

Settings	Number of children at SAEC	Age	Number of interviews (interviewed children)	Strategic selection of settings
Antelope	50	6-10	2 (4)	Rural /private
Bear	100	6-13	2 (14)	Urban/ public
Dolphin	73	8-10	4 (24)	Midtown/ private
Elephant	70	6-9	4 (9)	Urban/ public
Fish	45	6-10	8 (35)	Midtown/ public
Gorilla	90	8-10	2 (4)	Urban/ public
Hare	40	7-8	3 (8)	Rural/ public
Impala	24	9-10	4 (16)	Urban/ public
Koala	90	6-9	2 (6)	Urban/ public
Lion	100	8-11	6 (21)	Urban/ public
Swan	48	8-10	5 (15)	Midtown/ public
Tiger	50	7-10	3 (14)	Urban/ public

Note that in a Swedish context it is common that SAEC settings have different names. In this study, they are given fictive animal names.

These 12 institutions represent a variety of SAEC settings in the western parts of Sweden, in both rural and urban areas, private and public sector, large and small schools. Our strategic selection of SAEC settings represents a wide range of different institutional conditions accordingly, which provides a wide representation of SAEC institutions in Sweden.

## Analysis

The way children express themselves in interviews is analysed in a dialectical relation between actor and structure, where children's agency and strategies are a central unit of analysis but nonetheless viewed in relation to the structural conditions in the settings studied (Stones, 2005). This is understood through pedagogical practice and the children's possibility of having meaningful leisure time. The interviews with the children are a rich empirical material containing many similar expressions from the

children. A careful and accurate selection according to research questions and analytical tools has been made to represent the children's descriptions of meaningful leisure time and the opportunities and restraints they perceive.

The responses from the children were coded and sorted into themes by comparing similarities and differences in an iterative process (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry, 2019). The reflexive thematic analysis is based on all 45 interviews. While performing the analysis, four themes were identified, and they initially focused on what the children perceived as meaningful leisure time in SAEC. Through an abductive, close reading of the interviews, the children's agency in dealing with both opportunities and restraints was made visible. Central in this analysis were external and internal structures, agency, and strategies, (Stones, 2005; Swain, 2004). To that, we add Wolf's perspectives of subjective and objective meaning (2010; 2016). We analysed this by focusing on the routinisation of practice and how rules and resources were related to each other within the material.

When we read what the children had to say, the responses were analysed in relation to both external and internal structures, where we can see different practices as outcomes. We have located networks of children and actions with practices where children can act in different ways to influence their meaningful leisure time. The agents chose different internal strategies to handle the external structure. In these practices we also have analyzed the dualistic perspective of meaningfulness, subjective and objective meaning (Wolf, 2010, 2016) regarding how internal structures, agency, and strategies lead to actions and outcomes in a collective, objective meaningful way or not. Some of these practices reproduce meaningless leisure time, while others produce possibilities for social change, which seems to be meaningful in both an individual and a collective way. This is presented in the results as four different practices, expressed as *Strategic actions in collective practices*, *Shared meaningful leisure time in normative practices*, *The struggle for meaning in individual practices*, and *Lack of affordance in meaningless practices*.

### **Strategic actions in collective practices**

In these collective practices, the children are offered both communities and agency to act strategically. In the interviews, the children say they can participate and influence their daily life through different fora, such as circle-time or student council. They also have possibilities to choose by themselves whether they want to take part in the collective activities offered. There are opportunities for participation where they can act, and make themselves heard and even resist when they are not satisfied with a situation. In this example from SAEC the Fish, we talk about circle-time and their acts of resistance. At the Fish, the circle-time is a common forum for participation and allowing children's voices to be heard, but now, the children say that they have demonstrated against daily circle-time, as a collective strategy:

Researcher – I heard you have demonstrated against circle-time.

-Yes

- (quiet laugh)

-It was L and T that started.

R – It was you that started it, can you tell me why?

-Because it was boring



R – Why was it boring?

-You kind of want to play at SAEC and the third graders are let out later so we do not have any free time.

-We only had circle time, every day, so we could not have any free time so then we did not want it.

R - Ok so how does it feel now that you do not have it?

-Now we only have it on Mondays and Fridays.

-So now Fred (teacher) gets what he wants, and we get what's best for us.

(Child interview 3, Fish)

The transcript above comes from children in third grade who perceive that their time at the SAEC mostly contained circle-time and that there was no room for self-initiated play. They have longer school days, and when they arrive at the SAEC they want to decide by themselves what to do, and they do not want teacher-initiated activities such as circle-time. They find it boring when they cannot choose to take part or not. The children have, through a collective, resistance strategy, come to a solution that they think is good both for them and for the teacher. A possible interpretation of the children's way of resisting is to link it to civic activity, where subjective meaningfulness is linked to a wider, common perspective; meaning is created by doing something for the group. When children in interviews refer to these kinds of collective and strategic strategies, it is evident to us that the children are familiar with the external structure of the setting, they have fora to act in, and they have habitus to act strategically upon things that are not just individual choices but are choices that effect change for a group, a collective value. The outcome is a social change in a collective practice. This seems to be meaningful for the children. The meaningful leisure time makes meaning for both the individual and for the collective.

### **Shared meaningful leisure time in normative practices**

In the SAEC Impala, the children tell us about a common activity that everyone is expected to take part in. It is a wishing tree with leaves on it, and on the leaves, every child has written an activity they wish to do with their friends at the SAEC. Every week the teachers pick a leaf from the tree with an activity the children have had the opportunity to influence, but they cannot choose whether to take part or not. The children at the Impala explain how the children act around common activities:

Researcher – Yes, the wishing tree, then you can decide, right?

-No.

-Then we can decide.

-We must participate, all of us.

-But we have written the leaves!

R – Yes, that is right. You have written what is on the leaves, but then whatever it says, you must take part?

-Yes.

-Yes, everyone at the SAEC.

R – Yes, so you have kind of decided, but?

-You cannot say "No I don't want to or don't feel like it" everyone must participate.

R – Yes, that is right.

-Because, think like this, if E has a leaf where it says maybe football and no one wants to do that or a few, maybe someone says, "But think if it had been your leaf, how would you feel if nobody wanted to do that?"

(Child interview 4, Impala)

In relation to the teachers' demands of participation, the children at the Impala have developed a shared responsibility strategy to participate in some activities. They say that they must take responsibility for one another and sometimes support each other's interests to develop meaningful leisure time. In this example we can see an ambition to link subjective values (their own wishes) to others' subjective values in a common and supposedly shared meaningfulness. The children can decide what they want to do, but they cannot choose not to take part. Voluntariness does not exist, and they must subordinate themselves to the collective. This means that it is not meaningful for everyone, but some of the children point to the collective, that they have a joint responsibility for this activity, that they together share this activity. In these normative practices, a recurring content in the interviews is children's participation in common and collective activities. Children are offered shared meaningfulness in a collective practice through a responsibility to the collective.

These examples about normative practices show how children can act strategically by wishing for an activity, but their agency is at the same time restricted and narrow, often transformed to normative activities to foster children in line with the goals and content in the curriculum. The children can choose content but not participation. The external structure demands that everyone must take part; there is no opportunity to arrange it in other ways due to external structures. The aim is that everyone can act and participate to make it meaningful, but the loss of agency is threatening the concept of meaningful leisure time. The outcome is a normative non-voluntary practice. We see many of these examples in today's SAEC, where teachers try to make the children agents but the external structure with large child groups, low child/staff ratios and lack of rooms for SAEC-work make it hard to fulfil.

### **The struggle for meaning in individual practices**

In this theme, we show two examples where children use individual and avoidance strategies in trying to create meaningful leisure time, but the lack of collective practices seems to make it meaningless. In these individual, vacuous practices, children are offered voluntariness but no common content. When children act, it is in a subjective meaning with no collective benefit. There are, for example, no fora for participation and influence where collective values are negotiated. In these practices, children are not given access to what they would really like to do. Even if leisure time is mostly voluntary, there is not so much offered to take part in.

#### **Individual strategy to get access to desirable content**

Many children in our interviews say that they would like to do crafts, to paint and create things by themselves. However, they have no access to rooms or material for this. One example of this individual strategy is at the Lion. They tell us that the teacher does not have the time or that the children always make a mess and do not clean up after themselves, and that is why they cannot choose these things. These children, on the other hand, say they try to do their best to clean up. In this example, the children at the Lion say that available material sometimes is contingent on being a "good child":

Researcher - Can you choose what to do by yourselves or is it someone else that decides?  
-Sometimes we cannot choose to do crafts.

-You must ask the teachers.

R – Ok, do they say yes or no?

-Sometimes they say yes and sometimes they say no, but you can do crafts, but not use the paint, they say that you cannot use the painting colours.

-Sometimes you can.

-Only sometimes.

R – Sometimes?

-When you have been a good child.

(...)

-They think we make a mess.

(Child interview 1, Lion)

The children at the Lion say that it is the teachers who decide what material they can use when they do crafts. It seems to be a bit unclear if the teachers most often say yes or no, but it seems clear that creative activities are contingent on being “good children” that do not make a mess. When children talk about creative materials and activities, they point out shortcomings in external structure. The children try to act upon their own internal strategies by cleaning as best they can. But in this practice, the internal strategies cannot affect the external structure. This is reproducing an individual practice with less meaningful content. The internal strategies are not leading to collective values and meaning. The external structure is somehow voluntary but at the same time does not offer possibilities to act in a collective way. The voluntariness can refer to agency and structure, but the loss of the collective restricts their agency. The practice is reproducing children to be “good children” who clean up, but this does not give children access to what they would like to have.

### **Individual and avoidance strategy to get access to desirable friendship**

At the Antelope, in turn, the children are split into three groups during the afternoons. The splitting up of friends is due to poor spatial educational environments; there are no rooms where all the children can be together at the same time. The groups are fixed, and during the afternoon, they are circulating between rooms and activities, with one staff member responsible for each group:

Researcher – These groups you are split into, are they good?

-Yes.

-But I want to be with my friend.

R – Yes, of course, but can you be with your friend?

-No, she is in the other group.

R – What do you think about that, that you can't be with someone you want to be with?

-I get a little bit sad because I want to be with my best friends.

R – Yes and you can't be with them for the entire afternoon?

-There are different groups, X is in group 1, Y is in group 2, and I am in group 3, it is no fun.

(...)

R – Okay, but before Christmas you had other groups, didn't you?

-Yes.

-No, then we had no groups, I didn't know group 1, 2 and 3 existed, so I always went into group 2 because I wanted to be with Y, I pretended I was in that group.

R – Oh, could you do that??

-No, you can't really, but they get a little bit angry sometimes.

R – Okay.

-But no one has figured it out, please don't tell anyone!

(Child interview 1, Antelope)

The children at the Antelope above say that the three friends are divided into different groups, which means they cannot be together for the entire afternoon. Two of them can meet when there are two groups outside at the same time, but then the third child is inside in another group with a different activity. At the end, one of the children tells us about an agency strategy to resist the splitting up of groups. By pretending she belongs to another group, she can be with her friend. Sometimes she is discovered, and the staff can become a bit angry with her, but it seems to be worth taking that risk.

At both the Antelope and the Swan, the children express external structures with poor spatial environments leading to splitting the group into smaller groups, because there is no room for them all, until later in the afternoon when the children start to leave, and the groups decrease in size. In the interviews, the children also tell us that the material to play with is insufficient for them all, and that is why they must be split into smaller groups. Besides the external structures, the internal structures of children's agency show how the value of being together with others, their friends, is a source of meaningful leisure time. The children emphasise this by developing strategies to avoid rules that are splitting up friends and preventing them from being together. This agency does not lead to any changes though, nor is it valued in a collective way. Children's collective meaning as the source of meaningful leisure time, the friendship, is threatened by routinized structuration in time and space.

### **Lack of affordance in meaningless practices**

Through the interviews, the children explain that the staff seldom consider their relationships with friends when they divide the children into groups. The structuring and organisation of daily practice split the friends up, resulting in them hardly seeing each other at all during the afternoon at SAEC, as mentioned above. In this fourth theme, we describe what we have chosen to call a meaningless practice, where the children are offered a low grade of agency in a highly structured practice and often use routinized and adaptation strategies. In the interviews, the children describe an internship that lacks both subjective and objective motives for meaningful leisure time. Within this practice, the external structures are strong, and the children have little opportunity through their internal resources to influence or affect the situation. The example from the Swan below shows this pattern:

Researcher – At this time only one group is inside, is it good that only you can be inside, and would it be the same if everyone could be inside?

-No.

-No, it is not good because V, she is blue and we are yellow, and we are friends with her and then we can't be inside all of us, but we can all be outside but sometimes it starts to rain a lot and then maybe it's no fun.

-It becomes too crowded!

R – If everyone were inside it would be too crowded?

-Yes, maybe that is the idea.

R – Yes, is that why you are split up?

-Bad idea.

(Child interview 4, Swan)

The children at the Swan tell us they are split into two groups and that only one group can be inside before snack time because having all the children indoors at the same time is not possible. They can choose to play outside together, which the children say can be a good idea, but when it is raining, it is not always fun to be outside. If they choose to be inside, one of the friends in their community is excluded, they say. The external structure is not offering any resources for participation or influence and the children only use routinized and adaptive strategies to deal with the structure. This we see as a meaningless practice, with neither subjective nor objective meaning.

## Discussion

In the present study, we investigated how 170 children perceive and experience their opportunities to create meaningful leisure time in SAEC settings. These 170 children describe in detail what they perceive as meaningful leisure time in SAEC, mainly in relation to four practices we identified through our analysis: *Strategic actions in collective practices*, *Shared meaningful leisure time in normative practices*, *The struggle for meaning in individual practices*, and *Lack of affordance in meaningless practices*.

The analysis is developed by relating our empirical data to the concept of structure, agency, and strategies (Stones, 2005; Swain, 2004) combined with a philosophical perspective on meaning (Wolf, 2010, 2016). As shown in the analysis, children's meaningful leisure time is structured through agency, routines, time and space, as well as socio-material conditions within the external structure of SAEC daily practice. The external structural dismantling of Swedish SAEC has been clear for a long time (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2020:34). It is through their own internal structures that children within the investigated SAEC institutions develop strategies for dealing with the external structures that are part of the structuring of the everyday practices.

In the theme, *Strategic actions in collective practices*, a collective practice is clarified where the children strategically and critically organize themselves as a strategy to gain influence over the activities and avoid having circle-time at SAEC. Instead, they want free play. In this collective practice, children are active actors where we believe that their motivation can be seen as both selfish (subjective) and a concern for the other children's well-being at SAEC (objective), and that these two motives are inextricably linked (Wolf, 2010, 2016).

Within the theme *Shared meaningful leisure time in normative practices*, a collective practice is also clarified, but in a more normative manner. The analysis clarifies that the children strategically and actively help and stand up for each other and thus take a shared responsibility for creating meaningful leisure time. In line with Wolf (2010, 2016), we therefore argue that children's motives can be described as both subjective and objective, and that they routinely developed a common strategy for creating meaningful leisure time (Swain, 2004).

In the theme we call *The struggle for meaning in individual practices*, an individualized practice is clarified, where the children act through individual strategies to deal with the external structure. The theme's two empirical examples show all routinized and individual strategies within the practices in which the children participate. They use their internal structure and resources that they have access to

(Swain, 2004), and we interpret these strategies as subjective because their actions do not help anyone but themselves (Wolf, 2010, 2014). The theme thus shows a struggle for agency, where meaning was created through individual avoidance strategies which, however, only become meaningful for the individual child.

The fourth theme, *Lack of affordance in meaningless practices* clarifies a practice that the children in our empirical material experience as boring, if not meaningless. This practice lacks an offer of meaningful leisure time where we believe that there are neither subjective nor objective motives (Wolf, 2010, 2016). Instead, it is about the children having to adapt to the external structure that exists as they lack both agency and internal resources to act in any other way. The children's routine strategy in this practice is individual adaptation without the support of any collective (Swain, 2004).

In summary, this study, through a thematic analysis, has identified four strategies which are clarified through four themes where the children have access to different resources. In the first theme, the collective is the resource and meaningfulness is created through friends, in both a subjective and an objective way. In the second theme, the collective is also a resource, but the subjective and the objective meaning do not always link; they cannot always create meaning together in this practice. In the third theme there is no collective, the children use individual strategies to create meaning, they routinely adapt by trying to do the right thing (clean up), or strategically avoid rules. They try to create subjective meaning but make no meaning in an objective way. In the fourth theme, the strategy is adaptation. There is no resistance, or change, more a routinized adaptation to the external structure. The children do not have access to the external structure, and they cannot use their internal structure. Consequently, two collective strategies and two individual strategies that support different kinds of meaningfulness, resources and different forms of meaning are identified. The strategies are strategic action and resistance (collective), shared responsibility (collective), avoidance (individual) and adaptation (individual). It is obvious that the collective strategies are most successful when it comes to creating meaning. Such a collective practice and strategy is also in line with the curriculum's (SNAE, 2016) intentions about teaching and meaningful leisure time in SEAC. This collective strategy is also to be found in the social pedagogical tradition (Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2020) as a foundation for action in SAEC, the group-oriented work. Significantly, didactics and teaching in SAEC, based on this result, make no meaning, the outcome is a meaningless SAEC, a pastime.

In relation to the study's four outcomes of practices, our analysis shows that children acquire resources and develop participation through both internal structures, individual and collective strategies. By adapting to and following rules and routines without resources, the child is afforded what we describe as an adapted agency with a limited scope for action. In the identified collective strategies, the children try to change practice by organizing themselves collectively (Stones, 2005; Swain, 2004). These strategies offer what we believe is an agency with the opportunity for children to act differently. Like Stones, we believe that children can use both the external and internal strategies and that one does not exclude the other. An agency that links individual and collective values clarifies the relationship between power and actors, where social relations and collective organization become a resource that enables meaningful leisure time (Stones, 2005).

In line with Wolf (2010), we can also see the individual strategy as self-interested motivation, while the collective development strategy can be described as altruistic motivation with a concern for the well-being of others. This result is interesting to reflect upon based partly on the individualisation policy that exists within the Swedish education system (Vinterek, 2006), and partly on the long tradition of group-oriented pedagogy that exists within SAEC (Gustafsson-Nyckel, 2020).

Lager (2020) shows in another study how the SAECs external structures create different possibilities for children's meaningful leisure time. In line with our analysis, the analysis identified that the staff's way of organizing the teaching and how relationships within SAEC were formed, as well as socio-material conditions, all provide different conditions for children's opportunity to create meaningful leisure time.

In our study, children perceive that meaningful leisure time at the SAEC is generally based on participation, influence, and voluntariness. The children say they want to decide on their own what to do, they want to have influence in choosing what activities are offered and be able to decide for themselves if they want to take part in shared activities or not. They talk about different forums for having influence on shared activities, and how they can resist.

An important thing to highlight in relation to the above reasoning is that the children repeatedly say they want to be together with their friends - the friends seem to be the source of meaningful leisure time in SAEC. This is important to highlight in relation to how SAEC settings are organised in external structure and how agency is possible in this context because its construction has different outcomes in practice. This result, we argue, emphasizes that the children's friendships are a strong resource that they use to create meaning at SAEC. This result is confirmed by Dahl (2011) who believes that the most meaningful aspect of SAEC is friendship.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study can be interpreted as indicating that children are being socialised to take individual responsibility and to create their own meaningful leisure time. Meaningful leisure time becomes the child's own individual responsibility as many SAEC institutions do not offer any external structures that support the children's meaning-making. It is also a study that shows how children both adapt and challenge the structure through individual and collective strategies as well as resistance, which both reproduces practice and changes practice.

In addition, the study also shows that the children's most important resource at SAEC is their friends and peers as well as a collective organization. Based on the study's empirical themes and analysis, it is relevant for both politicians, school administrators, and teachers to ask the question about how tomorrow's SAEC should be organized and structured to create conditions and opportunities for meaningful leisure time for children.

Flising (1997) points out that meaningfulness from the child's perspective can be linked to "somewhere to be, something to do and to be able to spend time with friends" (p. 107). What Flising points out above is perhaps the core of what strongly contributes to meaningful leisure time for children at SAEC. Children's opportunities for meaningful leisure time should therefore be seen as a quality criterion,

which from a child's perspective should be the most important criterion. In this way, we may be able to avoid meaningless leisure time for children at SAEC.



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