"It shouldn't be something you have to create on your own."

Personal practical knowledge construction and professional learning for teachers in Swedish school-age educare.

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Abstract: Teachers who work in school-age educare (SAEC) in Sweden possess a variety of educational qualifications. They hold a dual role working as teachers both within the compulsory program and school-age educare. This dual competence requirement means that their professional needs are unique and often different from that of their colleagues who only work in the compulsory school system (Berglund, Lager, Lundkvist and Gustavsson Nyckel, 2019). They reside in a complex context when it comes to opportunities for constructing their personal professional knowledge. Considering that already in 2021, the government announced the creation of a national professional learning program (Regeringen 2021), it is essential to understand what type of professional learning is deemed needed by the SAEC teachers themselves. Through narrative interviews with SAEC teachers, this study aims to map an understanding of how the teachers construct their personal professional knowledge as SAEC teachers. The main research question in this study is:

How do SAEC teachers describe the role of professional learning as part of creating and developing their personal professional knowledge?

The findings indicate a need for a systematic approach to recognize the qualification of experienced teachers and create a framework for professional learning opportunities for all teachers in SAEC.

Keywords: School-age educare, extended education, professional development, personal professional knowledge construction, teacher

Introduction and Literature Review

One of the complexities of teacher professional learning (PL) is that it contains both elements of the micro (the teachers) and the macro (schools and governments) systems (Borko and Putnam,1997; Opfer and Pedder, 2011). In Sweden, there is an added challenge to these multifaceted aspects for the teachers who work in school-age educare. Teache rs who work in the extended education program, known as school-age educare (SAEC), have a wider variety of educational backgrounds than teachers within the compulsory school. This reflects how both the work itself and the qualifications for the work have changed over the years. As professionals in the compulsory school system, the teachers working in school-age educare in Sweden, often find themselves "betwixt and between" the roles that the teachers in the compulsory school and preschool inhabit (Ackersjö, Lindqvist and Nordänger, 2019). Being part of the compulsory school system, they occupy a dual role of working both within the

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compulsory program as well as the school-age educare program. This dual competence requirement means that their professional needs are unique and often different from that of their colleagues in the compulsory school system (Berglund, Lager, Lundkvist and Gustavsson Nyckel, 2019). This means that their work is situated within a context that reflects a more complex approach to PL. Ludvigsson and Falkner (2019) refer to school-age educare teachers as positioned in a "borderland" in the educational landscape as the teachers must navigate the two educational systems.

The SAEC teachers work in collaboration with preschool and compulsory school teachers (Skolverket 2022) and are responsible for the before- and after-school educational program. Today, the school-age educare centers employ staff who are educated as leisure time pedagogues, school-age educare teachers, early childhood educators, and other staff with other educational backgrounds. From 2019, a successful completion of a three-year university degree in Extended Education is, however, required to be licensed as a teacher in school-age educare. As part of the degree, they are also qualified to teach an aesthetic subject (music, art, physical education etc.) in the compulsory program. The major challenge faced is how to create PL for a section of teachers whose qualification and educational background has significantly changed over time. It is a complex but relevant question for the profession itself. The field of extended education is a growing area of interest in both Sweden and other countries that have extended education systems. However, most studies have focused on the effect extended education has on student achievement (Klerfelt, Ljusberg, Hippinen Ahlgren, 2020) rather than the PL needs of the teachers. The field of extended education remains very much an under-researched area in education and currently, no study has examined the PL needs of SAEC teachers.

A Brief Overview of School-age educare in Sweden

School-age educare is a non-compulsory section of the Swedish school system. Students ages 6–13 have the right to be enrolled in the school-age educare program, which is to a great deal subsidized by the government. The SAEC program is voluntary and available year-round with a focus on socialization, recreation and education for students aged 6–13. While it is not compulsory, a full 84 % of students aged 6–9 attend the SAEC program as part of their school day (SOU 2020:34).

The teachers in SAEC work in different capacities both within the compulsory and the SAEC program. The title used to describe them has traditionally not been *teachers*, but *pedagogues.* While the Swedish language makes a distinction between the title *pedagogue* and *teacher*, these terms are usually seen as synonymous in English. Similar to extended education programs in other countries, the Swedish system reflects its society and represents the idea of society's need to provide safe places for young children when parents are working. As a government institution, it reflects and promotes the values of the society within which it operates. The Swedish program evolved from being a place for children of the working class where they could learn practical skills to the 1960 s after-school centers known as fritidshem; (leisure home centers*)*, to today's school-age educare centers (Klerfelt, Ljusberg, Hippinen Ahlgren, 2020). The more recent shift to include a focus on pedagogy and teaching implies a more direct connection to compulsory school, which is also reflected in the latest term *school-age educare* (Skolverket/ Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). The origins of

extended education in countries such as Germany, Russia, Denmark and Sweden can be traced back to the end of the 1800 s when their main purpose was to provide children with a meal and protect them from child labour and violence. The development of extended education grew and developed over the years in response to economic and political needs. As society's emphasis on children's rights and wellbeing grew, a strengthening of those rights was reflected in the implementation of the new and different forms of child-care institutions in society (Klerfelt, Ljusberg, Hippinen Ahlgren, 2020). In the 1990 s, extended education went from having been governed by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and being independent of, or loosely connected to, the compulsory school system, to becoming integrated into the public school system (Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020). This change took place around the same time that the phrase *life-long learning* became part of the school policy language (Gustafson Nyckel, 2020). School-age educare was included in the Swedish School law in 2010 and received its own section in the national curriculum in 2016.

This shift from a foundation based on social pedagogy, emphasizing care and citizenship, to teaching and learning meant that the education and qualification of those working within the extended education system changed. While providing care and raising democratic citizens are together with the education part of the SAEC mandate, the inclusion of SAEC in the curriculum denotes a focus on the supplementary educational role of this institution. Sweden now has a three-year university education for teachers in the school-age educare system as well as a licensing procedure that is the same for all teachers. Thus, the professional title for those working in this part of the Swedish educational system has now moved from *pedagogue* to *teacher*.

Professional Learning and Practical Professional Knowledge

Viewed in a holistic sense, teacher PL means that teachers' whole selves are taken into account "as both their personal and professional lives bring significance to the meaning of the teaching act and the learning which results" (Day, 1999, p. 206). It further means that the very nature of teacher professionalism is deeply personal and grounded in the teacher's identity which stems from their personal professional knowledge (Mockler, 2020). One of the reasons why some professional development is not effective is this failure to consider teachers' experience, which in turn plays a major role in their motivation to engage in PL (Guskey, 2010). There is a myriad of important aspects to consider when defining PL that are relevant to the teachers, such as the context, the duration, the content of collaboration available, as well as the opportunity for reflection.

PL that stretches over an extended time is not only preferred by the teachers themselves; it leads to sustainability in changed teacher learning and practice (Avalos, 2011; King, 2014; Timperley et al., 2007). When teachers are given sufficient time to collaborate, dialogue and reflect, they grow both their personal and practical knowledge. Teacher collaboration itself is vital in the knowledge construction of teachers' professional wisdom. Working collectively and having the opportunity to belong to a network of learners promote the learning of the individual teacher and extend support for all teachers involved (Webster-Wright, 2009; Zehetmeier et al., 2015). The collaboration may look different for different venues, but the key component to learning is the interaction, action, and reflection inherent within these PL

opportunities. These practices provide "the experience of acting in complex practical situations" (Zehetmeier et al., 2015. p. 163).

Reflection is an essential quality of learning. Reflective practice can take place both by individuals examining their own practice or as part of a structured learning element of a collaborative learning opportunity (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). Reflective practice links the act of reflection with continuous learning (Schön, 1987). Learning with others emphasizes the social aspect of knowledge construction and creates the possibility for practical application of what is learned and reflected upon (Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005). As well, teachers need to acquire and develop content subject matter knowledge, procedural knowledge, strategic and pedagogical knowledge. These all require different approaches to PL (Kennedy, 2016). One of the most important facets of authentic PL is the teachers' potential to choose what is relevant to their personal professional knowledge.

When teachers are mandated to attend PL (either through their schools or school boards) or when they experience it challenging to find the professional learning they need, it limits their ability to develop their personal professional knowledge and may lead to a disconnect between what they are seeking and what is available (Day, 1999; Judah, 2006; Kooy & Colarusso, 2014). It is also important to remember that in mandated PL, transferring or developing new knowledge into the teachers' actual daily practice is viewed as problematic and does not necessarily lead to improved personal practical learning (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Aim and Research Questions

School-age educare teachers grow and develop their personal professional knowledge in both formal and informal ways. One of their challenges is that the formal PL opportunities available to them remain mostly directed toward the teachers who work in the compulsory section of the Swedish school system. To meet the growing responsibility that SAEC teachers have, it is therefore essential to understand how they can develop their practical and professional skills so they can both meet the multiple needs of the students they serve as well as their assignment of complementing both the preschool class and compulsory school program. The Swedish government recognizes that the most important resource in school and preschool class is the people working there. In their statement on November 3, 2021 (Regeringen, 2021) they announced that they had appointed a special investigator to review whether the right for students to participate in SAEC should be extended. This means that the need for well-educated professionals in SAEC is more crucial than ever. To understand the impact that this will have on the people working in SAEC it is essential, to begin with an analysis of the current situation in our schools; what kind of professional learning do they feel is needed to strengthen their personal professional knowledge? As there does not exist a professional learning accreditation system in Sweden, the most relevant way to examine this question is by asking the professionals themselves. We know the importance of considering their experience and motivation for PL to be relevant and effective (Gurskey, 2010). Through narrative interviews with school-age educare teachers, this study aims to map an understanding of how the school-age educare teachers view the role of PL as an aspect of developing and improving their personal professional knowledge.

The emphasis of the study is on the personal perceptions of the teachers and how they talk about PL as a support for their professional practice. For this purpose, the main research question in this study is:

How do SAEC teachers describe the role of PL as part of creating and developing their personal professional knowledge?

Research Methodology

Theoretical framework

Located within a social constructivist paradigm, this study is informed by the understanding that knowledge is at its deepest communal (Palmer, 2007) and that it is in the interaction with others that knowledge construction takes place. As such, teacher PL can be viewed as part of the journey of constructing and reflecting on the theoretical stances a teacher finds including the understanding that teachers gain in their profession. This research is based on the understanding that there is a "close relationship between narrative, experience and views teaching and learning as a continuous reconstruction of experience" (McIntyre Latta and Kim (2009, p.139). Just as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) construct the teachers' personal curriculum as a metaphor for curriculum and teaching, this study posits that teachers' personal experiential history can be viewed as a way of understanding their PL, both past, current, and future needs. As their constructed knowledge can be seen as revealed in their past experiences, the concept of viewing teachers' PL through their lived experiences has been used as a vehicle to explore patterns related to their experiences. To view the connection between their narratives and their experiences this study draws upon the concept of Huberman's construct of teacher's professional life phases (1998). In the first years of teaching, the teachers seek out help to develop and strengthen their professional identity and efficacy in the classroom. While in the mid-years of their profession, their needs shift to managing changes in their role and identity and focus on the tensions and transitions that are part of seeking to manage the challenges to both their work-life tension and motivation. The last few phases reflect a continued focus on motivation while at the same time, containing a strong sense of commitment, agency, and self-efficacy (Huberman, 1998). Huberman, and later Day (2012), used the ideas of professional life phases as a way of envisioning teachers' professional development and approaching the dynamic nature of their learning. In this study, to sidestep any type of oversimplification, or over-characterization, of the teachers' PL, as they describe it, their narratives will be placed in the holistic context of their telling. The understanding of the narratives is built on the belief that "experience is the primary agency of education" (Eisner in Connelly and Clandinin, 1998, p. ix).

Method

The study uses one-on-one narrative interviews, which are similar to semi-structured interviews, and uses open questions. The interviews took place over the time of a little more than a year from 2018–2019 and were mostly conducted in one-on-one settings. One session of a

group interview at a school-age educare was done. The strength of using narrative interviews as a method is that it will allow a privileged insight into the daily lives of the teachers, and thus provide a window into the needs for PL in their profession. Through the use of narrative analysis (Earthy and Cronin, 2008) the narrative from the interview is examined to provide an interpretation of how the teachers talk about their understandings of their PL and development as relevant to their role as SAEC teachers.

The interpretation of the term narrative analysis spans a variety of both collection and analysis. It is important to highlight that the emphasis of this study is on the personal perceptions of teachers in SAEC and how they construct their narratives when discussing the role that PL has in crafting their personal practical knowledge (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). The concept of narrative in this study refers to the talk that teachers do in the interviews which represents the story they tell of their experience. Thus, it is used to capture the everyday form of information that is familiar to the teachers (Creswell, 2013). To gain a better understanding of, not only the field of professional development in SAEC but, the needs of those who work there, the main research question explores how the teachers describe the role of PL in creating and maintaining their personal professional knowledge.

Participants

Originally fourteen participants with various qualifications and experience in SAEC were invited to this study. Eight of the participants had worked five years or less and six of them had been active in the field for longer than fifteen years. The data from one participant in the group interview was removed from the study as there was not enough information collected in the interview to allow for analysis, leaving the study with thirteen participants in the final analysis.

The data was then grouped into two; those who had worked for less than five years and those who had worked for more than fifteen years. It thus became evident that there might be an alignment with the education programs they had taken. From 1993 a three-year program was in place but before that, a two-and-half-year program led to the certificate of Fritidspedagog (Leisure-time home pedagogue). From 2011 onwards the School-age educare teacher program is on an undergraduate level. Within each degree, there exist several variants of the composition of the programs, however, for the purpose of this study, only the title and year of completion are recorded (Appendix 1). No one in the stage 5–15 years volunteered for the research and this further led to the groups corresponding more directly to the two types of professional exams within the field. The omission of this group will limit the conclusions that can be drawn for SAEC teachers as a whole but will still allow for analysis of the early and late-career teacher's input. As the selection was based on the teachers' voluntary choice to participate, one might describe them as self-aware and highly motivated teachers who are willing to share their experiences with a researcher.

Data collection

The invitation was extended to teachers belonging to a professional network for SAEC teachers and was also placed in a SAEC teacher Facebook group. Through a snowball effect,

other school-age educare teachers invited some participants through recommendations. One of the participants created the focus group by inviting all the SAEC staff in their school to join the study. Most of the interviews took place face-to-face, but a few, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, were conducted via Skype or Zoom. The participants were given guiding questions ahead of time in order to reflect on them or suggest other areas for discussion. The recording was done either by a recording app on the interviewer's phone or through the recording mechanism of Skype or Zoom. Notes were taken during and after the interviews to complement the recordings. The recordings were stored securely and were only accessible through a password.

Data analysis

Analysis of narrative interviews is closely entwined within the process of data collection itself as it includes more than mere descriptions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim in Swedish and then constructed into narratives by the researcher creating a storyline with a chronological structure. During this process, care was taken to reflect on the role the interviewer played in the re-creation of the narratives and recognize the influence of the assumptions by the researcher (Mishler, 1991). The story that the teachers constructed in the interview is seen as a selective reconstruction of their experience and this reconstruction is the basis from which the analysis takes place. It is therefore important to remain aware of the narrative as representative of their experience and thus regard this creation in itself as valid. By approaching the interview text in this matter, it helps identify significant aspects of the individual narrative (Earthy and Cronin, in Gilbert, 2008). The narratives were analyzed through iterative coding where the identification of important phases and patterns led to the creation of themes, which were then applied to the narratives again to create codes used for the analysis of the narratives. The findings were then compared and contrasted. All quotes from the participants have been translated into English by the researcher.

Ethical considerations

The study followed the ethical guidelines as outlined by the Swedish Research Council (2017). All identifying information about the participants has been anonymized. Through translation of the quotes, these are not searchable in the original language. All participants were informed of the ethical guidelines, such as the anonymization of their identities, that were adhered to in the study and signed a consent form to that effect before the interviews took place.

Results

Personal professional knowledge construction: Choosing the path

During the interview process, the teachers with fewer years of experience were more apt to answer the guiding questions directly, while the experienced teachers used the questions more

like a stepping stone to telling their stories. This meant that the researcher's interaction with them reflected different types of responses in the building of the narrative and this may have encouraged different types of vocabulary in their stories. However, it was clear that when talking about their profession, the language the teachers chose to use in their narratives gave an understanding of the role it plays in the social construction of their professional identity (Earthy and Cronin, 2008) but more importantly it revealed what is important to them in their professional development. The language that the teachers used in describing their journey towards their profession revealed a distinct difference between how the more experienced and the newer teachers talk about their profession. While they all had different and individual stories of how they found themselves teaching in SAEC, some clear patterns emerged.

None of the teachers who had worked less than five years indicated that SAEC had been their first choice after high school. Several of them had experience in other jobs such as the army, media industry, sales, or the service industry.

I studied media in high school. Then I did my conscription service and ended up in the army for a bit. Then I worked in the industry for a few years… (*then*) I met people through martial arts where many of them were teachers. I met someone who was studying to become a SAEC teacher, and he really enjoyed it. (Mark)

Several of the participants used the phrase "by accident" or "by chance" when they described their path to becoming SAEC teachers. Their decision was often influenced by either talking to others who worked at SAEC or by finding a way to combine their love of creativity or physical education with an opportunity to teach. Some tried the job on by doing supply work before committing to the undergraduate program and expressed a sentiment that trying out the profession this way gave them a better understanding of what the job entailed.

Several of them had other teaching programs in mind, like a preschool teacher or physical education teacher. Mostly because of the marks requirements for entry into those programs they chose the SAEC program instead as the entry requirements were often lower.

For me, it was by accident. I was going to study to become a high school teacher, in Physical Education. But there was a problem with transferring marks from high school… When I started studying (*to become a SAEC teacher*) I fell for it during my first practicum. I thought it was so much fun. (Samuel)

Well, I was going to be a preschool teacher, or so I thought, but they required English B and I didn't have that, so I supplied (in pre-school). Someone told me that SACE didn't require English B, so that turned out well. They also had Physical Education (*as part of the program*), which I like. (Lotta)

Their language reflected a search for something, however, common among this group was how they quickly felt that this was what they wanted to do early on in the program and the feeling of being in the right place. They described how during their teacher education they had studied alongside students in both the compulsory program and the pre-school program, something they felt had both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage pointed out was the opportunity for collaboration, as they all dealt with the same students during the school day. The most prevalent disadvantage mentioned was the fact the uniqueness of SAEC was often obscured and specific realities from SAEC were not brought up or brushed over quickly in programs that included both preschool and compulsory school students.

Their stories revealed how, after graduating, they all quickly found employment in SAEC. It is interesting to note that only a few of them currently teach the subject (in the compulsory school program) for which they are qualified, and some even teach a different aesthetic subject rather than the one they studied at university. The reason they gave for choosing not to teach their subject was mostly a lack of planning time, where they felt they

were asked to do two jobs but were only given planning time for one. This was quite dependent on where they were employed, and their stories revealed that the principal had a large role to play in the planning of both assignment and preparation time.

Listening to the experienced teachers, it was clear that they used a different language in describing why they chose to become SAEC teachers, where their vocabulary focused on the joy of working with students. Unlike their younger colleagues, the SAEC teachers who had been active in the field for a long time talked about having been focused on working with youths and students even right after high school.

I have always liked working with children. When I finished high school… I started supply teaching at a preschool right away. (Margret)

I studied the youth and children program in high school, that was the name then, for two years. First, I thought it was younger children I wanted to work with …then it was working with the older children that I found most satisfying. (Joannie)

One participant talked at length about the impact of the relationship he formed with his own daycare provider, and how he has kept regular contact with the woman who cared for him as young until her recent passing at 90. He described her as his role model and one of the reasons he wanted to work with students. In all their narratives, they communicated their deep interest in working with students and how this became their main motivation for seeking out a career in SAEC.

While the more experienced teachers placed the students at the center of their career choice, this does not mean that the younger teachers did not have a child-focused approach to their work. You can certainly hear their joy of teaching the students when they talk about their work. Instead, it most likely reflects the reality of the job market and the societal values at the time they finished high school.

Personal professional knowledge construction: Continuing the journey

As can be expected, those who had worked longer had a more varied experience of PL opportunities and have also had a chance to reflect on what kind of PL has sustained their professional identity and agency over the years. They have been able to delve deeper into their profession while seeking to sustain their motivation and commitment to their work (Huberman, 1998). This was found in their stories as well.

In comparison, the teachers still in their first five years of teaching were focused on developing and strengthening their competency as well as a sense of professional identity and efficacy (Huberman, 1989). They talked about searching for a balance in their work which is reflected in their description of trying to define their role in comparison with the teachers in the compulsory school and the teachers in the preschool program. They spoke about not being seen as "real teachers" and instead of being seen more as additional support or resource personnel, more like educational assistants than teachers.

We do not want to be just "additional support". That is our big challenge. You have to be able to advocate for yourself quite a lot and motivate why I am more than educational support (*for the classroom*). (Marvin)

To improve their ability to advocate for their role, they have participated in different types of PL opportunities seeking to strengthen both their professional skills and agency. The participants with less experience talk about their search for PL through networks and social media

as well as through reading books and articles. What they looked for most was to develop skills that relate to their daily practice. The participants spoke of wanting a balance between theory and practice and valued hands-on learning with real-life practical applications. One teacher portrayed lectures with practical hands-on activities as the most meaningful as they helped her see the connection with the curriculum document. As they are still new to the role, the participants spoke passionately about the university courses in their teacher program that they had found helpful and relevant to them now that they are in the field.

They rejected a monolithic view of learning and did not like workshops where there is an assumption that all students are the same and need the same things or that all teachers needed the same PL. Instead, they emphasized the need to individualize PL, as everyone came with different experiences. Some commented on positive experiences where they were given time to choose how they wanted to develop their own PL and emphasized the need for sufficient time to do so as well.

I can feel that if when you are asked to take responsibility for your PL, you are not given the time to do so. We had "trust-time" *(time that you could choose to use as you saw fit)* …two hours per week. (Fanny)

They spoke also about the need for individualization as it gave them the decision-making power to decide what kind of PL they needed based on the needs of the students they were working with.

All participants, regardless of experience, described participating in employer-mandated PL and they defined it as uneven. A considerable part of the mandated PL focused mainly on the compulsory school teachers' role. As this type of PL is mainly situated in the classroom setting, the participants commented on the fact that the needs of the teachers in the compulsory school are not always the same as those working in SAEC.

For the teachers who had been working for more than fifteen years, one thing that was evident in their stories was their passion for learning: their own learning, others' learning, as well as the learning of the students. Their commitment to learning and developing their skills as SAEC teachers was supported by the large variety of professional development they have been engaged in over the years as well as in the vocabulary they used to describe their learning:

… it was completely magical …it was a great program and the courses… the outdoor education was FANTASTIC! (Margret)

Like their younger colleagues, the experienced participants participated in employer-mandated PL. They have all taken university courses that qualified them to teach various subjects, from academic subjects such as reading and mathematics to practical subjects such as woodworking and technology. Several of them spoke of wanting to deepen their understanding of outdoor education and adventure learning. A few of them have even completed a master's degree, committing to studying their field at a higher level with a focus on expanding their knowledge of theory, as well as practice, in the field. Both groups had attended and led workshops, and been part of conferences, study circles and book groups- all to develop their knowledge and skills in the school-age educare pedagogy.

Like other professionals when they become experienced in their field, teachers are often asked to take on a leadership role and this was true for the participants in this research as well. They chose to become involved in advocating for the profession both through the union and other avenues. They spoke of becoming role models for their younger colleagues and acting as

supervisors for student-teachers studying to become SAEC teachers, and most had earned a supervision certificate from the universities. One had taken principal qualification courses but had decided not to go into administration.

When I started, the principals, I think, had a different role than they have today. A lot has changed… it made me hesitate… I went to an interview, but I felt that (*as a principal*) you get too far away from the pedagogical aspect, and I was not quite ready to take that step. (Ingrid)

This sentiment of wanting to be immersed in pedagogical learning at SAEC was also expressed by another participant who was qualified as a compulsory school teacher. Having qualifications in compulsory school, she was offered a job as a classroom teacher. She accepted this job but quickly discovered that her heart was in school-age educare and returned to SAEC after a few years teaching in the classroom environment.

A clear consequence of their commitment to developing their professional competency is that a majority of the experienced participants now work with providing PL for other SAEC teachers. Recognized for their experience, these teachers are leading PL for their colleagues as this is part of their assigned duties, either in the school or in the school district. Others have embarked on creating the PL they found missing in their own professional development.

I applied for a grant to develop PL for school-age educare teachers. In collaboration with my school board and a university, I started up network groups for the school district …and those networks held up later as well. So, we still build all our PL on those networks and the collegial conversations between teachers (*that take place there*). (Linda)

The experienced SAEC teachers also belonged to different types of networks and appreciated the collegial aspect of sharing experiences. PL in network settings was highlighted as an authentic arena for discussion and debate and ran like a thread through all participants' conversations. The experienced teachers described networks that varied in both size and permanence. Some of them were organized by their employers, while others were created for a specific purpose, such as the implementation of the new curriculum. Both the early career and experienced teachers mentioned the university-organized network for teachers in SAEC, to which they belonged. Their descriptions reflected an appreciation of being part of a community of practice where they were allowed to share and reflect together with other SAEC colleagues (Author, 2020).

Personal professional knowledge construction: Finding PL opportunities

All the participants spoke of the lack of relevant PL opportunities; however, they did highlight some they found helpful in building the knowledge they were seeking. A major provider in the PL scenario in Sweden today, *Sveriges Lärare,* offers a variety of opportunities for teachers to build their professional knowledge. *Sveriges Lärare* is the largest union for teachers working in SAEC and provides resources and opportunities for this educational group. Their website provides information on current issues and upcoming PL events, courses, lectures, and resources specially tailored for those working in SAEC (*Sveriges Lärare*, 2023).

The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) is also a provider of PL for SAEC teachers, mostly through web-based courses and as a searchable database for conferences and courses. The courses are presented in modules and are mostly designed to be taken together with a group of co-workers. One of the challenges brought up by the teachers in the

study was the inconsistency with which these courses have been implemented by the principals.

The participants instead identified the various networks they belonged to as a relevant way to learn. Learning together with others in the same role was one of the reasons for preferring learning in a network setting and most of them had participated in local networks.

A different way of connecting with others, especially the younger teachers spoke of, was through the use of social media sites. While some discussed using literature for keeping up on the latest research or learning new skills, most of them highlighted social media sites as both sources for inspiration and facts. Blogs by other educators, YouTube videos and a variety of Facebook groups for SAEC teachers were mentioned. The Facebook groups acted both as information sources and as networks with others in dialoguing around current issues. Besides looking for relevant PL opportunities, all acknowledged that they often had to spend both their own time and/or money on PL that they deemed as relevant to their personal professional knowledge.

Personal professional knowledge construction: Looking toward the future

For all the teachers in this study, much of what they looked for in developing their personal professional knowledge was directly connected to the questions around their daily work with students. What they were seeking, and what some of them created, were opportunities for authentic learning that guided their knowledge around those questions. The importance of networking with other SAEC teachers was often brought up and was seen as valuable. One suggestion was to be able to attend networks as school teams and not merely as individual teachers, as this would allow for communal knowledge construction through reflections and sharing as a group, both at the network meetings and later at the workplace.

A prevalent element found in the narratives was a critical stance towards both employer and government-created PL. Talking about the possibilities that exist in these PL opportunities, the SAEC teachers also highlighted a major problem; those in charge of PL implementation do not appear to have a good understanding of either the program or the teachers' role. The narratives of the SAEC teachers conveyed the deliberate choices they made in pursuing learning that they felt they needed, not what was mandated. They chose PL that was close to their practice, what they said they needed to do their job better, based on professional questions and their problems of practice.

In their search for relevant PL, the experienced teachers looked for recognition of both their experience and qualifications. Not surprisingly all of them have chosen leadership in some form. They highlighted the barriers they had encountered in constructing their professional knowledge: one being unable to complete a master's degree- which further stopped them from being able to teach at the university level. As some of their degrees as pedagogues did not include an undergraduate thesis paper, they could not apply to the master's programs at Swedish universities, and it would require supplementary courses to do so. Only one had persisted in finishing this route. The other PL that they have taken over the years was not recognized in the application process. The equivalence process was both arduous and time-consuming, which has led to most of them finding other avenues to grow their professional practice.

The experienced teachers whom the employer had assigned the duty of PL developers talk about the vagueness of this role. Those who have had the freedom to develop their assignments themselves were secure in that role, while those who have been assigned this role express an uncertainly of what exactly is expected of them:

I fumble a bit here, and I have not received any answers…what is expected of me as the developer of PL? Sometimes I feel a bit frustrated. (Margret)

Like their colleagues who have worked for less than five years, the experienced teachers emphasized the importance of working in a team with other qualified SAEC teachers. In many schools, they were the only licensed SAEC teacher leading the team of other staff. Working as the only qualified teacher at their school or division was described both as "boring" and challenging, as it did not develop their professional knowledge in the way they had hoped for. They highlighted the importance of being supported by each other and not always having to drive the changes by themselves.

It is difficult to drive these *(initiatives)* by yourself. It is something that requires much energy and time. It is very difficult to do this on your own. You need many teachers to be able to drive this at a high quality. (Mira)

When they could not find what they were seeking, they either looked for other arenas, such as involvement with the teacher's union, or actively created opportunities for what they viewed as a need- not only for themselves but for others. This type of advocacy was not always uncomplicated and their frustration with what they see as a lack of vision for SAEC teachers' PL was clearly reflected in their stories. Much of their frustration was directed toward the leaders of the schools.

I think it is tragic, that when it comes to learning there is no regulated organized time for PL; it is completely up to the employer to choose to develop those employed in SAEC or not. (Linda)

Conclusions

The narratives of the teachers in this study revealed how their background and experience are important elements of how they perceive what type of PL is relevant and authentic to them. In answering the research question of how these SAEC teachers described the role that professional learning had in creating and developing their personal professional knowledge, this study revealed not only the challenge of the offers available in the professional learning field itself but mostly how diverse the needs of the SAEC teachers are. The results of the study found a distinct alignment with the professional life phases (Huberman 1988).

The study found that SAEC teachers early in their careers, like the teachers in Huberman's research (1989), were seeking professional learning that guided them in sustaining a strong sense of work identity, self-efficacy, and effectiveness in their work. Their quest was for both procedural and content knowledge, strategies, and hands-on learning (Kennedy 2019). They asked for a strong focus on the practical aspects in both formal and informal learning opportunities. Learning from others, sharing practices and experimenting were highly valued elements in the learning they were seeking (Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, and Donche, 2016).

Similarly, the experienced teachers voiced a need for both sustaining their motivation and commitment while also seeking career advancement opportunities (Huberman 1993). Their

narratives revealed how the learning they were seeking needed to reflect their own teaching reality and the context in which they are operating. (Author, 2019). While the need for personalization and choice was important for them, they often did not find what they were looking for and instead ended up creating PL opportunities that they then shared with others. In this way, it appeared that they could grow their agency while at the same time finding what they needed to build their professional practical knowledge (Calvert, 2016). The younger teachers expressed similar frustrations with finding relevant learning. They turned to the communities found on social media or in networks. Voices from both groups emphasized the collaborative approach to learning, of belonging to a community of learners and expressed that they value the communal aspect of learning in networks and the interactional component of knowledge construction involved (Webster-Wright, 2009; Zehetmeier et al., 2015).

The changing policy and requirements SAEC teachers have experienced in the last decade are perhaps part of why they might find that their personal professional knowledge construction needs differ from their compulsory school colleagues. While choice is an important element in relevant PL, in this study it emerged as a two-edged sword where it both benefits and disadvantages the teachers in their search for authentic PL. While they value being able to make choices in their PL they are equally frustrated by both the lack of direction and availability in this rather "messy" landscape of what is available for them to build their professional practical knowledge in the field.

While not outright rejecting the mandated PL from their employers, they found this kind of PL problematic. The content in these sessions was mostly tailored to classroom settings. As the participants work in both SAEC and the compulsory school program, the information was sometimes relevant to them. However, it lacked an interpretation of how some of this information translates to the non-classroom setting of SAEC. The participants asked for PL that specifically addressed how to build their practical personal knowledge for SAEC. The curriculum states that SAEC is to complement the learning in both the compulsory school and preschool class programs, thus the teachers need this knowledge (Skolverket, 2011 p.22). This study found a clear deficit in the PL that addressed the mandate of SAEC when it comes to the students learning. This leads to a disconnect between their mandate as teachers and their need for PL that develop their personal professional knowledge (Day, 1999; Judah, 2006; Kooy & Colarusso, 2014.) Moreover, the mandated PLs were often "one-shot workshops" with a one-size-fits-all approach (Mockler, 2020) that did not give them time to reflect, either on their own or with colleagues (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988), which was unlikely to lead to a change in their personal practical knowledge or daily practice (Avalos, 2011; King, 2014; Timperley et al., 2007). The voices of the teachers in this study echo the findings from Little (2012) that "more typically, teachers experience professional development (PD) as episodic, superficial, and disconnected from their own teaching interests or recurring problems of practice. (Little 2012, p. 22 in Mockler, 2020).

Future studies

While the authenticity of using a narrative study has the advantage of giving an in-depth view into the perceptions of the SAEC teachers in this study, the study represents a smaller sample of the field itself. Therefore, a larger study would be able to provide a more expansive picture of the professional learning field for SAEC teachers in Sweden. This would hold the possi-

bility to lay the groundwork for determining the development of professional learning for SAEC teachers that are both personally relevant and essential in developing professionalism in the field itself.

Discussion

The teachers' voices tell us that there is great potential to build this workforce and an amazing possibility to have the SAEC program staffed with teachers who truly can complement and compensate the education that the students receive through the preschool class and compulsory school program (Skolverket, 2022). What is missing is a systematic approach to both providing and recognizing as well as organizing the qualification in PL for SAEC teachers. This is particularly true for experienced teachers who are seeking or creating their own opportunities even as they feel uncertain when formally assigned to leadership positions. It also makes it challenging for the newer teachers as there is no clear path to constructing their practical professional knowledge; no guide of what is recognized or valued within the profession. One of the suggestions in the 2015 report *Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD Perspective* (OECD 2015) was to create a National Institute for Teacher and School Leader Quality, as a step to "develop standards, models and frameworks for initial education and continuing professional development" (p. 112).

A framework for continuing PL for SAEC teachers would go a long way to provide a roadmap. A comparison can be drawn to the Ontario school system where accreditation of both initial and continuing teacher learning is evaluated through The Qualification Evaluation Council of Ontario: QECO (Author, 2019). This organization accredits and evaluates PL for teachers in the province through a formal process. Accredited courses known as Additional Qualification courses (AQ) are delivered through Ontario universities, colleges, school boards, teachers' unions and other organizations such as Indigenous Education Coalition (IEC) and are all approved by the Ontario College of Teachers. The AQ system is directly linked to the salary structure of teachers' contracts, and successful completion of these courses can move individuals up the salary grid (Author, 2019). While the Swedish educational system differs in several aspects, one of them being that teachers negotiate their salaries individually, there is strength in having a system for organizing and recognizing professional learning in a formal matter. In a memorandum, the Ministry of Education in Sweden announced that it is sending a professional program consisting of a national structure for professional learning out for consultation. This proposed program would consist of two parts, a national structure of professional development and a national merit system (Regeringen U2021/03373). While it is a recognition of the need for a common understanding of the importance of professional learning, there is no mention of whether it would include SAEC teachers. The consultation process would have to consider the multifaceted aspects of professional learning and will undoubtedly present challenges, one being the inclusion of SAEC teachers to strengthen the learning for the students in the Swedish school system. Other professional learning, both formal and informal, would remain an essential part of teacher learning, however, a framework that recognizes the PL that SAEC teachers lead and participate in would enhance, strengthen, and improve their status and recognize their importance in

the Swedish educational system. To enable the SAEC teachers to construct their personal professional knowledge both structure and recognition are needed, as clearly articulated by this participant:

I think it should be every teacher's right to continuous professional learning. It should not be something that you have to create yourself, but it should be part of the system…it must be part of the structure of the system. (Linda)

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Appendix 1. *Participants*

Teacher (pseudonym)	Years of experience	Job title
Karl	1	School-age educare teacher
Fanny	2	School-age educare teacher
Marty	3	School-age educare teacher
Samuel	4	School-age educare teacher
Lotta	4	School-age educare teacher
Marvin	4	School-age educare teacher
Mark	5	School-age educare teacher
Mira	17	Fritidspedagog
Margret	22	Fritidspedagog and compulsory primary teacher (Preschool class – grade 3)
Linda	22	Fritidspedagog
Otto	23	Fritidspedagog
Ingrid	31	Fritidspedagog
Joanie	32	Fritidspedagog