

# Doing and Resisting Pupilness in Swedish School-Age Educare

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**T**his is a reflection on pupilness as a position/positioning/action within the Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) setting and the norms and values related to this. The aim is to explore what kind(s) of pupil that is constructed in SAEC and how children relate to and act in relation to the norms of the SAEC and thus perform pupilness in different ways. Lastly, the issue of language is considered – what it means to be verbally positioned as “pupil” and what this entails in practice and in research.

The term pupil is used to talk about a specific child position/positioning which children have in relation to the embedded/non-embedded norms and values of educational settings. Pupil is, in a sense, something that one is appointed. It is a position that cannot be (at least not easily) opted out of, since to be a child in an educational setting is to hold the position of a pupil. As with most positions, however, what it entails is something that needs to be performed and negotiated (cf. Lofors-Nyblom, 2009). Even if being a pupil is a position/positioning it is also closely linked to the actions of those in the pupil position. This ‘doing’ of being a pupil is understood as pupilness and draws on a perspective where actors, in this case children, are constantly producing and being produced by the context simultaneously. Such a perspective recognises children as social actors and active participants who have “valid ideas, values and understandings of her/himself and of the world” (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007, p. 460). To understand how pupilness is done in everyday life, action is vital. Even if the child as a social actor must be

understood in the context in which s/he performs pupilness, the label “pupil” is different from the performance of pupilness. The position of pupil can be embraced, adapted, negotiated, resisted, rejected, or transformed. Sometimes children do not want to be pupils and act accordingly – despite the “expectations” of the educational context. Pupilness is also something that is done in interaction with others, emphasising the negotiation of pupilness. In short, in the words of Kofoed (2008, p. 417), “All children in school become pupils, but they perform pupilness differently”. This entails an understanding of pupil/pupilness as something that is simultaneously appointed and performed, that is, children’s agency is emphasised alongside the contexts that frame children’s actions. Pupil and pupilness thus refers to different aspects of being and acting as a pupil and are seen as intertwined (pupil/pupilness). As well as being a certain position (being a pupil), pupilness also incorporates acting against this position in various ways in any given situation.

This means that the everyday organisation of education – the context in which pupilness is played out – is of importance. According to Jackson (1990[1968]), the order in the school environment is communicated through explicit rules that tell children what is expected of them as pupils. As these explicit rules are communicated and visible to children, they can relate to these in a conscious way. However, the explicit rules make up only a part of the norms and values in school. Jackson argues that a large part of the web of norms and values that guide the expected behaviours of children in school is embedded and implicit. He calls this the hidden curriculum of school. The hidden curriculum, unlike the explicit one, is not communicated to children, and the teachers might not even be aware of all the things they expect children to be or do. Thornberg (2009) states that the rules and norms of school have two functions: to construct social order and regulate children’s behaviour, and as moral socialisation or fostering: “[T]he rule system mediates the construction of the desirable or good pupil to children” (Thornberg, 2009, p. 251). It is important to relate the ways in which children understand their possibilities for action in different situations in school to both formal and informal curricula.

In terms of social order, the order of the classroom is relatively well established (cf. Denscombe, 2012). It is, at least, something that most people have certain expectations of. Classroom order is (often) characterised by a pattern of interaction where a teacher leads a group of pupils. Although this is a simplification – not all teaching in school is done in this way – much of the pupilness in school can be said to revolve around the classroom and an order by which pupils are to achieve formulated goals (Bartholdsson, 2007). In this way, parts of pupilness are linked to educational aspects, like academic performance (cf. Löfgren, Löfgren & Lindberg, 2019). There are also parts of pupilness that are more general and can be said to connect to ideas of being a “good” citizen (cf. Thornberg 2009). Embedded values and norms are conveyed and negotiated in the spaces outside the classroom, such as during breaks or between lessons (cf. Lago, 2014; Lofors-Nyblom, 2009). The question of what it means to be a pupil and what is expected of children can change from one situation to the next during the school day. There may be one type of expected behaviour while the teacher is giving a lesson in the classroom, and another in P.E. activities; a third type of behaviour when children act as council representatives, a fourth during play with peers at break times, and so on. Lofors-Nyblom (2009) shows that in the classroom, attributes such as being responsible, reflexive or critical are valued, while values such as honesty, being helpful or caring are more prominent in peer interactions and therefore more important in situations outside the classroom. She also shows that the ability to adapt to different situations is important in order to be considered a “good” pupil. Pupil/pupilness is thus not fixed but under constant negotiation. Children’s understandings of, and what adults communicate about, school order – consciously or unconsciously – are important factors as pupils negotiate how to be a child in school. In this process, children relate their behaviours to verbalised and non-verbalised norms and values, but also contribute to establishing or changing these values and norms. Lahelma and Gordon (1997, p. 120) describe pupilness as a “process /.../ embedded in everyday life”. Such an approach implies that, to understand how pupilness is done in different contexts, one needs to study the different everyday practices of children in

educational settings. To explore this issue further, the Swedish SAEC is used as an example.

## Pupilness and Swedish School-Age Educare

In Sweden, SAEC is a part of schooling for younger school children (aged six to twelve) and many children attend SAECs before and after school and during school holidays (Skolverket, 2019). SAEC is guided by the same curriculum as compulsory school but has its own section. The curriculum states that SAEC should contribute to children's development, that learning in SAEC should be group-based, that activities should be based on children's interests and that SAEC should provide children with opportunities to a meaningful leisure. Aspects such as social environment, play and communication are emphasized as means to achieve this (Skolverket, 2022). The SAEC is an interesting example to use to problematise and examine the concept of pupil/pupilness, even if questions regarding the pupil position/positioning/action are also of relevance within other educational settings such as school or preschool.

There are a few points that make SAEC interesting in this regard. Firstly, the use of the term 'pupil' is quite new in SAEC. Historically, children in SAEC have simply been labelled 'children'. It was only in 2010 that the children who attend SAEC began to be referred to as pupils in policy (SFS 2010:800).<sup>1</sup> In practice, there is still an ambivalence to the concept. This means that staff talk about pupils in SAEC, at the same time there are discussions of what the term does with the expectations the staff have on children and with the expectations that children have on SAEC. Secondly – and as an explanation for why children in SAEC have not been called pupils, even though SAEC traditionally has been an arena of children's

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<sup>1</sup> Children can, of course, do pupilness (or any kind of institutional position of a child) even if they are not labelled pupils. Educational arenas where children are not – officially – called pupils are also places that hold specific norms and values about how children are expected to act and perform (cf. Emilsson, 2008, on Swedish preschool where the term 'pupil' is not commonly used in either research, policy or practice).

learning – SAEC has been part of the education system only for a few decades. It was in the 1990s that SAEC became part of the school system and responsibilities for SAEC were transferred from social to educational authorities. The effects of this shift can still be said to be present in SAEC practice as a tension between tradition and new demands (Elvstrand & Lago, 2020; Lager, 2018). Thirdly, even though SAEC is part of the education system and, for instance, is governed by the school curriculum and shares facilities and organisational structure with compulsory school, it is a voluntary type of schooling. Of course, it might not be up to the individual child to decide whether or not to attend, since it is often the children’s guardians who make that decision. Nevertheless, the compulsory aspect that is often associated with schooling is not in place. Jackson (1990 [1968]) points out that a vital part of being a pupil in school is that children, unlike staff, do not have the freedom to leave. This is, to some extent, not the case in SAEC. Fourthly, educational aspects in SAEC intersect with other, more social pedagogic or holistic aims such as the SAEC being an arena for social relations and children’s leisure (Lager, 2018) since these aspects are much more clearly stated in the SAEC curriculum than in school (Skolverket, 2022).

Overall, this means that the norms around pupilness are different in SAEC than in school, and that children perform against different expectations of what it means to be a pupil. Previous studies show that children expect the SAEC pupil role to be freer than in school, and they expect to have influence and control over their activities (Elvstrand & Närvänen, 2016; Lago & Elvstrand, 2021, 2022). Lager (2021) shows how children also see influence and control as connected to how SAEC staff act. Staff who are present, create mutual relationships with children, and redistribute power, thus inviting the children to co-create activities, are considered to facilitate conditions for children to have influence and control over their activities. Lack of shared negotiation, on the other hand, limits these conditions. Children’s agency and staff’s expectations are thus connected. In her study on pupilness, Ayton (2008) points to the significant role of relationships between adults and children in constituting pupilness. In school, this power relationship merges into a teacher-pupil relationship as the institutional order of school

makes its way into the dynamic. When it comes to the staff's expectations of children in SAEC, Dahl (2014) shows that SAEC staff make normative assumptions about children and support children in relationships that meet those norms (for example consensus, tolerance, respect, inclusion, closeness, trust and adaptation to rules). In line with this, Hedrén and Lago (2023) show that SAEC staff tend to position children as group subjects, that is, as part of a collective. When children are positioned as individual subjects, generally it is when a child deviates from the norms, adult expectations, or the behaviour of the group. So, what happens to pupilness in this specific context where the framing of pupil/pupilness as well as the institutional norms in the SAEC settings can be described as fluid, under construction, or negotiated. In the next section, pupilness in SAEC is discussed based on examples from SAEC practice.

## Doing and Resisting the Pupil Position in SAEC Practice

In SAEC there are, of course, many occasions where children simply act the part of SAEC pupils, that is they act according to the institutional norms in the SAEC settings. In the following, I will look more closely at three examples of when children resist or trouble some aspect of the norms of the SAEC and thus perform SAEC pupilness in diverse ways. This does not mean that these are the most common ways to perform pupilness, but it is interesting to look at situations where children do resist expectations regarding the position of an SAEC pupil, since they make visible the norms, values, and expectations of the institution. Pupilness is more visibly negotiated in these situations than in situations where children comply with or uphold the norms, values, and expectations around how to be an SAEC pupil.

This study is based on research conducted using qualitative methods in SAEC centers. Together with Helene Elvstrand, I have researched various aspects of SAEC, and although the idea of pupilness has not always been at the centre of attention, these studies have raised the question of the position of the child in this setting. In the following data from previous studies are re-analysed

to pin-point the issue of doing pupilness in SAEC. This means that the theoretical lens through which the examples have been analyzed is new, as are the interpretations of the individual examples. The examples are drawn from observational studies of everyday SAEC life and interview studies with children in SAEC. The research involved several schools and their SAEC centres and has followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). For further information and discussion about conduct, see Elvstrand and Lago (2019, 2020) and Lago and Elvstrand (2021, 2022).

### *Doing expected pupilness reluctantly*

Sometimes the norms and values of the individual SAEC centre are made into explicit rules. It is not unusual for children to be part of this process by, for example, being invited to take part in an activity where it is discussed and decided which rules the centre should have. Children's participation is strongly emphasised in SAEC's mission as well as in tradition, and these kinds of formal ways of structuring participation can be seen as a way to ensure that children have a say in SAEC matters (Elvstrand & Lago, 2019). However, participation as experienced by the children and their space for action can also be limited within the activities meant to enable participation. This is shown in the following example.

Ture, 8 years old, tells me that they have had an activity to decide rules for the SAEC centre where the pupils had to write rule suggestions on pieces of paper. Afterwards, they discussed the suggestions and the teachers wrote down the decided rules on a sheet of colourful paper, and then all the children put their thumbprint on the rule sheet [to show that they agreed with the rules]. The paper was then put on a wall in the SAEC centre. This is what Ture and I are looking at right now. Ture expresses displeasure and says that his and his friend's suggestions have not been included. "Why not?" I ask. "Our rules were 'unreasonable'," Ture replies. "Who decided that?" I wonder. "The adults," he replies. "What kind of rules did you want, then?" Ture says that one of the suggestions was that "you can bring your own toys to the SAEC centre". "Well," I say, "that might not work [all the time], but perhaps you could bring toys in with you one day a month?" "Yes, but they just said our rules didn't

work,” Ture says. “What do you think of the rules, then? Do you agree?” “No!” says Ture. “But you put your thumbprint anyway?” I ask. “Yes,” Ture replies. “Why did you do that if you don’t think the rules are good?” I wonder. “Well, you have to!”

When asked why he had signed the rules (by putting his thumbprint on the paper) even though he did not seem to agree with them or feel included in how they had come about, Ture answers “Well, you have to”. This can be interpreted as a reluctant submission to SAEC’s order, but also demonstrates his perceived space for action in the activity, that is, that he has little or no such space. The perceived SAEC order is one where pupils take part in decision making but where the decisions ultimately lie with the adults. As a child, you are expected to follow the adults’ decisions, giving the children a narrow frame within which they are expected to act. The ones who set this frame, in Ture’s interpretation, are the adults, as they are the ones who have dismissed the proposals that transgress the limits of the frame and are “unreasonable”.

In the above example, in addition to the norm that children should be involved in decisions about what rules to have at an SAEC centre, there are also norms about consensus and joint decisions (cf. Dahl, 2014). The act of letting the children put their thumbprints on the rule sheet can be seen as a way of manifesting a collective decision. Ture does not seem to perceive that he has the possibility to oppose the decision, even if he does not approve of the rules. This example highlights that the act of pupilness is not the same as not being critical or hesitant to the norms of the SAEC. Ture can be said to negotiate his position as a pupil between the idea of himself as someone who (has to) obey adult expectations, at the same time as he can be said to express a wish for other child positions. This makes visible the tension between children’s different positions/positionings in SAEC; the institutional order and adult expectations on the one hand and children’s wants on the other. Ture does, however, submit to what he understands as being expected behaviour and can be said to perform expected pupilness, even though he does so reluctantly.



### *Resisting doing 'proper' pupilness*

In other cases, the children do not perform pupilness in the way that the SAEC staff expects them to; rather, they can be said to resist adults' expectations of how children in SAEC are to behave 'properly'. In a previous study, Helene Elvstrand and I explored the practice of doing choice in SAEC (Elvstrand & Lago, 2020). The results show that giving children choice is a strong value in SAEC, and that choice is a central part of how teachers organise activities. The study also shows that there is a strong norm that pupils must make an active choice, and that there are certain kinds of choice that are valued more than others, which is shown in the following example.

A group of five pupils are sitting together on the sofa. They are making jokes together and doing funny drawings, writing love letters, and laughing at them. Stina, one of the SAEC teachers, enters the room. She looks at the group and says: "This is not okay. You can't just hang around. You have to decide what to do. This is not a good way to spend your afternoon at SAEC." Then Stina points to each of the pupils and asks: "What do you choose to do right now?"<sup>2</sup>

Seen through the lens of pupilness, the children are acting in a way that is not in line with the institutional expectations of how to act as a pupil, in any case not a "good" one. The example shows that the freedom of choice that can be said to characterise SAEC (Elvstrand & Lago, 2020) also has clear limits, and that there are activities that are seen as less desirable – or perhaps even as non-activities, as the teacher's statement "You have to decide what to do" can be interpreted as if she perceives that the children are currently doing nothing. What is conveyed by the teacher can be said to be an idea of what constitutes a useful or productive use of SAEC time (cf. Haglund, 2009; Holmberg & Börjesson, 2015). If the expected pupilness is understood as including an expectation that children in SAEC should be doing "something", at least something other than "just hanging around", then the children's actions can be understood as a form of resistance to acting like a proper SAEC pupil. The example makes visible that SAEC pupilness can be quite

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<sup>2</sup> The example has previously been published in Elvstrand & Lago (2020).

different things from the perspectives of adults and children. While values such as “just hanging around” with friends and having fun together are in the foreground for the children, this is not in line with adult expectation of being a ‘proper’ SAEC pupil.

### *Choosing not to be a pupil*

One aspect that makes SAEC an interesting context for exploring pupilness is its voluntary nature. As previously mentioned, SAEC is a non-compulsory type of schooling, which means that the coercive mechanisms that control and keep children in compulsory school are not in place here – although of course, attendance in compulsory school can also be negotiated to a certain extent, e.g., through school absenteeism (cf. Bodén, 2016), and the voluntary nature of SAEC might not always mean “voluntary” for the individual pupil, as it is often the guardians who make the decision. Together with Helene Elvstrand, I have investigated how older SAEC children are sometimes given a space to negotiate their whereabouts at the junction between SAEC and home and that some children can choose whether they want to attend SAEC or not (Lago & Elvstrand, 2021, 2022).

In the following, Bitte, a girl in third grade, explains why she sometimes chooses not to attend SAEC with her parents’ permission, something that she has mentioned earlier in the interview.

Sometimes it’s just that I’m really tired and sometimes I just want to go home and maybe just be with one friend because when you’re at school then you can’t say that someone can’t be with you [during activities]. You can’t do that. But at home you can play by yourself. And then on Fridays, I’d rather not stay [at SAEC] but just go home and be with the family and have a bit of a cosy time. And often it’s like this that I have stuff to do, like this whole week it’s been like that. On Monday I had swimming, and on Tuesday there was a school trip and then we had a class activity in the evening, all on the same day. And

yesterday, on Wednesday, I had horse riding and today I will go looking at summer houses, so... It has been a lot this week.<sup>3</sup>

Bitte describes SAEC as part of a more general regulated time/space in which she as a child/pupil appears to have little space for action. Listening to her listing one activity after another gave me the feeling of being overwhelmed by a wave of regulated activities. Being an SAEC pupil in this example becomes one of many regulated positions for Bitte. However, by “just going home” instead of staying at SAEC, Bitte abandons the requirements of pupilness. By doing so, she can create a space for herself to be with “one friend” (something that can be contrasted with SAEC where the norm is to include everyone) or to have “a cosy time” at home (something that SAEC does not seem to be able to provide). Understood from a perspective of pupilness, what Bitte is doing is removing herself from the exercise of power which in SAEC takes place through the regulation of time and space. Lofors-Nyblom (2009) argues that what positions children as pupils to a great extent is bound to the time/space world of being in the institution. By actively choosing not to be in SAEC, Bitte chooses not to be a pupil or perform pupilness at all. In one sense, Bitte’s choice to leave can be viewed as aligning with the voluntariness of SAEC, at the same time she can be said to be troubling the notion of SAEC as a free space for children’s leisure (cf. Lager, 2018) as she makes it a part of the regulated spaces of childhood.

## Concluding Discussion

The outset of this text has been to reflect on pupilness as a position/positioning/action within the Swedish SAEC setting and the norms and values related to this. The examples show that children in SAEC have to perform pupilness in relation to specific norms, values, and expectations that are in place in SAEC. In this way this study contributes to an understanding of the construction and negotiation of pupilness within this specific context. When the children troubles, show reluctance, or resistance to this order, they both make this order visible and contribute to upholding and

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<sup>3</sup> The example has previously been published in Lago and Elvstrand (2021).

changing it. The established order is built on ideals of consensus and joint decisions; there are expectations on children to make an active choice, with some choices being more valid than others, and requirements to be social and include everyone. The values that are revealed in this study are linked to SAEC's social pedagogic or holistic assignment. There are, of course, also parts of SAEC pupilness that relate to teaching and learning, but in research, these social pedagogic or holistic norms, values, and expectations are present throughout SAEC practice and are thus equally important aspects of being an SAEC pupil (cf. Lager, 2018; Lago & Elvstrand 2021, 2022). The fact that pupilness in SAEC is so closely linked to social pedagogic or holistic norms, values, and expectations means that the doing of pupilness is balanced against a doing of childness. The children's troubling of adult expectation and institutional norms in the SAEC settings can thus be interpreted as a desire for an even looser framework and more diverse ways to be a pupil (or child) in SAEC. For the children values and activities such as "just" being with peers, having more opportunities to own their activities (e.g., by bringing and using their own toys) or having "a bit of a cosy time" seems to be desirable in SAEC.

The tensions made visible as the children embrace, adapt, negotiate, resist, reject, and transform the positions of SAEC pupil is part of the ongoing doings of pupilness. SAEC leaves space to choose not to be in the pupil position more than in other educational settings partly due to its social-pedagogical tradition, partly because of its non-compulsory form where some children can choose to leave if the demands of the institution do not suit their wishes. As SAEC is a voluntary type of schooling, the compulsory aspect that is often associated with schooling and being a pupil (cf. Jackson, 1990 [1968]) is not in place. Presence in SAEC is, at least for some children, something to be negotiated, particularly as they can choose to leave SAEC when they judge the social order to be unreasonable or not desirable. By exercising this choice, they also abandon the possibility (or demand) to be a pupil, since that position is strongly linked to being in the educational context – very few would use the label outside such institutions. For the children themselves, it is not necessarily a position they want to perform as expected. Rather, SAEC pupil/pupilness is (at least

more than in many other educational settings) positions/positionings/actions that need to be understood and done in diverse ways.

### *Positions and the use of language*

Finally, I would like to discuss the role and function of language in relation to children's doing of pupilness/childness in educational settings such as SAEC. As mentioned, the concept of 'pupil' is still quite new in the SAEC setting. Officially, the term was introduced in 2010. Something that I often thought about while writing about SAEC practice was how I should name those I was writing about. I have also had similar discussions with SAEC teachers who express an ambivalence about using the label "pupil". When writing or talking about children's education, it is easy to automatically refer to children as pupils, since that is how they are labelled in law and in policy (SFS 2010:800; Skolverket, 2022). But is it right to use the prescribed official language in research and teaching practice, or should this language be challenged?

An argument I have encountered, both in research and in practice, is that using the term "pupil" in some ways risks limiting children's space for action. To be a pupil is, as already discussed, to act from a specific position and relate to specific norms and values. Although pupilness is seen as negotiable and constantly re-constructed, its core is nevertheless focused on the child as a learner and as someone who should be educated in order to qualify for further education and for citizenship (cf. Biesta, 2009). The risk with using the term "pupil" is that it is these parts of children's lives in educational settings that are made visible. The school context as a setting for children's everyday lives might therefore become less visible. Can research and practice, by challenging the official language, give space for other (important) activities rather than only those that position children as learners or that aim to shape children for society? The ways in which pupilness is done in SAEC points to the conclusion that children are not always acting pupilness. This is most likely true in other educational contexts as well. Challenging the language is one way of expanding children's space in education. Another way is to do as the children do in the

examples shown in this essay, and challenge norms and expectations in everyday practice.

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