"(Maybe) I am going to School-Age Educare because now I have a Residence Permit": Children's Non-Access to School-Age Educare in a Swedish Asylum Context

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ABSTRACT

Sweden's school-age educare has been identified as important for children's access to play and meaningful leisure. However, research has not addressed asylum-seeking children's access to school-age educare or its potential role in asylum contexts. This article draws on data from a 1-year ethnographic fieldwork with children in a Swedish asylum context and explores asylum-seeking children's perspectives and experiences in a context of non-access to school-age educare. The article shows that the children attached positive meanings to school-age educare and were affected negatively by their exclusion from activities in these centres. The article discusses the potential role of school-age educare for children in asylum contexts and argues that school-age educare could play an important compensatory role for asylum-seeking children's overall living conditions, both in terms of care provision and in terms of possibilities for play and meaningful leisure.

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> In my first visit at the school, I was standing at the schoolyard with Hakim, one of the school-age educare pedagogues, while the children were playing around us. We discussed my research project and the possibilities for me to conduct my research at this school. Hakim said that I should write about the younger asylum-seeking children in his introductory class as they were not allowed to attend school-age educare and therefore were excluded from many activities with other children in school. Hakim said that, at this school, the management wanted the children to have a residence permit before getting access to school-age educare.
>
> Fieldnote

INTRODUCTION

School-age educare (*fritidshem*) has become an integral and fundamental part of the Swedish school system and is an important setting for many children. School-age educare should be offered to children between 6 and 12 years (Education Act SFS 2010: 800), and the majority of children in Sweden in this age span are enrolled in school-age educare. In the autumn of 2015, around 84% of the children in the ages 6 to 9 and 58% of all the children in the ages 6 to 12 were enrolled in school-age educare (The Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE] 2016).

In school-age educare, children can spend both mornings and afternoons in school, but before and after school hours. The purpose of school-age educare is to stimulate children's learning and development (SNAE 2018). In addition to cooperation with the compulsory school concerning children's educational goals (Klerfelt & Ljusberg 2018), another important purpose is to provide children with access to play and contribute to meaningful leisure (SNAE 2018). School-age educare thus inevitably relates both to children's right to play and meaningful leisure as well as children's right to education (UNCRC 1989).

In Sweden, asylum-seeking children are formally entitled to a right to education on the same terms as all resident children[1] (Education Act SFS 2010: 800), but the right to attend school-age educare is governed by different rules and fees[2] (Andishmand 2017; SOU 2022: 61). The Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010 Chapter 14 § 5) only stipulates a formal right to school-age educare for children when their parents work or study.[3] The Education Act (SFS 2010:800) nonetheless includes a paragraph that leaves room for a more inclusive interpretation, as school-age educare also can be provided based on a child's needs and family situation (SFS 2010 Chapter 14 § 5). However, a recent official report of the Swedish Government (SOU 2022: 61) states that municipalities generally interpret the paragraph in a restrictive way and that the current legislation excludes various groups of children in socioeconomically disadvantaged families

1 Asylum-seeking children attend the regular school with other long-term resident children, and in school-age educare all children aged 6 to 9 and 10 to 12, respectively normally attend the same school-age educare centre.

2 In Sweden, parents pay a fee, based on their income, for their children to be enrolled in school-age educare (SOU 2022: 61), but the school also receives financial support from the municipality for each child who attends school-age educare no matter the amount received from the parent/s.

3 These rules are implemented differently depending on the interpretation of the municipality.

who would especially benefit from school-age educare. The report states that the compensatory role of school-age educare could in particular benefit newly arrived children. However, the possibility to interpret the paragraph differently means that, in Sweden's system of strong municipal self-government, asylum-seeking children's possibility to attend school-age educare varies between municipalities and even between schools (Svensson, Drackner & Jacksson 2018). Despite this exclusionary context, there is, in general, little research on children's perspectives on non-access to school-age educare or their experiences of exclusion from these centres.

In this article, I wish to contribute with an exploration that particularly focuses on asylum-seeking children's perspectives and experiences in a context of non-access to school-age educare. The article engages in theoretical perspectives in the sociology of childhood (James & Prout 1990; James, Jenks & Prout 1998). Methodologically, the article draws on data from participatory 1-year ethnographic fieldwork with young children in a Swedish asylum context. The aim of this article is to explore asylum-seeking children's perspectives on school-age educare and the meanings they attach to school-age educare centres. This will be explored in relation to asylum-seeking children's perspectives on their non-access to school-age educare and how the children experienced and were affected by their exclusion from activities in these centres. These aims will result in a discussion of the potential role of school-age educare for children in asylum contexts. This, finally, can add to our understanding of children's conditions for belonging in this particular asylum context. My ethnography shows how boundaries for belonging were embedded in the children's living conditions at an asylum centre while longing for a place to call home and for school to provide a sense of belonging although, in school, the children experienced a conditional inclusion (Karlsson 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2021a). This article explores boundaries for belonging through non-access to school-age educare in a Swedish school, in relation to the children's overall living conditions and leisure time.

CHILDREN'S LIVING CONDITIONS AND LEISURE TIME IN ASYLUM CONTEXTS

Research on asylum contexts shows that children and families often live in deprived housing (Barghadouch et al. 2022; Candappa 2001; Fanning & Veale 2004) and that children in asylum centres often have limited access to play and meaningful leisure with little possibility to invite friends from school (Fanning & Veale 2004; Fichtner & Trần 2020; Seeberg, Bagge & Enger 2009; Vitus 2010; White 2012). Families regulated by European asylum-reception systems, moreover often struggle with economic hardship and may not afford toys or necessary clothes and shoes for children's outdoor play (Candappa 2001; Fanning & Veale 2004; Svensson & Eastmond 2013).

Research has pointed out how school has the potential to be an important social space for asylum-seeking children (e.g. Candappa 2000; Candappa & Ignibie 2003; Spicer 2008; Svensson & Eastmond 2013). The school could also be important for migrant children's access to after-school activities (Devine 2009), and studies show that asylum-seeking children experience outside of school hours and on holidays as lonely and boring (Svensson & Eastmond 2013; Vitus 2010). Many studies, however, point to asylum-seeking children's experiences of boundaries of belonging in school and practices that segregate them from peers both socially and spatially (Candappa 2001; Devine 2009; Spicer 2008; Svensson & Eastmond 2013; Åhlund & Jonsson 2016). Nonetheless, asylum-seeking children's play and leisure activities with peers could

create a sense of belonging despite restraining contexts (see Fichtner & Trân 2020; Spicer 2008; White 2012). While it has been reported that school-age educare could enhance asylum-seeking children's possibilities for play and social relations with peers (Svensson, Drackner & Jacksson 2018), research has not addressed the potential role of school-age educare for children in Swedish asylum contexts. In general, there is sparse research on asylum-seeking children's experiences of access to meaningful leisure or after-school activities.

Swedish research has pointed out that school-age educare could have an important compensatory role (Andishmand 2017; Hjalmarsson & Odenbring 2019). The compensatory purpose of school-age educare entails a strive to meet children's different needs while taking into consideration their different socioeconomic backgrounds and living conditions (Klerfelt & Ljusberg 2018). Hjalmarsson and Odenbring (2019), for instance, show that school-age educare centres and pedagogues have an important role to play for children without access to appropriate clothes or equipment for outdoor play and activities, as well as that school-age educare could contribute through the provision of fruit, free lunch meals and afternoon snacks. In the school-age educare centres, children can spend both their mornings and their afternoons outside of school hours and are then offered afternoon snacks and sometimes breakfast. School-age educare can thus be 'depicted as a tool for affording children experiences that are not available in other environments where they already participate' (Klerfelt & Ljusberg 2018: 127).

Research also points to the important role of school-age educare and school-age educare pedagogues in terms of contributing to play and meaningful leisure during schoolyard-breaks, after school-hours, and in school holidays (e.g. Kane 2015; Kane, Ljusberg & Larsson 2013). In explorations from children's perspectives, Swedish school-age educare centres have been identified as important places for children's experiences of play and meaningful leisure through social activities with friends (e.g. Elvstrand & Närvänen 2016; Lager & Gustafsson-Nyckel 2022). Ljung Egeland (2015) moreover shows how children with migrant backgrounds talk about school-age educare as an important setting for playing with friends in a context where they have little access to organised leisure activities. In this article, I wish to contribute to the research field with a study that focuses on asylum-seeking children's perspectives and experiences and that connects migration research and childhood studies with research on extended education.

THEORETICAL CONNECTIONS

Theoretically, this study connects to childhood sociology and the view of children as persons in their own right with agency and voice to express their own perspectives on their circumstances (James & Prout 1990; James, Jenks & Prout 1998). Childhood sociology also involves a critical analysis of the power relations that children are entangled in within the social order and engages an analysis of how children experience their social worlds (Mayall 2008). Mayall (2000) argues for explorations of children's experiences in the institutional and political contexts where children lead their lives. In this study, it is important to consider how the children's socio-legal position as children in an asylum context shaped their experiences. Yuval-Davis, for instance, shows how formal (e.g. membership through a residence permit or citizenship) and informal (e.g. social power hierarchies) boundaries of belonging shapes the everyday experiences of asylum-seekers (Yuval-Davis 2006; Yuval-Davis, Anthias & Kofman 2005). I am here interested in understanding children's

own perspectives and experiences on their conditions of belonging in a particular asylum context. Mayall argues that 'taking children seriously as people leads to shifts in thinking' (2000: 248). My ethnographic analysis inevitably builds on my own interpretations of children's 'voices' as well as my interpretations of children's body language. This means that I include an analysis of children's perspectives through both their verbalizations and their embodied expressions (emotions, body language, silences, tone of voice; Kraftl 2013; Spyrou 2011). These theoretical connections have informed my ongoing ethnographic analyses of lived experiences focusing on the themes that emerged from children's experiences and perspectives in a particular context of asylum reception.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

This study builds on a 1-year ethnographic fieldwork with children in a Swedish asylum context from the autumn of 2015 to the autumn of 2016 (Karlsson 2021a). This period of time has been referred to as 'the refugee crisis' – a time when Sweden responded to an increased number of asylum-seekers with restricted asylum rights and border controls while public opinion showed increased anti-immigration views (Ålund, Schierup & Neergaard 2017). This year, I followed a group of children aged 6–12 while they were placed in the Swedish asylum reception system with their families. The children lived with their families in a large asylum centre and went to school in the local area together with long-term resident children. In the present study, I mainly focus on five of the children, that is, the girls I have chosen to call Enya, Tuya, Amina, Jasmine and Amel, as they were the only children who in my fieldwork, in some way explicitly expressed their perspectives on school-age educare. However, the overall fieldwork and the experiences of all of the participating children inevitably add to my analysis in this article.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The research project was approved by a Regional Ethical Review Board (2015/1402-31/5). The ethical considerations have also included reflections on the power relations in the fieldwork, considering the children's social position and legal status and how I was positioned in relation to them. In the field, I avoided a traditional adult role such as not making the children adhere to institutional rules, but positions ascribed to me based on age varied between 'grandmother', 'big friend' and 'teacher'. Sometimes, I was problematically positioned as a white representative of the 'Swedish' society, while the children were often positioned as the 'other' (Karlsson 2021a). These positions, of course, affected the trust-building processes and reveal the importance of constantly reflecting on my research position in the field of childhood *and* asylum while conducting fieldwork in an institutional setting. The ethnographic data generated in the field was, of course, affected by my position as a white, adult, female researcher and what the children felt they could and wanted to share with me.

The ethnographic setting was initially accessed through the principal and headteacher to obtain consent to conduct my research at the school. Contact with the participating children was initiated in their classrooms, and information about the research project was given in different languages (with the help of an interpreter and multilingual teachers) prior to both parents and children giving their written consent. However, the process of gaining consent from the children was a continuous and collaborative relational process throughout the fieldwork. I aimed for ethical responsiveness

(Karlsson 2022) towards the children's verbal and non-verbal expressions and respect for their integrity, and read their body language to interpret when they wanted to talk to me. The school staff was informed of my study at a staff meeting and in our initial interactions.

The data has been pseudonymised, and the children's names, as well as the names of other persons or places, have therefore been replaced, and detailed information about the participants has been left out.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic methodology in my study was inspired by a participatory approach to ethnography with children (Christensen & James 2000). Ethnography has been emphasised as a particularly important research method for studying children's perspectives and experiences (James & Prout 1990). In the yearlong fieldwork, I engaged in children's everyday practices and participated with the children 3 to 4 days a week in their everyday spaces (the school, the asylum centre and the local community).

The fieldwork was mainly conducted with the children in school throughout their school day (8 a.m.–2 p.m.) and sometimes in the afternoons at the asylum centre where they lived. The data in this article was mainly collected through ethnographic participatory methods that elicited informal and semi-formal conversations (some of them audio-recorded). This was combined with fieldnotes from participatory observations while spending time with the children at school, both in class, during school breaks and outside of school hours.

Walk-tours with the children (cf. Elvstrand & Närvänen 2016) from school to the asylum centre and sometimes in the local community added important insights into the children's overall access to play and meaningful leisure in their everyday lives. The methods also included other participatory methods developed in childhood sociology (Christensen & James 2000), such as visual methods, mappings, drawings and worksheets. My ambition was to give the children more opportunities to verbalise their experiences and give them influence over what methods they preferred. Participatory methods can be alternatives to formal interviews with more complex power relations between adult researcher and child (Spyrou 2011). In the daily conversations in the field, I was attentive to children's non-verbal communication and translated written material, visual methods and translations apps were used to overcome language barriers. The conversations that this article builds on were nonetheless held in Swedish or English.

THE SCHOOL AND THE SCHOOL-AGE EDUCARE CENTRE

The school under study was, in 2015, turned into the main reception school for younger children living at the recently established asylum centre in the local area. In school, the participating children were divided into three different introductory classes (*förberedelseklasser*) and a small former office space was used as one of the classrooms. In the primary and middle school classes, two school-age educare pedagogues, Amanda and Hakim, worked with the children during school hours and another pedagogue, Arash, worked with the preschool class. The children in the introductory classes had no class placement in a regular class with children in their own age and, overall, they had very limited contact with other children at the school, as all instructions, including music, arts and PE, were carried out separately.

The school under study had a school-age educare centre for children aged 6 to 9[4] that was located in the same building and the same classrooms as the compulsory school. The children enrolled in school-age educare had access to both indoor activities and outdoor play in the schoolyard in the mornings before school and in the afternoons after school hours. In the afternoons, these children were offered afternoon snacks.

The school-age educare pedagogues engaged the children in activities in the schoolyard during school breaks and arranged excursions on school holidays. The participating children in this study were, however, not allowed to attend school-age educare. This meant that the school-age educare pedagogues seldom interacted with them and that the school recurrently forgot to invite them to arranged activities in school, as well as, they were formally excluded from activities outside of school hours.

The children had no access to school-age educare while being placed in introductory classes nor after they had been transferred to a regular class in which their classmates attended the school-age educare. The school under study was located in a municipality that, at that time, normally allowed children to attend school-age educare while their parents were unemployed or on parental leave.

In school, the children and their parent/s where (to my knowledge) never informed about school-age educare. This information was not included in the introductory interview (*introduktionssamtal*) that teachers held with newly arrived families. In the performance appraisals (*utvecklingssamtal*), the questions concerning school-age educare were skipped in the conversations and crossed over in the evaluation forms directed to the children. The school altogether seemed to avoid introducing school-age educare to the children and the parents in the introductory classes. The information that asylum-seeking families receive from the Migration Agency focuses on children's formal education, and the municipalities have no responsibility to inform families about the possibility to attend school-age educare (SOU 2022: 61). This meant that very few of the children (or their parent/s) knew about the possibility to attend school-age educare.

CHILDREN'S NON-ACCESS TO SCHOOL-AGE EDUCARE IN A SWEDISH ASYLUM CONTEXT

In this section, I will present ethnographic data from conversations with the few children who explicitly mentioned school-age educare, but I will also draw on data from overall insights from the field and present some fieldnotes of observations where school-age educare is mentioned in conversations (between school staff or between school staff and children). The first empirical section focuses on the children's perspectives on school-age educare and the meanings they attached to the school-age educare centre. The second empirical section focuses on the children's perspectives on their non-access to school-age educare, and the third and last empirical section focuses on the children's experiences of exclusion from school-age educare as well as how they were affected by this exclusion.

4 A sister school, close to the school under study, offered school-age educare to children in the ages 10 to 12.

CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL-AGE EDUCARE

In this first example, I will present a conversation I had with two children, Enya and Tuya, who had lived in Sweden for a longer period of time and had moved around between different schools. In this conversation, Enya talked about the experience of having attended school-age educare in a previous school and the positive meanings she attached to that experience.

> **Sandra:** Did you go to school-age educare at your previous school?
>
> **Enya:** Yeah.
>
> **Sandra:** How was it?
>
> **Enya:** Fun.
>
> **Sandra:** Tell me, what was fun?
>
> **Enya:** That I could play with my friends and my sister and that we could dress up and play princess. And like table tennis. And we always play. To play house and with LEGO (whispering with Tuya).[5]
>
> **Enya:** Yes, then we go to school-age educare when we go to another school. We go to school-age educare a little while, a few days or a month and then we go to excursions, to go to a parc or to the swimming pool and everything. It was so much fun [...].
>
> **Sandra:** How does it feel that you can't go to school-age educare now?
>
> **Enya:** Boring.
>
> **Sandra:** What do you do instead of going to school-age educare?
>
> **Enya:** We go home.

In this conversation, Enya described how attending school-age educare was a fun experience. She attached positive meanings to school-age educare in terms of possibilities for play with friends and her sister but also having access to certain objects and materials that encouraged their play. Enya also talked about how they were able to visit different places and engage in activities on different excursions. In another conversation, Enya also mentioned how much she liked one of the school-age educare pedagogues at the previous school, as he was very funny and kind. Enya was very talkative and excited when she talked about her and Tuya's previous experiences of the school-age educare. When Enya described her non-access to school-age educare as 'boring' this should of course be understood in relation to her previous experience of school-age educare as 'fun' but this also has to be understood in relation to her housing situation. Enya said that she and Tuya went directly to the asylum centre after school, which was the place where the children in this study spent most of their time outside of school hours. The asylum centre was a former hotel where the families lived in former hotel rooms and where the children had little access to play and meaningful leisure. The time spent at the asylum centre was, by some of the children, described as 'boring' and having nothing to do (Karlsson 2019a). The time spent outside of school was thus often filled with boredom when instead they could have spent their afternoons at the school-age educare centre.

When I talked to Amel, she also described the school-age educare centre as a place where children are able to stay in school and play after school hours. She said that

5 Tuya and Enya whispered in their shared language during the conversation, and Enya, who was more confident in talking Swedish, shared their experiences with me.

'the school-age educare centre is a place where we can be until around 4 pm or so in school and we play and such.' When I asked Amel if she had been to the school-age educare centre, she said 'no' but despite her non-access, she attached similar meanings to school-age educare as Enya. The next section will focus on children's perspectives on their non-access to school-age educare.

CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON NON-ACCESS TO SCHOOL-AGE EDUCARE

The children's expressions showed that they understood the reasons for their non-access to school-age educare in different ways. In a conversation I had with Jasmine, she said that she had heard about school-age educare from Amina. Jasmine explained to me that she might be able to attend school-age educare when her mom started working: 'Maybe I will go to school-age educare when my mom works or something'. Jasmine thus comprehended her non-access to school-age educare as dependent on her mom's employment.

In the field, I heard representatives of the school explaining the children's non-access to school-age educare using the same arguments, that is, that school-age educare was not necessary for the children as their parents were not working and that the parents could not pay the fee for school-age educare. In some municipalities, parents' unemployment is indeed a reason for children's non-access to school-age educare, but this was not the policy in the municipality where the school under study was located. In this case, Jasmine's mother was moreover taking care of her youngest child during the day, and normally, children in this municipality could attend school-age educare having parents on parental leave with younger siblings. Amel also mentioned her non-access to school-age educare being connected to her mother's work situation and that her mother was not able to pay the fee for school-age educare.

> **Sandra:** Have you been to the school-age educare centre?
>
> **Amel:** No, because if I want to be at the school-age educare centre I must have money and my mom doesn't have [...] my mom doesn't have a residence permit [...] so that's why.
>
> **Sandra:** So, you need to have money to go to school-age educare?
>
> **Amel:** Yes.
>
> **Sandra:** And a residence permit?
>
> **Amel:** No, I don't have! No, I say that my mom doesn't have, so she doesn't have job. When I come to [the asylum centre] my mom is [there]. She doesn't go to anything so that's why.

In this conversation, Amel explained that it costs money to attend school-age educare and that her mom did not have a residence permit, and therefore she did not have a job. This also meant that her mom was at the asylum centre when Amel finished school. Amel comprehended her non-access to school-age educare as connected to these three explanations.

Amina similarly talked about the residence permit as a reason for her non-access to school-age educare. In the conversation below, Amina explained to me that she could not attend school-age educare but that she was going to as she had recently received her residence permit.

> I can, I mean, not now, eh, go to school-age educare. I am going to, because now I have a residence permit, but, I mean, I don't go to school-age educare now because first we must know where I am going to live, in an apartment or a house or, I mean, where [...] then I can, I mean, if I don't move far from this school, but yeah, then I can move, then I can start school-age educare.[6]

Amina explained that one reason she did not start school-age educare right away, although she now had a residence permit, was that her family was waiting for the Migration Agency to place them in a municipality for their resettlement. In Sweden, families are placed in one municipality while they are in the asylum process and, most often, they are resettled in another municipality if they are granted a residence permit. Amina described how her family was waiting for information from the Migration Agency about where they would move and that when she was in the resettlement process, she might be able to start school-age educare.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL-AGE EDUCARE

Most of the children in my study were affected by their non-access to age educare, but it became more explicit and noticeable for some children.[7] Enya and Tuya were two of the children who clearly experienced their non-access to school-age educare as negative in relation to their experiences at a previous school. Amel, on the other hand, had never been to school-age educare but had heard about it from others and therefore knew she was excluded from that setting and some activities in school.

Amina, who had been transferred to a regular class with classmates attending school-age educare experienced the non-access to school-age educare differently. In relation to her classmates, her exclusion from school-age educare became more explicit. When I talked to Amina, it became clear that she had noticed the difference between her and her classmates' access to school-age educare activities. When I asked her if there was something her classmates could do that she could not, she immediately mentioned her classmates' possibility to attend school-age educare. When I asked Amina what it felt like not being able to attend school-age educare she first told me it was ok, but her body language signalled the opposite before pausing and telling me that 'there are times when they eat something nice, they play something fun, then [...].' When Amina talked about not being able to participate in the activities that her classmates engaged in at the school-age educare centre I interpret her verbalization of her experience of exclusion, but I also mean that her embodied and non-verbalised expressions – her body language, tone of voice and her silent pause – show that this exclusion indeed affected her negatively.

My interpretation of what Amina expressed in the above conversation also builds on an observation I made on another occasion. In the fieldnote below, I describe a situation where the participating children were excluded from a school activity based

6 The title of the article is based on an interpretation of this excerpt, although Amina doesn't explicitly say "maybe" there are many uncertainties in her upcoming access to school-age educare after receiving a residence permit.

7 The exclusion from school-age educare has briefly been presented as part of children's experiences in school (Karlsson 2021a; 2021b) but this article builds on a more in-dept analysis and developed focus on this theme.

on their non-access to school-age educare and how Amina was visibly affected by this exclusion.

> *The children in school have been gathered in the school's main hall for a celebration before Christmas holidays. When the celebration is over, all the children are instructed to help carry their own chair back to the school's dining hall. When we enter the dining hall the tables are set with cloths and decorations with traditional Swedish Christmas motifs and the staff are preparing a special Christmas lunch for the children. The children in the introductory classes are nonetheless sent out from the dining hall to leave school as they are not invited to the Christmas lunch. Amina waits with her class but when her primary school teacher realises that the children in the introductory classes are preparing to leave school the teacher turns to Amina to tell her that she perhaps should leave too as it is probably only the children who attend school-age educare who are supposed to eat lunch in school. When I walk with Amina and some of the other children from school to the asylum centre, Amina walks way ahead of us, showing clearly that she is both angry and sad while saying several times that she is hungry.*
>
> Fieldnote

In this fieldnote, the exclusion is visualised spatially when the children in the introductory classes were placed separately in the back row and not being included in the performances on stage, although they too had been practising the same Christmas carols for weeks. The exclusion becomes particularly explicit when the children were told to enter the dining hall to leave their chairs but were then instructed to leave again while other children were visibly preparing to eat a 'special lunch.' When Amina was told that she too should leave school as the primary school teacher refers to how perhaps only children in school-age educare are welcome for lunch, the exclusion is explicitly connected to the children's non-access to school-age educare. The fieldnote above shows how Amina was clearly affected by the exclusion she experienced – here expressed in a non-verbal embodied, emotional and affective reaction – revealing her emotions of anger and sadness or disappointment. In another fieldnote, the observation of an interaction in a regular class also shows how the exclusion from school-age educare is actualized:

> *Jasmine is about to be transferred to a regular class and is invited to the classroom to meet her new classmates. When the primary school teacher invites the other children in the class to ask Jasmine questions, to get to know her better, one of the children well-meaningly asks: 'Are you going to go to school-age educare?'. The teacher immediately interrupts before Jasmine gets a chance to answer: 'No! Not school-age educare, right?' and turns to Jasmine who silently shakes her head.*
>
> Fieldnote

In this fieldnote, I interpret Jasmine's non-verbal expressions of her experience of exclusion from school-age educare that is, her silent head-shake when her exclusion from school-age educare is accidently pointed out in front of her new classmates.

In addition to Amina's embodied reaction when she had to leave school without the Christmas lunch, she also verbalised how she was affected by this exclusion, repeatedly saying that she was hungry as she was not provided with a lunch meal

at school that day. This should be understood in relation to the children's access to food as well as the taste of the food that was served at the asylum centre. In the asylum centre, all the meals were served in a canteen, and several of the children described this food as 'disgusting' and some even said that they refused to eat it (Karlsson 2019a). The families had no access to cooking facilities at the asylum centre and therefore had no real influence over food choice or food provision. This context perhaps provides a deepened understanding of why some of the empirical examples point to food as connected to school-age educare. In the excerpt below, Amel also describes how she stayed in school after school hours to eat her afternoon snacks, which are normally provided to children in school-age educare although she had to bring her own.

> **Amel:** When I finish school, I don't go home, I just go to play in school a bit and I wait for [my big sister] to finish school or I do so many things so that I too will be in school.
>
> **Sandra:** Mhm, so you stay in school after?
>
> **Amel:** Yeah.
>
> (...)
>
> **Sandra:** What do you do here in school when you stay?
>
> **Amel:** I play, eh, I go outside and play, I do some homework in the maths book, I sit and wait and eat what I have, so that's why, yeah.

In a way, Amel here describes a form of resistance against her non-access to school-age educare in her attempt to stay in the school building so that, as she says, she *too* will be in school, where she plays, studies and eats her own afternoon snack. The way that the exclusion from school-age educare affected the children must be understood in relation to their overall asylum context and perhaps, in particular, their housing situation. In my 1 year in the field, I observed that the children mostly walked straight to the asylum centre after school and had little or no access to after-school activities. The children described the asylum centre as a place that infringed on possibilities for play as they lived in overcrowded former hotel rooms with their families with little access to toys and in a premise that was highly regulated and prohibited playing in the shared premises (Karlsson 2019a). The children had no access to after-school activities in the local community or in any sports clubs and had very little access to cultural activities.

In this context, the children were longing for a place to call home and for school to provide a sense of belonging. In school, the children indeed had more access to play and social relations, and therefore, the school became an especially important place for the children. Many of the children, increasingly started to arrive early before school and stay in the school building after school hours to play (Karlsson 2018; 2019b). However, when the children indeed tried to claim the school space as a space for play outside of school hours, the school responded with rules that prohibited their play inside the school premises (Karlsson 2021a). This could perhaps be the reason why Amel corrects herself in her conversation with me when she underscores that she plays outside. The children's inclusion in school was thus conditional, and they experienced both informal and formal boundaries of belonging, including non-access to school-age educare.

The rules of the school resulted in a dilemma for the primary school teachers and the school-age educare pedagogues, as they based on the children's overall situation,

understood the children's needs but were obliged to follow the rules set up by the school management. Instead of having the role of ensuring children's access to play and meaningful leisure, the school-age educare pedagogues were assigned the role of removing the children from the school premises after school hours (Karlsson 2021a). The children's non-access to school-age educare also resulted in their exclusion from arranged play activities with peers during school hours at the schoolyard, as the school-age educare pedagogues who arranged these activities did not know the children in the introductory classes.

In the year I was in the field, the majority of the asylum-seeking children were never included in the school-age educare at this school. In addition to the formal rules for access to school-age educare, the school management meant that the school lacked enough space for enrolling the children in school-age educare and that the children were only in this school temporarily anyway. When the school finally gave the children access to school-age educare, the enrolment process was prolonged as the parents could not access the digitalized enrolment process and had to hand in paper forms that were lost by the school administration. When I returned to the field after the summer holidays, most of the children had moved from this school, and the few children who now attended school-age educare had received a residence permit.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, I have explored the perspectives and experiences of young children in a Swedish school while placed in an asylum context. My ethnographic interpretations focus on asylum-seeking children's verbalised perspectives and their non-verbalised and embodied expressions of their experiences (Kraftl 2013; Spyrou 2011). This study thus connects to childhood studies and migration studies and adds new and important insight into asylum-seeking children's belonging through an exploration of non-access and exclusion from school-age educare in a particular asylum context.

The findings in this study show that the children who had previous experiences with school-age educare understood and remembered these centres as a place for playing with friends, with access to material and objects for play, as well as it offered possibilities to go on excursions to other fun places. These findings correspond with previous research on children's perspectives on school-age educare (e.g. Elvstrand & Närvänen 2016; Lager & Gustafsson-Nyckel 2022; Ljung Egeland 2015).

The other children in this study had never attended school-age educare and were (to my knowledge), never formally informed about school-age educare. The findings, however, show that a few of these children, in different ways, had appropriated knowledge of school-age educare from peers. These children attached similar meanings to school-age educare as those who had attended school-age educare and described it as a place where children could stay in school to play.

The findings moreover show that the children understood and explained their non-access to school-age educare as related to the formal boundaries set up by the regulations that govern the right to access school-age educare and how these regulating policies were interpreted in the institutional practices of the local school. These findings moreover indicate that the children had somewhat accepted the school's explanations for their non-access to school-age educare.

In addition to the formal boundaries to the right to access school-age educare (which effectively excludes different groups of children), the children's non-access

was in this context also specifically understood as related to their socio-legal status as asylum seekers. This study shows that some of the children understood access to school-age educare as connected to having a residence permit, and most of the children indeed only accessed school-age educare after they received a residence permit and were in the resettlement process. The residence permit can thus indeed be understood as a formal boundary for belonging that, in this study, was connected to children's non-access to school-age educare and the more permanent status that resettlement entails for asylum-seeking children in relation to the Swedish school in general. The boundaries for belonging also connect to spatial and temporal dimensions of non-access explained by the school management as being due to a lack of space for (a separate) school-age educare centre for these 'temporarily present' children.

The results of this study moreover need to be understood and discussed in relation to the children's housing situation and the overall asylum context that informed their everyday lives. My ethnography gave me insights into the participating children's experiences of living in a strongly regulated asylum centre where they had restricted access to play and meaningful leisure (see Karlsson 2018). In this context (and other similar asylum contexts), I argue that school-age educare could have an important compensatory role for the children involved, taking into consideration their living conditions. In particular, I stress the importance of these centres in terms of possibilities for play and meaningful leisure with friends – both during school days in the schoolyard as well as outside of formal school hours and in school holidays. In addition, school-age educare pedagogues can be important actors in the introduction of children in asylum contexts to places and activities in their local community, such as playgrounds, sport arenas, libraries, cultural events, and so on. In line with previous studies on the importance of asylum-seeking children's leisure activities with peers for creating a sense of belonging (Ljung Egeland 2015; Spicer 2008), I argue that school-age educare might facilitate important social relations that might further increase asylum-seeking children's belonging both in school and in their community.

In addition to the connection between school-age educare and play and meaningful leisure, the children in this study, in some ways, also connected school-age educare to food provision. This relates to another important purpose of school-age educare, namely, the provision of care. My study points to how the potential role of school-age educare in terms of food provision must be understood in relation to the children's housing situation, where limited possibilities for food choice and food provision were actualized (see Karlsson 2019a). Previous research on asylum-seeking families' deprived housing shows that the food served in asylum centre canteens may not meet the children's dietary needs (Barghadouch et al. 2022; Fanning & Veale 2004). Therefore, I argue that the school-age educare centre could have an important role to play in terms of care, which here includes the provision of food, for example, breakfast, afternoon snacks, fruit and, in school holidays, lunch meals, as well as other food-related activities such as baking together with friends. This theme has been discussed in previous studies on the role of care in school-age educare for children in socioeconomically disadvantaged families (Hjalmarsson & Odenrbing 2019). The role of care through food provision could indeed be important for children in asylum-seeking families who often struggle with economic hardship and especially for children in families living in asylum centres with little to no possibility to buy or cook their own food.

The findings in this study strengthen research that points to the role of school-age educare for social justice in contexts of unequal childhoods (Andishmand 2017; Hjalmarsson & Odenbring 2019; Klerfelt & Ljusberg 2018). In this study, I argue that the findings indicate how school-age educare's may indeed have a particularly important role for children in asylum contexts, as these centres can compensate for their socioeconomic situation and their living conditions. I argue that, from a rights perspective, school-age educare can be understood as an important place for the realisation of asylum-seeking children's wellbeing and their right to play and meaningful leisure. In addition to the potential role of school for asylum-seeking children, which has previously been discussed in several studies (Candappa 2000; Candappa & Ignibie 2003; Spicer 2008; Svensson & Eastmond 2013), I argue that the school-age educare centre is a potentially important social space for children in asylum contexts. However, more research is needed on children's experiences of exclusion from school-age educare as well as the role of school-age educare for asylum-seeking or newly arrived children – especially how these children themselves experience inclusion/exclusion *in* school-age educare. Hopefully, the suggested changes in the regulations of access to school-age educare will – if implemented – decrease at least some of the formal barriers of asylum-seeking children's possibility to participate in school-age educare in the future.[8] This might be particularly important if the recent suggestion to make it obligatory for asylum-seeking families to live in asylum-centres is implemented.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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8 The SOU (2022: 61) suggested changes to be implemented in 2025 – including making school-age educare free of charge for children aged 6 to 9 years and expanding the compensatory paragraph, making it possible to access school-age educare based on children's living conditions. Moreover, it is suggested that municipalities should have the responsibility to inform parents and children about school-age educare.

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