

Uncovering the Role of School-Age Educare During the Covid-19 pandemic: Support for Pupils with Disabilities and Special Needs

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges that school-age educare (SAEC) staff faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on support provided to pupils with disabilities and special educational needs. The empirical material consists of qualitative interviews with staff from compulsory schools and special needs compulsory schools. In total, 19 interviews were conducted, ten individual and nine group interviews, comprising a total of 39 informants. The study draws on symbolic interactionism and the framework of inhabited institutions. The analysis was carried out using constructivist grounded theory as the methodological approach.

The findings indicate that SAEC staff often work across both school and SAEC, acting as a consistent link across pupils' daily activities and making them pivotal in shaping pupils' everyday experiences and support structures. This positions them as central actors in pupils' lives. During the pandemic, extensive organisational changes challenged SAEC's mission to offer alternative practices and experiences, as restrictions made collaboration between groups and school forms impossible. Furthermore, SAEC's role as a meeting and transition place was undermined by high teacher absenteeism and the prohibition of parental access to school premises. For pupils in need of support, these circumstances created significant difficulties for SAEC in providing adequate assistance and in maintaining a holistic approach to pupils' needs.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, disabilities, school-age educare, special educational needs

Introduction

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, a substantial body of research has highlighted various consequences for the education system (e.g. Beaton, Codina, & Wharton, 2021). These studies show that pupils facing different forms of vulnerability encountered even greater challenges during the pandemic, partly because they were often more dependent on adults than others (Bagattini, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). Research suggests that extended education offerings played an important role during this period, while facing challenges such as digital divides and resource shortages, and underscoring the importance of strong school–community partnerships (Sliwa et al., 2022). This article focuses on the consequences for a specific educational practice within the Swedish school system: the school-age educare centre

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(SAEC), with particular attention to how it supports pupils with disabilities and how staff describe their ability to provide support during SAEC time under pandemic conditions.

To contextualise the findings of this study, the Swedish approach is particularly significant. Unlike many other countries, Sweden did not impose strict lockdown measures. Instead, its strategy relied primarily on voluntary behavioral adjustments. Compulsory schools remained open at the national level (Björkman, et al., 2023), as the Public Health Agency of Sweden emphasised that school attendance was in the best interests of children and constituted an important health determinant (ECDC, 2023).

This does not mean that schooling continued without disruption. Schools implemented new routines, including social distancing, restrictions on external visitors such as parents, and the cancellation of activities like field trips and community events. Temporary local closures were also introduced during periods of high infection rates. For children with disabilities, authorities underscored the importance of prioritizing their access to education, even during closures. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that some pupils with disabilities experienced significant absenteeism, either due to illness or because they belonged to high-risk groups (SNAE, 2022).

The Swedish School-Age Educare Context

The Swedish SAEC is an education and leisure provision that is part of the school-system. It is tasked with complementing formal education, primarily by offering learning in alternative ways. Emphasis is placed on group-oriented, experience-based, and situational learning approaches (SNAE, 2024). In Sweden, a large proportion of the youngest pupils participate in SAEC, amounting to nearly half a million (SNAE, 2025). This includes pupils in need of special support.

The Swedish education system integrates compulsory school, preschool class, and SAEC into a unified structure designed to support pupils' development and learning throughout the day, where different professional groups contribute to a holistic perspective on pupils and their needs (Lago et al., 2022). These school forms share policy documents and are often housed in the same building, under the same principal, with shared staff and premises. Collaboration with parents is a central component of these kinds of structure, particularly for pupils with special educational needs, where home and school cooperation is essential to ensure appropriate support (e.g., Falkmer, et al., 2015). However, studies have shown that such cooperation was significantly disrupted during the pandemic (e.g., Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2023).

SAEC and Pupils with Disabilities

While the Swedish SAEC has traditionally been characterised as an inclusive pedagogical practice, enabling participation irrespective of individual circumstances, Karlsudd (2020) longitudinal research indicates an increasing tendency toward segregated solutions for spe-