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Bridging Classrooms and Communities: A Case Study of Integrating Problem-Based and Community-Based Service Learning in Bangladeshi Elementary Science Education

Sabiha Sultana*

Abstract: In this study, I explore how integrating problem-based learning with community-based service learning fosters 21st-century skills—specifically communication, collaboration, and critical thinking—among Bangladeshi elementary students. Drawing on a multi-stakeholder, participatory learning design process involving teachers, students, parents, teacher trainers, and education policymakers, I investigate the impact of a community engagement learning model developed and implemented across rural and urban public schools in Bangladesh. Using case study methodology, I analyzed data from classroom observations, student-led community projects, interviews, focus groups, and over 288 self-assessment survey responses. Findings demonstrate that embedding experiential, socially relevant learning activities into science curriculum enhanced students' ability to articulate ideas, work collaboratively, and critically engage with socioscientific issues. The study provides empirical evidence of how localized service learning grounded in students' lived experiences can challenge epistemic injustice and support educational transformation in Global South contexts. Implications are discussed for curricular innovation, teacher development, and educational policy in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: problem-based learning, service learning, Bangladeshi elementary education, community-based learning

Introduction

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in expanding access to primary education, achieving near-universal enrollment with approximately 98% of children of primary school age attending school. This progress reflects a significant step toward educational equity, with gender parity in access now largely realized. However, improved accessibility has not yet translated into equitable educational quality for all learners—a persistent and pressing challenge (USAID, n.d.). In response, the Government of Bangladesh has adopted a multi-dimensional strategy to transform its educational ecosystem (a2i.gov.bd), aiming not only to broaden access but also to enhance the substance and relevance of learning. Central to this effort is the cultivation of 21st-century competencies—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019)—that empower students to critically engage with their social contexts and become agents of change. To achieve this, education must extend beyond the confines of traditional classrooms and engage students in real-world, experiential learning through after-school programs, service learning, summer camps, and community-based education. These extended learning opportunities are

* **Corresponding Author:** Illinois Wesleyan University, School of Educational Studies ssultana@iwu.edu

essential for helping students meaningfully connect formal instruction with the social realities they navigate daily.

Several studies around the world have investigated community based expansive learning (Schuetze et al., 2015) or extended education (Kerr, 2022) or service learning or experiential education in relation to teaching citizenship education, environmental education, increasing scientific understanding, and improving language and literacy skills (Cincera et al., 2020; Hyland, 1994; Rauschert & Byram, 2017). Scholars also studied problem-posing critical pedagogy in the context of Bangladesh to investigate ways to empower students (Talukder & Samuel, 2017). Students' extended learning is interrelated to their experiences with the physical, social, political, cultural, and economic environments within their community that includes their peers, other students from different grades at schools, teachers, parents, neighbours, and other community members. It is also important to recognize that every student operates within a structured social environment that is governed by its unique regulations and available resources. Echoing Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Boeren (2019) states that "...the individual and society are interdependent, and thus both perspectives should ideally be included in research. This allows for the consideration of critical perspectives that go beyond the level of the individual" (pp. 281–282). As learning of an individual does not occur in isolation, therefore, learning design research in the 21st century should account for the community engagement and assets that students encounter in their everyday social life.

Elementary education in Bangladesh is offered without cost at public schools, welcoming all children from the age of six. The disciplines include arts and crafts, music, physical education, islam/hindu/christian/buddha (based on a student's own religious belief) religion and moral education, science, Bangladesh and global studies, mathematics, English, and Bangla at elementary level. We need to rethink the strategies for explicit utilization of students' experiential learning experiences and support from their immediate social networks during their educational journey in Bangladesh because these contextualized service learning experiences are the foundation of formal and informal learning as well as 21st century skills. So, how can the elementary education system leverage students' social experiences, like out-of-school service learning experiences in communities, in their formal schooling that would benefit their knowledge, skills, and abilities development of different content areas (i.e., life science, agriculture, environment, etc.)? How can students', their families', and communities' voices be explicitly tied with students' experiential learning designs that prioritize their localized needs and also support their 21st century skills? How can students' epistemic perspectives that they bring to the classroom from their lived surroundings be valued while also preparing them to navigate in this competitive industrial world?

In this study, I employed a case study design (Stake, 1995) to explore how integrating community-based service learning with Problem-Based Learning (PBL) can foster 21st century skills—specifically, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication—among Bangladeshi elementary students. Integrating PBL with a community-based service learning approach here includes making formal in-school content learning connections with the localized out-of-classroom civic responsibility through discussion with teachers, peers, students from other grade levels in schools, family members, neighbors, and other relevant community members. Data sources included descriptive field notes from four classroom observations, student presentations at conferences and fairs, images of community-based projects, student-created artifacts, 96 pre- and 192 post-self-assessment survey responses from students, in-

Achievement Liberating Pedagogy as a Response to Declining Wellbeing

Lea Ringskou*, Noomi Matthiesen**, Thomas Szulevicz**, Svend Brinkmann**

Abstract: The aim of this article is to articulate the contours of an achievement liberating pedagogy as a response to a general decrease in wellbeing among children and young people in Denmark. The analysis is based on a research project conducted in leisure time centers and youth clubs. The decrease in wellbeing is complex but nevertheless calls for pedagogical and institutional action. We argue that the achievement society can be seen as one explanation of the decrease in wellbeing. We propose that an achievement liberating pedagogy can be a pedagogical response to the negative consequences of an achievement society. Achievement liberating pedagogy is a world-centered pedagogy based on practices that unfold in both structured and spontaneous activities. It involves a pedagogical intention of liberation from instrumental and result-oriented activities, from individual measurements and from self-optimization. Instead, it aims to direct the pedagogical telos away from individual achievement, towards communities and joint activities engaged in for their own sake. Based on empirical findings, we draw the contours of achievement liberating pedagogy, its pitfalls and conditions that can challenge it. The analysis is based on theoretical inspiration from Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance and Max Van Manen's analysis of pedagogical tact.

Keywords: wellbeing, achievement society, achievement subject, achievement liberating pedagogy, leisure time pedagogy, professional claims

Introduction and Research Questions

In the last decades, reports and research within the Scandinavian and European countries have drawn attention to a decrease in wellbeing among groups of children and especially young people (Bakken, 2018; Collishaw, 2015; Jensen et al., 2022; Jeppesen et al., 2020; Ottesen et al., 2018; Ottesen et al., 2022). Both within Scandinavian countries and other Western countries, stress, anxiety and loneliness among children and youth have increased over the past decades (Bakken, 2018; Collishaw, 2015; Krogh, 2023). In Denmark, a report on mental health and illness concludes that 15 % of all children and young people have been diagnosed with a mental disorder before the age of 18 (Jeppesen, et al., 2020, p. 15). Another report indicates that 40% of girls and 20% of boys aged 19 report that they have experienced a mental disorder at some point in their lives (Ottesen et al., 2022). Presumably, not all these diagnoses have been clinically established by a physician. Nevertheless, these statistics indicate that children and young people themselves have become increasingly aware of their own mental challenges.

* **Corresponding author:** VIA University College and Aalborg University, Institute of Culture and Communication, lri@via.dk

** Aalborg University, Institute of Culture and Communication

The decrease is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes and explanations. A large part of these explanations focuses on the individual, offering psychological perspectives and individualized interventions (Katznelson, Pless & Görlich, 2022). A potential risk of this individualization is that both societal factors and pedagogical institutions are overlooked as possible explanations and places to intervene (Petersen, 2016, Petersen & Krogh, 2021; Ringskou, Brinkmann, Matthiesen & Szulevicz, 2024).

We take our starting point in an analysis of the achievement society (Eckersley, 2011; Madsen, 2018; Petersen 2016; Petersen & Krogh, 2021; Starley, 2019), which is characterized by a strong focus on measurement, tests and individual achievement. These societal and political trends are, for instance, manifested in education policy and the education system where tests, grades and measurement today play a dominating role (Biesta, 2021; Jacobsen, 2024). In the achievement society, the individual needs to monitor oneself constantly and work on self-optimization in order not to fall behind the competition for achievement. The achievement society thus results in social norms and demands connected to achievement that place a burden on the individual (Petersen, 2016). If achievement is equated with constantly performing, improving and optimizing oneself it can lead to exhaustion and inhibit wellbeing (Katznelson, Pless & Görlich, 2022; Petersen & Krogh, 2021; Ringskou, Brinkmann, Matthiesen & Szulevicz, 2024; Ringskou, Matthiesen, Brinkmann & Szulevicz, 2024).

We propose an achievement liberating pedagogy as a pedagogical response to the decrease in wellbeing. We define achievement liberating pedagogy as a world-centered pedagogy (Biesta, 2021). This is a pedagogy which is based on a pedagogical intention of liberation from instrumental, pre-defined, result-oriented activities and from self-optimization and individual measurements. Instead, the pedagogical telos is directed away from individual achievements and towards joint activities where the activities themselves have meaning and purpose, thereby stressing communities and togetherness. Achievement liberating pedagogy is not a fixed method but a dynamic and context-sensitive approach that requires professional judgment, improvisation, and ethical attentiveness.

The ambition has been to examine, define and discuss possible practices of achievement liberating pedagogy through a research project within the Danish field of leisure time pedagogy. In Denmark, leisure time pedagogy spans from leisure time centers (in Danish called *SkoleFritidsOrdning/SFO* and *Fritidshjem*) for children aged 6–10 years, youth clubs for children and young people aged 10–18+ years. The professionals working in leisure time centers are called “pedagogues” stressing the broad pedagogical character of their work (rather than a narrow learning-agenda typically associated with “teachers”). The leisure time pedagogues working in leisure time centers have been a part of the Danish public school since the 1980’s, working across leisure time centers and lower primary school (children aged 6–10 years). In the first four grades where the children are 6–10 years old, they need adult supervision while their parents work and therefore participation in leisure time center is necessary. Participation in Leisure time clubs becomes more optional as they get older and need less adult supervision.

Although these two types of institution differ from each other when it comes to both the age of the children and their organization and not least connection to the Danish public school, they are often based on the same core values of Danish leisure time pedagogy. Historically, both forms of institutions have been formulated as an alternative, and at times in opposition, to the formal school system with its strong focus on structure and curricular (Ankerstjerne, 2010; Gravesen & Ringskou, 2018; Ringskou, 2021). Furthermore, the preventive work with

The Limited Impact of Extending the School Week on Educational Outcomes in Dutch Primary Education: a Quasi-Experimental Study Using Penalized Synthetic Control Analysis¹

Gijs Custers*, Erik-Jan van Kesteren**, Oisín Ryan***

Abstract: This study uses a quasi-experimental design to investigate the causal impact of an extended school week on educational performance in 22 Dutch primary schools. The intervention has been partly modeled after the prominent Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). To assess the impact of the intervention, we leverage register data containing information on all Dutch children finishing primary school in the period 2009–2022. Synthetic control analysis is applied to estimate the causal effect for each individual school. The findings show the program has had limited effect on educational outcomes with little variation between schools. Although we lack implementation measures, we discuss how factors such as goal switching, lack of participation, and teacher shortages may have hampered program effectiveness. Finally, we explore whether the HCZ concept is transferable to other international contexts.

Keywords: Educational effectiveness; extended school time; after-school programs; Harlem Children's Zone; synthetic control method

Introduction

There is a significant need among policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to identify which educational programs are effective and to understand the conditions under which they succeed. This study evaluates the effectiveness of an extended school week in the Netherlands, using a quasi-experimental design, leveraging unique school-level registry data and synthetic control analysis. The intervention is part of the National Program Rotterdam South (*Nationaal Programma Rotterdam Zuid: NPRZ*), a unique program in its scope, long-term orientation, and involvement of various stakeholders (Custers et al., 2023; Dol et al., 2019). The extended school week aims to improve educational outcomes among disadvantaged students in 30 primary schools (NPRZ, 2012).

1 This study is an independent evaluation of the effects of the NPRZ extended school week, initiated by the first author. The main goal of the study was to contribute to scientific literature by examining the effectiveness of educational interventions within a long-term urban policy program in the Dutch context. During the research the first author maintained contact with the NPRZ bureau, but the bureau had no role in formulating the research questions, conducting the study, and interpreting the outcomes. Funding was obtained through a Microdata Access Grant from Statistics Netherlands in 2020.

* **Corresponding Author:** Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Law, Society, and Crime, custers@law.eur.nl

** Utrecht University, Department of Methodology and Statistics

*** University Medical Center Utrecht, Department of Data Science and Biostatistics

We contribute to the literature in two ways. First, although much research has been done on the effects of extended school time, important questions remain about why some programs are more effective than others in raising academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010; Kraft & Novicoff, 2024). The intervention is inspired by the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), a program that has substantially increased test scores (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011, 2015). Evaluating the HCZ adoption in the Netherlands is interesting from a policy perspective because the Dutch educational landscape is considered ‘policy-dense’ with many stakeholders (Waslander et al., 2016), meaning implementation of interventions might be complicated (Custers, 2025). Our study discusses to what extent the educational concept of the HCZ can be successfully transferred to other contexts (Kerr & Dyson, 2014).

Second, we advance earlier research on the NPRZ intervention by estimating the effects on academic outcomes for individual schools. Previous findings indicate that, on average, the program has had no impact on track recommendations at the school level (Custers, 2025). However, schools have some autonomy in how they implement the program (Kruiter et al., 2020; Sardes & DSP-group, 2023). Effects might therefore differ between schools depending on choices made during implementation. Although we have no measures on actual implementation and therefore cannot assess the causal impact of separate program factors, the findings can still indicate to what extent flexibility in implementation might produce different outcomes. In addition, whereas previous research only considered track recommendations as an outcome (Custers, 2025), this paper also looks at the effects on test scores.

In the current paper, our goal is to estimate the causal impact of the NPRZ intervention on educational achievement for different schools. We do not consider other goals of the program such as socioemotional development and students’ enrichment. We use register data from the system of social statistical datasets (SSD) by constructing a longitudinal dataset including 22 intervention schools and relevant control schools drawn from the nationwide registry data, in principle including all schools in the Netherlands, for 5 pre-intervention and 9 post-intervention years. The causal effect of interest is the post-intervention improvement in educational outcomes for the 22 intervention schools. To estimate the causal effect of the NPRZ intervention, we perform a quasi-experimental synthetic control analysis (Abadie & L’Hour, 2021), which attempts to estimate the post-intervention counterfactual for each school.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: First, we contextualize our study by discussing the HCZ and relevant findings from similar after-school programs. Second, we describe the setup and context of the NPRZ intervention, including relevant characteristics of the Dutch education system and potential issues with the intervention. Third, we describe the register data and the resulting longitudinal dataset, after which we explain our methodological approach. Finally, we present the results and end with a brief discussion.

Findings from the HCZ and After-School Programs

Harlem Children’s Zone

The HCZ is an educational and social service organization that creates educational opportunities for students in central Harlem (Hanson, 2013). The philosophy behind the program is to create a “pipeline” or “conveyor belt” through which children from disadvantaged families

Teaching in School-Age Educare Centres – Human Rights Through Direct, Embedded and Approach-Based Teaching

Lisa Isenström*

Abstract: This article examines how teaching is enacted in extended education settings, using Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) centres and human rights as examples. It analyses SAEC teachers' discussions about content and methods in this practice area. The article is based on interview data from 19 SAEC teachers in Sweden. The data were analysed through content analysis, theoretically framed within an action-theoretical approach and employing three theoretical teaching types: direct teaching, embedded teaching, and approach-based teaching. The findings demonstrate how each teaching type addresses different content with distinct methods, as: a) direct teaching prioritises knowledge development through a variety of methods, b) embedded teaching prioritises conduct development through conversations, and c) approach-based teaching prioritises acquiring rights experiences through teachers' different ways of managing situations. Therefore, the findings suggest that SAEC teachers need opportunities for and competence in all three teaching types to cover a broad range of educational topics and to fully utilise the potential of extended education contexts for teaching and learning.

Keywords: Extended education, school-age educare, SAEC, teaching, human rights, children's rights.

Introduction

Extended education across different national contexts provides a significant space for diverse teaching and learning methods. While compulsory schooling often adheres to traditional teaching approaches, extended educational settings tend to be more flexible and adaptable to various situations (Boström, Elvstrand & Orwehag, 2022). As a result, these environments could be valuable for teaching a wide range of topics. In Sweden, school-age educare (SAEC) centres are the most prominent extended education setting; although not compulsory, they still enrol over 80% of children aged 6–9 years. Therefore, this educational environment could provide a variety of learning opportunities for most children. Even if research on teaching in SAEC has increased in recent years, empirical knowledge about teaching and learning in SAEC centres remains limited (Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021; Boström, Elvstrand, & Orwehag, 2022). Previous research on teaching in extended education settings, especially in SAEC, has emphasised the need to establish a strong foundation for teaching in such environments that reflects their unique characteristics, to avoid the risk of reverting to traditional school teaching.

* **Corresponding Author:** Karlstad University, Department of Educational Studies, lisa.isenstrom@kau.se

Any country that has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) is obliged to address human rights within their educational settings. This obligation includes respecting rights in educational environments, teaching children about their human rights, and promoting human rights values and behaviour (UN, 1998, articles 28 and 29). While compulsory schooling often concentrates on learning *about* human rights, extended education contexts have a unique capacity to teach values and behaviours aligned with human rights alongside knowledge about them. Nonetheless, the teaching and learning of human rights within extended education have not been prioritised in previous research. When human rights have been discussed in SAEC research, for example, in a recent issue of this journal, it has mostly been related to social learning, participation, and children's perspectives (e.g., Elvstrand & Boström, 2025; Gravesen & Aagaard Christensen, 2025; Näpfli & Chiapparini, 2025). Likewise, Wade (2015) shows how after-school programmes can support children's social-emotional functioning. Furthermore, Horgan et al. (2018) state that children's voices need to be considered in the development of school-age care in Irish policy. However, knowledge about the teaching and learning of human rights per se remains largely invisible. Additionally, when educational human rights research has addressed this topic, it has primarily been within school and pre-school contexts (Quennerstedt & Moody, 2020).

Teaching can be defined as activities led by teachers with the intention of developing students' learning around specific content through different methods (SFS, 2010). However, the methods and forms of teaching depend on the pedagogical context (Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021). Knowledge of the enactment of teaching human rights in different contexts can be beneficial for other educational settings on how to approach this matter. The aim of this study is to contribute to the expansion of pedagogical knowledge on the enactment of teaching in SAEC centres, with a particular focus on teaching human rights by answering the specific research question: *Which methods and content do SAEC teachers describe that they include in their practice when teaching human rights?* Human rights and democracy form the value base for the Swedish school system (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). In Sweden, SAEC centres have long been part of the school system and, since 2011, have been governed by the Curriculum for Compulsory School, Preschool Class and School-age Educare (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Therefore, Swedish SAEC centres present an interesting case for studying the teaching of human rights, offering valuable insights for a range of educational contexts.

Teaching in School-Age Educare Centres

School-age educare centres are an indisputable part of the Swedish school system. They provide care for children in primary school (6–12 years) before and after school and during school holidays. About a third of the staff working in SAEC have a university degree in education, and almost 57% have some kind of pedagogical education. Even though it is not compulsory, 82.9% of children aged 6 to 9 and 19.8% of children aged 10 to 12 attend (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). Consequently, teaching practice in SAEC centres has the potential to reach a large number of young children.

Rethinking Out-of-School-Time Relationships: Achievement, Self-Efficacy, and Social Status

Larry E. Suter*

Abstract: The analysis describes how participation in outside-school-time (OST) activities and tutoring of the U.S. high school student population was associated with algebra achievement and mathematics self-efficacy. The complex dynamics between factors associated with OST and students' backgrounds were explored in detail with descriptive displays and regression models.

The survey analysis found that the probability of high school students participating in informal activities was associated with both family social status and prior (9th grade) achievement equally. Participating with a tutor was found not to be associated with student's algebra achievement and self-efficacy by 11th grade. Student participation in multiple OST activities (clubs, study groups, college preparation classes, and more) was positively associated with higher self-efficacy in mathematics but not with achievement. The resulting analysis provides insights that sharpen our understanding of how to describe the integration of student OST experiences and academic outcomes. The resulting empirical evidence lends support to the need for incorporating interactions between ability, social status, and study time in research studies intending to identify causal effects of extended study.

Keywords: Tutoring, out-of-school-time, social status, student achievement, attitudes, gain scores

Introduction

Most high school students take part in various out-of-school-time (OST) activities, both formal and informal. While not all OST programs aim to improve academic performance, many do, including private tutoring ("shadow education"), cram schools, academic coaching, college prep courses, afterschool clubs, study groups, museum trips, science competitions, online resources, and other uncatalogued activities (Stevenson & Baker, 1992; Bray, 1999, 2010; Baker, 2014; Bray; Kobakhidze & Suter, 2020). The accumulation of knowledge about OST participation has been hindered by the absence of a unified framework, making national and international data collection difficult (NRC, 2015). Research reviews conducted for OECD highlight the complexity of OST activities and the challenge of developing effective survey questions, as seen in the 2015 PISA survey, which included almost 200 categories related to students' extra study time (OECD, 2011a, 2011b; Suter, 2019).

The survey analysis presented in this paper applies a broad definition of OST to explore how different OST activities are associated with cognitive achievement and non-cognitive attitudes. Tutoring is analyzed separately from other OST activities to test whether the assumption

* Visiting Scholar at University of Michigan, Larrysuter@me.com

that tutoring has a measurable impact on students' academic performance by researchers and parents is credible and supported by empirical evidence.

While research on the OST phenomenon has expanded over the past two decades, few studies have had sufficient statistical resources to build a comprehensive conceptual framework supported by empirical data (see, for instance, Kuger, 2016). This study continues that trend. It explores the consequences of academic achievement for students who received tutoring or engaged in other OST activities during secondary school, seeking to clarify how tutoring influences outcomes. Longitudinal studies in the U.S., like the High School Longitudinal Survey (HSLS:09), enable researchers to compare student performance over time and distinguish between pre-existing characteristics and changes resulting from OST participation. By analyzing student gain scores alongside yearly performance snapshots, this study aims to determine whether involvement in OST activities leads to measurable academic improvement (NCES, 2022; Willett, 1989).

Theory of Out-of-school-time

The expectation that participation in OST leads to higher student achievement is widely accepted, yet empirical evidence presents a more nuanced picture. Some studies of academic outcomes from tutoring or participation in other OST activities reported a positive association between OST participation and achievement gains (Vandell et al., 2007; Long, 2014). However, the effect sizes were small, particularly for private tutoring (Bray, 2014; Zhang et al., 2024). Comparing experience in OST settings with homework shows that homework hours have a much stronger association with achievement than OST participation (Suter, 2019). While OST experiences, such as tutoring, may not boost test scores directly, it often enhances motivation and attitude, supporting academic success indirectly. Studies show OST participation can increase self-efficacy—especially in group activities—and encourages engagement and identity formation. Participation in science OST programs is also linked to greater STEM interest.

A comprehensive theoretical model of how student engagement in OST activities is associated with cognitive achievement must distinguish between the factors that influence entry into these activities and the effects of these activities on students over time. The theoretical basis for this study is Carroll's time-based learning model, which posits that academic outcomes are influenced by a student's prior ability, the time spent on learning activities, and the quality of instructional support (Carroll, 1963, 1989). Carroll did not discuss family background as a factor influencing student outcomes. However, empirical research conducted after he initially developed his model of opportunity to learn has shown a strong association between family background and achievement that must be incorporated into any theoretical or empirical analysis.

Family status is known to have some influence on frequency of student participation in out-of-school-time (OST) activities (Buchmann & Park, 2009). The association between family social status and achievement is now an established fact (Coleman, 1966; Alexander et al., 2016) and its association with student participation in OST has been frequently noted. (Zhang & Liu, 2022; NRC, 2015; Huang, 2015; Wiseman, 2021; Entrich, 2021; Buchmann, et al, 2010a; Kobakhidze et al., 2023). A practical reason for an association between receiving tutoring and family status is that additional expenses are often required for these supplemental

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

Helene Elvstrand^{*}, Lina Lago^{**}, Kristina Hellberg^{***}

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

* **Corresponding Author:** Linköping University, helene.elvstrand@liu.se

** Linköping University

*** Högskolan i Halmstad

(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-