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EDITED BY
Costinela Fortea,
Dunarea de Jos University, Romania

REVIEWED BY
Rohail Hassan,
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia
Valentin Marian Antohi,
Dunarea de Jos University, Romania

*CORRESPONDENCE
Maryna Rosen
maryna.rosen@miun.se

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Educators' perceptions of equity in school-age educare practice: a continuous balancing act

Maryna Rosen*, Lena Boström and Ulla Damber

Department of Education, Psychology and Social work (PPS), Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

Background: Equity is a central policy goal in Swedish school-age educare centres (SAEC), yet how it is perceived by educators in everyday practice remains underexplored. This study examines educators' perceptions of equity in SAEC learning environments.
Methods: Drawing on participatory action research, the study involved 23 educators from four SAECs in one Swedish municipality. Data were collected through an open-ended survey and group interviews and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.
Results: The findings indicate that equity is perceived as challenging to define and lacking a shared conceptual frame beyond individual interpretation, while being significantly influenced by structural conditions. At the same time, equity is shaped through everyday practices of care, relationships, and student engagement. Educators describe equity as multidimensional and marked by recurring tensions that they navigate.
Conclusion: They balance in daily practice, within a policy context where equity is broadly defined and conceptually contested. The findings have practical and policy implications, highlighting the importance of shared professional understandings of equity and the conditions that support sustained dialogue and conceptual clarity around equitable learning environments in SAEC.

KEYWORDS
educators' perceptions, equity, extended education, learning environments, professional meaning-making, school-age educare centres (SAEC), Sweden

1 Introduction

Deficient equivalence in schools is a burning concern all over the world. In this article, equity and equality in SAEC in Sweden are targeted. SAECs are comparable to what internationally is referred to as after-school programs or extended education, combining educational, social, and recreational goals (Boström et al., 2022; Hurst et al., 2025; Schüpbach et al., 2025). SAEC practices are guided by the Swedish Education Act (Skollag, 2022) and the Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class, and SAEC (Skolverket, 2024). Participation is voluntary, but all students are offered a place. In 2024/25, 57% of all Swedish students attended SAECs (Skolverket, 2025a). Primarily, younger children attend, even though children up to 12 years are offered a place.

SAEC practices differ from the lessons in school, and no grades are given. By tradition, supervision, care, and educational activities are intermeshed regarding both space and time to create a coherent whole, thus opening for different pathways to tackle the dilemmas that arise in the SAEC community of practice (Lundmark and Kontio, 2024). Students' interests and needs form the basis for shaping practices, characterised by a focus on social development, dialogue, games, play, and informal learning. Such focus, however, is dependent on having sufficient resources, including educated personnel, manageable groups of children, and time for planning (Norqvist, 2022).

The Swedish concept *likvärdighet* has been central in both the Education Act and the curriculum over time (SFS, 1980), a concept embracing both equality at a structural level and equity that operates at an individual level. This distinction is important, as equality is often framed as providing the same resources and opportunities to all pupils, whereas equity acknowledges that some pupils need more support and resources in order to achieve comparable educational outcomes (Leithwood, 2021). In this study, the focus is on educators' perceptions of equity in their practices. However, conditions for equitable learning environments may be affected by insufficient equality and structural constraints across SAECs.

In the steering documents, both equity and equality are put forward as established goals for all education, regardless of students' background factors, such as social class, disability, language, religion, and gender (Skollag, 2022). Historically, Swedish school policy has repeatedly linked equality to the idea of "one school for all", where a common school design was expected to secure equal opportunities for education (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). Equal *access* to education with equal *quality* across the country is indicated as a goal. Equity *"shall promote pupils' continued learning and knowledge development based on their background, previous experiences, language or languages and knowledge"* (Skolverket, 2024, pp. 6–7). A similar situation also exists in Swedish education policy, where the concept of equivalence/equity/likvärdighet (Englund and Francia, 2008) has traditionally been articulated through three core aspects: equal *access* to education, equal *quality of education*, and the *compensatory function of education* (SOU, 2020:34). Taken together, these formulations combine structural goals of equal access and quality with expectations of individual adaptation. However, they offer limited guidance beyond compensation for how equity at an individual level is to be understood and enacted in practice. This interpretive openness makes educators' professional understandings central to how equity is translated into everyday SAEC practice.

During the last decades, international comparisons of equity in education have indicated declining results in Swedish schools, closely connecting equality to educational outcomes (OECD, 2022). Above all, students with a migrant background and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds underperform. Among policymakers, a more pronounced focus on results is evident in the current Swedish curricula, where the term *"teaching"* has been added, causing debates among educators foreboding *"schoolification"* of their practices (Skolverket, 2024, 2025b). Against this background, the complementary learning opportunities in SAEC gain in importance to increase equity, with more flexible learning options rooted in students' interests and curiosity. While previous SAEC research has largely focused on structural and organisational conditions, this study is positioned within practice-oriented research by examining how educators perceive and make sense of equity in everyday work.

With the aim of providing a deeper understanding of how educators in four SAECs perceive and discuss the concept of equity in their practices, the following research questions guide the research:

- How do educators perceive the concept of equity in SAEC learning environments?
- What dimensions of equity do educators emphasise in their interpretations?
- What tensions do educators identify when they discuss equity in everyday practice?

The research field of equity in SAECs exposes a considerable research gap. Despite growing policy attention to equity and inclusion, empirical knowledge about how educators in SAEC understand and implement equity remains limited (Boström et al., 2024; Elvstrand et al., 2024; Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020; Lang et al., 2024; Souto-Manning and Epley, 2024), which motivates this study. Previous research has predominantly examined equity in relation to governance, resource allocation, and structural conditions. In contrast, this study focuses on educators' professional interpretations of equity in everyday SAEC practice. By examining how equity is conceived and enacted from the perspective of personnel, the study complements existing structural and policy-oriented research and contributes to the knowledge base on the creation of equitable learning environments.

2 Previous research

Previous research can be understood through three thematic areas: equity as policy, equity as practice, and equity as a professional dilemma. While substantial scholarship has examined equity as a normative goal and analysed the structural conditions of educational provision, fewer studies have explored how it is perceived, interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in everyday professional practice.

2.1 Equity as policy

Historically, Swedish research has primarily approached equity as a matter of policy and governance (Englund and Quennerstedt, 2008), achievement (Wahlström, 2008), or redistribution (Francia, 2008), rather than as an educational concept, a tendency that continues to shape how equity is addressed in contexts such as SAEC (Andishmand, 2017). Policy analyses show that equity does not denote a single, stable idea but reflects enduring tensions between equality of conditions and fairness of outcomes, as well as between redistribution through compensation and recognition of diversity (Englund and Francia, 2008; Francia, 2008). These tensions are carried into educational practice, contributing to the openness of equity as it is interpreted in everyday work (Andishmand, 2017). At the same time, compensatory logics have been described as both problematic and productive: while compensatory approaches risk reinforcing deficit perspectives and processes of exclusion (Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020), they may also enable earlier support for pupils with additional needs and justify resource allocation based on need rather than uniform provision (Gardesten et al., 2023; Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020). Nevertheless, much of this research remains situated at the level of policy formulation and structural principles, offering limited insight into how equity is understood and enacted by educators in everyday educational practice.

2.2 Equity as practice

Within SAEC research specifically, equity has frequently been examined in relation to organisational and material conditions. SAEC is described as a hybrid educational space where care, learning, and leisure intersect, and where its positioning, as education or childcare, varies across socio-economic contexts and shapes educators' roles (Andishmand, 2017; Schüpbach et al., 2025). This hybrid character, combined with processes of "schoolification," has drawn attention to questions of limited autonomy (Boström and Augustsson, 2016), unequal opportunities for independent activity (Boström et al., 2015), and constraints shaped by resources and the physical environment (Grewell and Boström, 2025). Research further shows how

organisational hierarchies and subordination to school logics make it more difficult for SAEC to realise its own educational mission (Haglund and Boström, 2022), and how school leaders balance demands, resources, and expectations of equity in ways that may constrain educational development (Boström and Elvstrand, 2024). Although these studies provide important insights into the structural conditions shaping equity work, the analytical focus has largely remained on access, regulation, and resource distribution rather than on educators' professional meaning-making. Similar tendencies are visible in international research on outside school hours care, where equity is frequently discussed in relation to access and policy frameworks rather than as a dimension of professional interpretation (Cartmel and Hurst, 2021).

2.3 Equity as a professional dilemma

A smaller but growing body of research has begun to explore how educators interpret and negotiate equity in everyday practice. Curriculum openness in SAEC has been shown to place considerable interpretive responsibility on practitioners, as curricular formulations are subject to ongoing negotiation, interpretation, and realisation in practice (Norqvist, 2022). Studies have examined educators' reflections on social injustice and stigma (Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020), negotiations around children's influence over activities (Haglund, 2015), and framings of equity as a moral commitment to *"make a difference"* under conditions of limited resources (Wernholm and Ackesjö, 2025). Together, this research conceptualises equity as relational, situational, and embedded in professional judgement.

Research in other educational contexts shows that complex concepts such as sustainability and equity do not automatically move from policy into practice but are interpreted and shaped by professionals in their everyday work (Dziubaniuk et al., 2024; Desir and Posselt, 2025). This highlights that equity is not only a policy goal but also something constructed and enacted in professional practice.

However, within SAEC research, systematic analyses of how educators conceptualise and make sense of equity in their everyday work remain limited. While prior studies have provided substantial knowledge about policy formulations, organisational conditions, and compensatory strategies, fewer have investigated how equity is constructed, negotiated, and enacted by educators working within hybrid educational settings characterised by both structural constraints and professional discretion. This gap motivates the present study.

3 Theoretical framework

In this study, the frame factor theory is used as the theoretical framework (Lundgren, 1972). As external factors, out of reach of the individual educator's control, influence educators' possibilities to shape their educational practice, frame factor theory provides a lens to analyse how educators' perceptions of equity in their everyday practices are affected by such external factors. With roots in the 1960s, the frame factor theory has been a tool for analysis of the processes in educational practices, school management, and evaluation of outcomes. From the 1970s, thinking has evolved into curriculum theory (Lundgren, 1972). Frame factors include policy regulations such as the curriculum and the Education Act, time allocation, group size, student body in class, staffing levels, organisational arrangements, and access to resources in terms of learning materials, physical space, and other available equipment (Lundgren, 1972).

In more recent years, the initial view of frame factors as exclusively limiting actors' own intentions and possibilities has been given more attention, as frames not only necessarily must be seen as limitations that cannot be transgressed (Öberg, 2019). Although the formulations in the curriculum are beyond the control of individual educators, curriculum enactment depends on how educators interpret and use the possibilities available in practice. Educators and students as actors, according to Gustafsson (1999), are not predetermined by the framing, but have a free space for actions, where educators' own choices and decisions influence the educational practices. Gustafsson (1999) uses the term conditions, which she divides into three categories: supportive factors, real frameworks, and perceived frameworks.

Studies use different typologies for categorising frame factors, depending on the focus of the study. In this study, we draw on the categorisation of frame factors presented by Imsen (1999), which also includes factors related to students, as this is particularly relevant for our analysis. Imsen suggests five groups of frame factors; 1) educational frames such as curriculum and factors with importance for their interpretation, 2) administrative frames like schedules and school's organisation 3) frames related to economic and material resources, 4) social conditions and school culture in the organisation and, 5) frames linked to students' prerequisite, motivation, and parental collaboration.

Several recent studies have extended and adapted frame factor theory to new empirical contexts. Bäckström (2023) combines the theory with the Opportunity-to-Learn perspective to explain how classroom composition constrains instructional content, time, and quality, generating peer effects. In higher education, Asghari and Andersén (2022) demonstrate that institutional requirements, scheduling, and student composition shape educators' work. Within physical education, Torell Palmquist et al. (2025) show how administrative and learner-related frame factors influence riding lessons for young children, functioning both as constraints and opportunities.

In this study, perceived frameworks have attracted our particular interest to highlight educators' choices and perceived limitations and possibilities in relation to equitable learning environments. Lindblad and Sahlström (1999) also makes a distinction between outer frameworks, which are beyond educators' control, and inner frameworks, which include factors linked to the educator as a person and offer possibilities for influencing classroom processes.

Against this backdrop, we have applied frame factor theory as an analytical tool to examine how educators' perceptions of equity are shaped, constrained, and enabled within the interplay of external and perceived frameworks.

In this study, frame factor theory guides the analysis in relation to the research questions. Educators' perceptions of equity are examined through the concept of perceived frameworks, highlighting how they interpret and negotiate their working conditions. The dimensions of equity are analysed in relation to professional agency within external and organisational frames. The identified tensions are interpreted as emerging from the interplay between external frameworks—such as resources, structures, and policy demands—and perceived frameworks. Thus, frame factor theory serves as an analytical lens for examining how structural equality and individual equity are negotiated in SAEC practice.

4 Materials and methods

This study employed a qualitative, participatory action research design (Creswell, 2014) to explore how educators perceive and

understand equitable learning environments. The research was conducted over a 2-year period as part of a broader development initiative in a large Swedish municipality, aiming to generate practice-based knowledge through collaborative inquiry.

The study analysed data collected during the project's first year, utilising a combination of qualitative methods, including an online open-ended survey and initial semi-structured group interviews. For this article, the analysis focused specifically on responses related to the core research topic—how educators perceive the concept of equity within learning environments in SAEC. Only data segments relevant to this focus were extracted and included in the analysis.

4.1 Sample description and interview process

This study involved 23 educators from four SAECs. All educators employed at the four participating SAECs during the first year of the development project were invited to take part in the study. Participation was voluntary, and no additional inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied beyond current employment in the respective centres. This approach was consistent with the participatory action research design, aiming to involve the full professional teams in collective reflection on equity in practice. All participants completed a demographic and background survey as part of the initial phase of data collection, which included questions on gender, age, professional experience, education, and working conditions. Due to staff availability on the scheduled interview dates, 19 of these educators participated in the group interviews; at least one educator from each SAEC was unable to attend. No additional interviews were conducted with the four absent participants. The gender distribution included 16 women, 6 men, and 1 participant identifying as *"other."* Participants ranged in age from 26 to 65 years. Regarding professional experience, approximately half of the participants had worked in SAEC for more than 10 years, while the other half had less experience. Regarding physical work environments, the majority worked in partially integrated school premises, while some reported working in fully non-integrated or completely separate facilities. In the group of educators, there were different professions, including SAEC educators, pre-school educators, leisure-time pedagogues, childminders, and teaching assistants. These background characteristics represent a diverse and experienced group of educators, well-positioned to reflect on questions of equity and educational practice in SAEC contexts.

The interviews were held on the respective SAEC premises. We conducted six semi-structured group interviews (19 educators participated) to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the research topic, achieving theoretical saturation, as no new themes emerged after this number of discussions. In qualitative research, adequacy is determined by depth and richness rather than numerical representativeness. Given the exploratory aim of examining educators' perceptions of equity within a specific municipal context. The sample was considered sufficient to generate nuanced and contextually grounded insights. The discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A). The findings presented in this article are based on the semi-structured group interviews (n = 19), while the questionnaire responses (n = 23) served as an initial exploratory step informing the development of the interview guide and broadening the contextual understanding of educators' perspectives. The interviews lasted 23 to 52 min, and the total number of transcribed pages was 94 (A4, 1.15 spacing). Table 1 provides an overview of the composition, duration, and transcription volume of the semi-structured group interviews.

In this study, we employed a semi-structured interview guide in line with Rowley's (2012) recommendations. The guide consisted of broad thematic questions that provided structure while allowing flexibility to explore unexpected or particularly interesting responses (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012). The thematic areas were designed to capture narratives, while ensuring coverage of the key topics intended for exploration during the interviews.

The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed with careful attention to detail and consistency. Prior to analysis, all recordings were reviewed to ensure respondents' statements were transcribed into complete, coherent sentences suitable for interpretation. As the analysis followed a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, initial coding began during this review phase, involving the careful identification of recurring words, concepts, and events. When presenting quotations, educators are referred to using fictitious names followed by a numerical code indicating the specific SAEC (e.g., Anna, 1; David, 4).

4.2 Ethical considerations

In this study, preventing harm was a primary concern. Following Allmark et al. (2009), potential consequences were carefully considered. Measures were taken to ensure voluntariness, avoid exploitation, and maintain confidentiality. Prior to the interviews, educators were thoroughly informed about the study, provided with an information letter and a consent form, in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024). The data were anonymised, processed, and stored in accordance

TABLE 1 Overview of interviews and empirical material.

SAEC	Number of respondents	Gender		Time	Pages
		Woman	Man		
SAEC 1 A	3	2	1	45 min	15
SAEC 2 B 1	3	3	0	34 min	19
SAEC 2 B2	3	1	2	37 min	13
SAEC 3 C	4	3	1	29 min	20
SAEC 4 D 1	5	5	0	52 min	19
SAEC 4 D 2	1	0	1	23 min	8
Total	19	14	5	220 min	94

with Mid Sweden University's data management plan and in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation as established by the Swedish Data Protection Authority and GDPR (with supplementary provisions to the EU General Data Protection Regulation) (SFS, 2018).

4.3 Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2023). This approach was chosen for its compatibility with both the participatory action research design and the study's interpretive focus on meaning-making practices (Braun and Clarke, 2023). RTA is particularly well-suited to this study, as it investigates how educators perceive, understand, and enact the concept of equity in their daily practices—an inherently interpretive and context-bound question. Since the researcher also holds a participatory position within the project, the reflexive orientation of RTA is essential for acknowledging and critically engaging with the researcher's influence on the analytic process. The research team consisted of three people: a PhD student with experience in children's perspectives and student health, and two senior researchers with different backgrounds. One was more specialised in leisure-time pedagogy, and the other in teachers' professionalisation. With the complementary expertise of these three researchers, a broad foundation for interpreting the empirical material was established. The analyses of the empirical material were initially carried out individually and subsequently jointly. The researchers facilitated reflective activities within the broader development project but held no managerial authority over the participating educators. This position provided access to situated professional reflections while requiring ongoing reflexive awareness of how their involvement could influence data collection and interpretation.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic approach. It was an iterative, non-linear process involving repeated reading, inductive coding, and theme development through critical reflection. Themes were understood as constructed patterns of meaning, shaped by the researcher's positionality and deep engagement with the data. The steps were the following: 1. Familiarisation with the data. 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Searching and constructing initial themes, 4. Reviewing and refining themes 5. Defining and naming themes, and 6. Writing the analysis.

The final stage involved composing contextually grounded analytic narratives supported by representative data extracts. These themes form the foundation of the study's findings and were interpreted in light of theoretical perspectives and participants situated experiences.

4.4 Trustworthiness and reflexivity

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to the COREQ guidelines (Tong et al., 2007) and employed credibility frameworks by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell and Poth (2018). Reflexivity was maintained through memo-writing and self-reflection (Patton, 2015), critically examining assumptions and positionality. Semantic validity was supported by aligning coding and themes with participants' intended meanings, while contextual sensitivity (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) guided interpretation within SAEC settings. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, and confirmability, dependability, and transferability were addressed via transparent documentation, audit trails, and rich descriptions. These strategies ensured a rigorous and ethically sound qualitative process.

Data accuracy was ensured by cross-checking transcripts against audio recordings. The three researchers independently coded the data and met regularly to exchange insights, challenge interpretations, and refine themes. A semi-structured interview guide supported trustworthiness. The research team—comprising a doctoral researcher and two senior researchers with teaching experience—critically reflected on their positionalities and assumptions to minimise bias in data interpretation.

5 Result

In the following chapter, the three research questions are addressed individually based on the RTA.

5.1 Equity as a difficult-to-define concept

The first question concerned how the educators perceived the concept of equity. The analysis identified four key aspects shaping these perceptions: structural factors, enacted education, educational responsibility, and meaningful participation for all (Figure 1).

In educators' descriptions of the concept of equity, structural factors were particularly prominent. Educators perceive those structural factors—such as inadequate facilities, insufficient staffing resources, and municipal disparities—undermine the possibility of achieving equity. Differences between departments and schools are described as substantial, both in organisational and socio-economic terms. A lack of facilities, group rooms, and adequate spaces is regarded as a recurring obstacle. The following excerpts illustrate how two educators articulated their perspectives: *"I would say it is not equitable, as we have different facilities,* var*ying amounts of space, and differing*

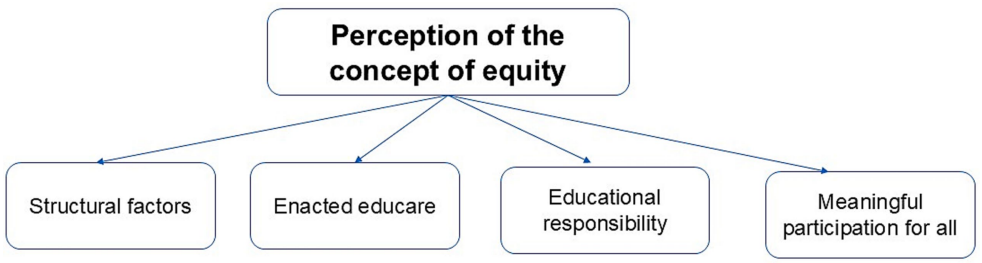

FIGURE 1
Educators' perception of the concept of equity.

pedagogical competencies (Berth, 2)." "*We lack learning environments… for example, the girls' group that wants to dance does not always have access to sports halls. I hate having to say no to things they want to initiate (Andrew 1).*"

Equity is therefore understood as largely beyond the control of individual SAEC, being strongly contingent upon resource allocation and priorities, for example, budget allocation and personnel strategy. These accounts illustrate how educators relate equity to external frameworks, such as material resources, organisational structures, and municipal priorities, which define the structural conditions for action.

Another prominent theme in the perception of equity was enacted by educare. Care is actively realised in everyday actions and environments. This concept is emphasised in practice, in which education and care are integrated and enacted within the educational setting. Educators describe equity as something that emerges through everyday practices, where care and learning are not separate but are intertwined. The following two quotations illustrate this: "*It is, in fact, just as much about care as it is about learning (David, 4).*" "*Care and learning constantly intersect… a bit of closeness yet simultaneously learning (Cilla 3).*" Equity emerges as enacted through everyday interactions that enable participation and belonging. Being seen, greeted, and acknowledged becomes a form of equity-in-action, where children's right to safety and belonging is realised through the presence of adults. In frame factor terms, these descriptions reflect how perceived frameworks shape educators' interpretations of what is possible and meaningful within existing structural constraints.

Educational responsibility emerged as an additional component of the concept of equity. Educators reflect on their professional responsibility to work towards equity through awareness, planning, and a shared understanding. Equity appears as a collective endeavour within work teams—something that must be sustained through dialogue, reflection, and planning. Dora (4) articulated her perspective as follows: *"The educational aspect is crucial; having a shared understanding is essential. If we are aligned and work towards the same goals, we continuously develop."*

The educators further emphasised that the concept of equity incorporated the principle of *"meaningful participation for all,"* highlighting the importance of inclusive engagement in everyday practices. Equity is conceptualised as guaranteeing meaningful participation for every child, irrespective of background, needs, or abilities. Rather than being understood as uniformity, equity is framed as responsiveness to individual circumstances. Educators highlight the necessity of *"meeting children where they are"* and designing inclusive activities to prevent marginalisation. Bo (2) clarified, *"All students should have access to meaningful leisure time based on their individual needs and circumstances."* Berit (2) reflects, *"How can the school-age educare become equitable for children with diagnoses? What support can we provide to ensure they have the same opportunities as others?"*

Equity is linked to participation in shared activities and access to meaningful opportunities within the SAEC context. Relational interaction—such as seeing, listening, and fostering a sense of belonging—is described as a condition that enables such participation rather than as equity in itself. Taken together, these accounts show that educators understand equity as shaped both by structural conditions and by everyday relationships. They refer to limited resources and organisational arrangements, but also to their own professional judgements in daily work. Equity, therefore, emerges as something that is continuously interpreted and worked out in practice rather than as a clearly defined principle.

5.2 Multiple dimensions of equity

The second research question examined the dimensions of equity that the educators highlighted. They highlighted multiple dimensions of equity, illustrating that fairness and inclusion in SAEC settings are understood as both social and structural constructs. The analysis revealed the following four dimensions: relational, educational, ethical, and developmental conditions (Figure 2). While the first analysis (Figure 1) captured how educators describe the concept of equity, this second analysis identifies analytical dimensions through which equity is enacted in practice. Whereas meaningful participation refers to the outcome of equitable practice, the relational dimension can be understood as capturing the interactional processes through which such participation becomes possible.

Educators emphasise relationships as the foundation for justice, as equity is created in practice through adult presence and engagement. They speak of *"being there," "seeing everyone,"* and meeting each child based on their individual circumstances. *"We try to see every child… saying a small word to each one, and I believe that provides a sense of security for the younger ones as well,"* explained Anne 1. The relational dimension conceptualises equity as emotional and social recognition. Justice is not only about resources but about ensuring that every child feels seen, acknowledged, and secure.

Another dimension of equity is shared professional understandings of educators and educational dimension, which highlights equity as a didactic principle – providing all students with opportunities for learning through structure, flexibility, and adaptation. Professional reflection is seen as a prerequisite for justice.

This dimension includes professional coherence, having a common educational vision, shared norms, and coordinated practices

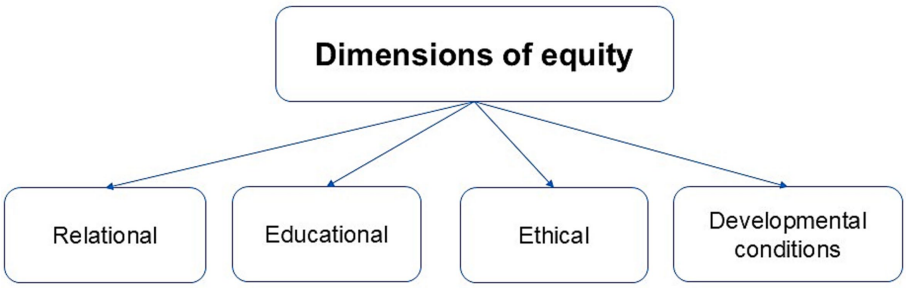

FIGURE 2
Educators' perception of dimensions in the concept of equity.

through planning and reflection. Dimensions of equity become an expression of collective professionalism, joint planning, clear routines, and an inclusive educational approach. Doris (4) emphasised: "The *educational aspect is the most important – that we share a common understanding. If we work towards the same goal, we are constantly developing.*"

Ethical dimensions are also evident in the educators' narrative about equity. There are ethical approaches and commitments to creating fairness through care, empathy, and responsibility. Educators describe equity not only as relationships or support, but as ethical adult conduct in which the educator serves as a role model. The following quotes exemplify this: "It's *about being a good role model, how we interact with the children, taking time and being present (Boris, 2).*" "*We try to empower the children, give them responsibility, and allow them to make mistakes. That strengthens their self-confidence (Anette, 1).*" The ethical dimension reveals equity as a moral commitment. Justice is not only about distributing resources, but also about creating respectful relationships where every child can thrive and grow. Developmental conditions as dimensions of equity are also expressed by educators. Equity includes creating conditions for development over time (temporal dimension). Educators describe equity as something that is built gradually, by giving students recurring opportunities to develop within the SAEC's environments. As Ada (1) pointed out: "You *need to think in a longer perspective… that you follow your group from grade one, two, three, so you should have been able to work with roughly the same things.*" Social development emerges as one of the most important dimensions of development, and thus as a core aspect of equity. Equity is not understood as equal starting points, but as fair conditions for development over time. Thus, equity becomes a question of what opportunities students are given to develop as social, emotional, and active subjects within the SAEC context. Together, these dimensions illustrate that equity is not perceived as a single principle, but as a layered construct shaped by relational, professional, ethical, and developmental considerations. These aspects are closely intertwined and often overlap in practice. Meaningful participation concerns children's actual opportunities to take part in activities, while the relational aspect refers to how educators' everyday interactions make such participation possible.

5.3 Tensions when discussing equity

Educators reveal four main tensions that emerge as they attempt to enact equity in daily practice: inclusion versus structural limitations, freedom versus control, sameness versus difference, and care versus accountability (Figure 3). These tensions highlight contradictions between ideals and realities in the Swedish SAEC context.

The tension between inclusion and structure becomes evident when educators strive to offer all students equal opportunities, but feel that limited resources, inadequate facilities, and insufficient educator density hinder this goal. Abil (1) said: "We *lack learning environments… Sometimes we have to say no to the children's initiatives, and I hate saying no.*" Beda (2) clarified, "We *have different facilities and different educational competencies – it's not really equitable between the departments.*" Educators express frustration that equity requires resources they cannot influence. Despite their commitment, inequality is created through structural differences between schools and socioeconomic areas. This tension reveals how equity in practice is not only a matter of educational values but of systemic conditions. A gap emerges between the will to include and the ability to implement. Tension can be interpreted as emerging from the interplay between external frameworks (e.g., staffing and facilities) and perceived frameworks, where educators attempt to reconcile structural constraints with professional commitments.

SAEC strives to promote pupil influence and free play while at the same time needing to create structure and a sense of security for large groups of students. This tension is expressed by Charles, 3:

"*We work with free play, but the children have to stay in one place with what they have started. Otherwise, it creates insecurity for others. We try to have both free and educator-led activities; no one should be forced, but everyone should participate.*"

Educators balance students' freedom with the need for order and safety. Equity in this context involves giving students influence—but within clear boundaries. Some educators associate equity with equal conditions—the same materials, routines, and rules. Others emphasise the right to difference—that children require different forms of support to achieve equal opportunities. Two quotations illustrate this: "*We try to have the same layout in our planning, the same materials. It should look the same (Acco).*" "*All children have different needs – we have to adapt so that everyone has access to meaningful leisure time (Dag 4).*" This ambivalence shows how educators negotiate between standardisation and individualisation. In practice, equity involves both shared structures and individual adaptations, which sometimes creates tensions between fairness and targeted support. This tension reflects two competing discourses of justice: the compensatory and the differentiated discourse. Educators move between these perspectives in their everyday practice. Educators seek to emphasize care, safety, and social development, while simultaneously experiencing demands for measurable learning outcomes. This tension is described by Anton (1): "Well-*being is important, but so is learning… everything needs to*

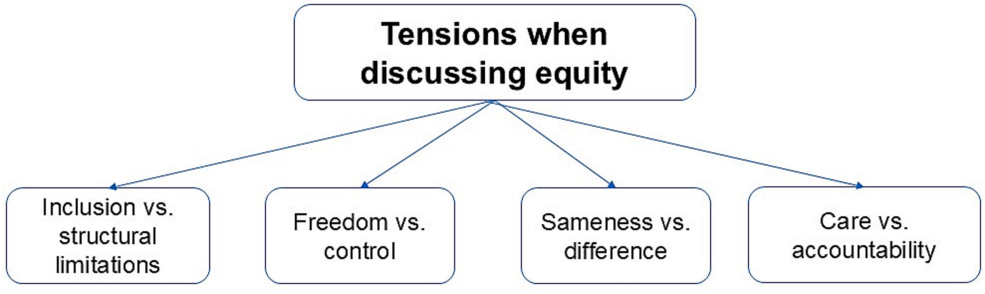

FIGURE 3
Tensions identified during educators' discussions of equity.

be meaningful." Beata (2) also described this tension: *"Care and learning are constantly intertwined, but at times it feels as though learning has to be demonstrated to a greater extent.*" Equity in this context requires balancing emotional value (students' sense of safety and relationships) with educational value (learning and development). Educators describe the risk that the caring dimension of leisure-time pedagogy is undervalued within a school-centered system.

Through these tensions, a recurring pattern emerges: educators constantly balance structural constraints and professional obligations in their attempts to ensure equity. The tensions identified reflect the interplay between external frames that define the limits of action and the perceived frames through which educators interpret and prioritise equality in practice. Thus, equality appears not as a stable state but as a continuous balancing process of negotiation shaped by competing demands.

Overall, the findings indicate that educators' perceptions of equity are shaped through the continuous negotiation between structural conditions and professional interpretations. Equity emerges as multidimensional and situational, grounded in relational practices yet constrained by organisational and policy frameworks. Across themes, a recurring pattern becomes visible: educators move between external frameworks that define the boundaries of action and perceived frameworks through which they interpret and enact equity in everyday practice. This analytical pattern provides a foundation for the discussion of how structural equality and individual equity intersect in SAEC contexts.

6 Discussion

In this article, educators' perspectives about equity in SAEC were analysed through reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023) in the light of frame factor theory (Lundgren, 1972). Throughout the discussion, equity is approached as a concept that operates at two interrelated levels: equality at a structural level, concerning comparable conditions across SAEC settings, and equity at an individual level, concerning how education is adapted to pupils' different circumstances and needs. In this section, the results are discussed under the following headings: Different ways of perceiving equity in SAEC, Dimensions of equity in SAEC practice, and Tensions shaping educators' perceptions of equity, followed by implications and suggestions for further research.

6.1 Different ways of perceiving equity in SAEC

The findings indicate that educators in SAEC do not define equity as a fixed or singular concept, but rather as something that depends on the conditions under which they work. In this article, equality refers to structural conditions and resource distribution across settings, while equity concerns responsiveness to individual pupils' needs within those conditions. From a frame factor perspective, educators' perceptions of equity are influenced by external conditions such as resources, facilities, staffing, and local differences (Grewell and Boström, 2025). These conditions, linked to structural equality across settings, define the space of possible educational action in SAEC, within which equity is enacted at an individual level (Gustafsson, 1999; Imsen, 1999; Lundgren, 1972).

At the same time, equity can be interpreted as something realised through everyday educational actions (Andishmand, 2017). In the empirical material, educators describe how perceptions of equity are enacted through care, attentiveness, adult presence, and the integration of care and learning in daily practice. From this perspective, equity appears not to be solely shaped by managerial rules or policies but emerges at an individual level through relational processes within everyday educational work (Boström and Elvstrand, 2025; Norqvist, 2022; Gustafsson, 1999).

The findings suggest that when equity in SAEC is understood as responsiveness to students' individual needs and opportunities for meaningful participation in leisure time, it is interpreted in different ways by educators. Previous research indicates that such interpretations are often shaped through everyday professional judgement rather than through shared conceptual frameworks (Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020; Haglund, 2015). In this study, equity is described as a shared professional responsibility—supported by collective dialogue and reflection—that appears to be associated with more consistent interpretations of a fair learning environment within educators' groups (Wernholm and Ackesjö, 2025). Such professional coherence can be understood as reducing students' dependence on individual educators' varying levels of experience or confidence in everyday practice (Andishmand, 2017).

Overall, this study suggests that, in the empirical material, educators' perceptions of equity are grounded in relationships, professional practice, and everyday participation rather than framed primarily through policy discourses. Similar patterns have been identified in international research, where educators in extended and hybrid educational contexts navigate normative policy concepts through situated professional judgement rather than through fixed institutional definitions (Dziubaniuk et al., 2024; Desir and Posselt, 2025). In early childhood scholarship, equity is likewise described as relational and enacted in everyday practice rather than prescribed through policy alone. These parallels suggest that the interpretive space identified in SAEC reflects broader dynamics in contemporary educational settings. From a frame factor perspective, this interpretive openness can be understood as emerging within the interplay between external frameworks—such as policy formulations and organisational structures—and perceived frameworks shaped through professional judgement (Gustafsson, 1999; Lundgren, 1972). Previous research shows that equity in Swedish education has largely been articulated at the level of policy and governance (Englund and Quennerstedt, 2008; Francia, 2008; Wahlström, 2008), offering limited shared conceptual guidance for educators' everyday work. This has left considerable room for interpretation of equity in educational practice. In line with earlier studies conceptualising SAEC as a hybrid educational space, educators' accounts reflect how care, learning, and leisure are intertwined and locally interpreted in everyday work (Andishmand, 2017; Norqvist, 2022).

6.2 Dimensions of equity in SAEC practice

From a frame factor perspective, the findings show that educators perceive equity in SAEC as having several dimensions, including relational, educational, ethical, and developmental aspects. These dimensions mainly concern equity at an individual level, as understood and enacted in everyday practice, rather than equality at a structural level. A similar emphasis on relational and practice-based interpretations of equity has been identified in international research, where educators'

sensemaking plays a central role in translating normative policy concepts into everyday professional action (Dziubaniuk et al., 2024; Desir and Posselt, 2025). This way of understanding equity is consistent with earlier research indicating that SAEC didactics is still developing, with educational meanings mainly shaped in everyday practice rather than through established didactic concepts (cf. Boström et al., 2022; Boström and Elvstrand, 2025). Relationally, equity is associated with adult presence, recognition, and emotional security. Educationally, it depends on professional coherence, shared visions, and coordinated practices that help educators work in similar ways, which educators describe as reducing differences in how opportunities are offered to students. Ethically, equity is understood as adult responsibility and role modelling, including how educators support students' participation and sense of agency in everyday activities. Developmentally, equity is described by educators as providing fair conditions for students' social and emotional development over time, rather than focusing on equal starting points (cf. Andishmand, 2017).

Together, these dimensions illustrate that equity is an ongoing process shaped by professional practice and long-term developmental considerations. These dimensions also reflect educators' agency within existing frame factors, where professional choices and interpretations influence how equity is understood and approached in practice (cf. Gustafsson, 1999). In this way, frame factor theory functions not only as a contextual lens but as an analytical tool for understanding how structural conditions and professional agency interact in the enactment of equity. The findings thus contribute to theoretical debates on equity as a professional practice by demonstrating how policy-level ambitions are reinterpreted through situated educational work. These findings also suggest that both initial teacher education and continuing professional development in SAEC need to address equity not only as a policy goal but as a relational and practice-based competence. Structured opportunities for collective reflection on professional judgement and shared interpretations of equity may strengthen coherence in educational practice.

6.3 Tensions shaping educators' perceptions of equity

A central tension concerns inclusion at an individual level versus structural constraints linked to equality across settings. Educators strive to include all students, but face limitations primarily related to external frame factors such as staffing, space, and material resources, creating a gap between educators' intentions and the conditions under which they work. Similar tensions have been described in previous research, where organisational arrangements and leadership structures constrain educators' space for educational action in SAEC (Haglund and Boström, 2022; Boström and Elvstrand, 2024). Comparable tensions between inclusion, resource constraints, and professional responsibility have also been identified in international extended education contexts, where educators operate within hybrid institutional arrangements and competing policy demands (Cartmel and Hurst, 2021).

Another tension involves freedom versus structure. While students' influence and free play are highly valued, safety and order in large groups require clear structures. Educators describe how they rely on perceived frameworks and relational competence to balance these demands in everyday practice, illustrating how professional agency is exercised within, but not fully determined by, external frame factors (cf. Gustafsson, 1999; Öberg, 2019).

A third tension concerns the negotiation between sameness and difference in everyday practice. In educators' accounts, equity is shaped through ongoing decisions about whether to apply shared structures or adapt to individual students' needs. From this perspective, treating all students in the same way does not lead to equitable outcomes, a pattern also noted in previous research (cf. Hjalmarsson and Odenbring, 2020).

Finally, educators experience tension between care-oriented practices and demands for measurable learning outcomes. External curricular and assessment discourses define what counts as legitimate practice, at times marginalising relational and caring dimensions. This reflects the lower legitimacy of relational work within outcome-oriented school discourses. Previous research similarly shows that equity in SAEC is often framed through access, funding, and organisational priorities, while educators' relational and caring work tends to receive less recognition within school-centred curricular and accountability frameworks (Cartmel and Hurst, 2021; Elvstrand et al., 2024). These recurring tensions also point to the importance of preparing educators to navigate structural constraints while sustaining relational and ethical commitments in practice. Both initial teacher education and continuing professional development may therefore benefit from explicitly addressing how equity is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted under conditions of limited resources and competing expectations.

In sum, equity in SAEC emerges as a continuous balancing act in which educators orient their professional judgements within structural and institutional constraints shaped by external and perceived frameworks. As a result, equity at an individual level becomes situational and contingent, rather than guided by shared, clearly articulated approaches to equity that align the efforts of different adult stakeholders around pupils' learning, development, and well-being. This analysis contributes to theoretical discussions of equity as a professional practice by demonstrating how normative policy ambitions are reinterpreted and reshaped within everyday educational work.

6.4 Limitations of the study

This study is qualitative and draws on material from a limited number of SAECs within one contextual setting. It explores educators' perceptions of equity, rather than observed educational actions or long-term outcomes for students. The participatory action research design, while enabling in-depth professional reflection, may also have influenced how participants articulated their understandings of equity. The findings are therefore not meant to be statistically generalisable, but they provide analytical insight into how equity is perceived and given meaning in everyday SAEC practice.

The study is closely linked to the historically and politically contested concept of likvärdighet, which may limit transferability to other national contexts. In addition, the analysis focuses on a specific organisational setting and does not capture potential variations between municipalities, leadership models, or socio-economic contexts. Nor does it follow how perceptions of equity may shift over time or how they relate to observed practice and student experiences. Future research could explore how educators' interpretations of equity vary across municipalities, organisational models, or national contexts to deepen understanding of how structural conditions shape professional practice.

6.5 Contribution

Despite these limitations, the study makes a clear, practice-oriented contribution. It shows that equity in SAEC is not a predefined

pedagogical concept but is shaped through educators' perceptions in everyday practice. By shifting the focus from policy, resources, and access to educators' meaning-making, the study highlights equity as a multidimensional concept—relational, educational, ethical, and developmental—rather than as equal conditions or compensation alone. In doing so, the article helps explain why equity in SAEC often appears unclear and contested: policy-level tensions are carried into practice, where educators are required to make sense of equity in their daily work. The originality of the study lies in its focus on educators' perceptions of equity, complementing earlier SAEC research that has primarily addressed structural conditions.

6.6 Implications

In SAEC, educators work with an understanding of equity that is ambiguous and conceptually unstable. As a result, equitable learning environments do not emerge automatically from individual professional judgment alone. When shared discussions and a common professional language are lacking, work with equity becomes uneven and dependent on individual interpretations. Reference points developed collaboratively within SAEC may help reduce inconsistency in everyday decision-making and support more predictable conditions for pupils.

Equity in SAEC cannot be understood solely in terms of resources, organisation, or access, nor can it remain only at the level of everyday practice without conceptual clarification. There is a need for research that develops clear, practice-relevant frameworks of equity and that connects structural equality with individual equity. This has implications for teacher education, as both initial preparation and professional development need to address equity as a central professional dilemma and prepare educators to navigate structural, relational, and policy tensions. Participatory action research may support this by creating structured spaces for collective reflection and iterative development of practice. Through collaboration between educators and researchers, shared interpretations of equity can be articulated, tested, and refined in relation to everyday work.

Expectations of coherence cannot be placed on educators alone. When equity is defined broadly and mainly through compensatory logic, conceptual ambiguity is carried directly into practice. Policies that aim to strengthen equity in SAEC, therefore, need to support sustained conceptual work across policy, research, and practice, and to clarify responsibilities related to structural equality and individual equity. It would also be valuable to conduct longitudinal research to follow educators over time to see how their perceptions change in response to policy shifts or professional development.

7 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educators perceive equity in SAEC as challenging to define and as being significantly influenced by structural conditions shaped through the everyday practices of care, relationships, and student engagement. This reflects the dual nature of the Swedish concept of likvärdighet, which combines expectations of equality at a structural level with equity that operates at an individual level. Equity is perceived as multidimensional in educators' perceptions, creating repeated tensions in practice: inclusion versus structural limitations, freedom versus control, sameness versus difference, and care versus accountability. Structural factors are influencing the possibilities of achieving the intentions outlined in the steering documents and limiting the conditions for equity in SAEC. To achieve a higher degree of equity in SAEC, educators' accounts indicate that resources need to be allocated specifically for SAEC, rather than being included in the overall school organisation. If equity were fully implemented in SAEC, it could influence equitable conditions for all students´ learning, development, and well-being, also in school. However, the considerable room for interpretation identified in this study places significant responsibility on educators' professional judgement. Beyond the Swedish context, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions about how equity is interpreted and enacted in hybrid educational settings where care, learning, and accountability intersect. Understanding equity as a professional and situational practice highlights the need to better align structural conditions with educators' relational and ethical commitments.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

MR: Data curation, Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. LB: Data curation, Project administration, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Supervision, Conceptualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Visualization, Writing – original draft. UD: Formal analysis, Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2026.1791249/full#supplementary-material

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