Social Integration of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
– Exploring the teachers’ accounts of how children with SEN are integrated at a mainstream primary school

Afnan Hallak
Israa A.E. Osman

Supervisor: Rebecka Tiefenbacher
Examiner: Lina Söderman Lago
Abstract

Even though there have been enormous efforts towards the inclusive practices of young children with special educational needs (SEN) globally. Young children with SEN might still have different experiences related to their integration in mainstream environments depending on each school, municipality, country, and country. The study is aimed at exploring the teacher’s accounts of how children with SEN are integrated socially into practice in a mainstream school environment. It also investigates the main challenges faced by special needs children inside their classrooms, as reported by teachers working at one of the mainstream primary schools. The study was based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with five primary school teachers and teaching assistants. Thematic structural analysis was used to identify the study's main themes. These themes were focused on; a) the teachers’ accounts in relation to the social integration among primary school children (with and without) SEN, b) the participation of children with SEN in the social activities of the primary mainstream school, and c) the communication challenges encountered in the teacher/student interactions. The teachers’ accounts in relation to the social integration among primary school children showed different benefits for children with and without SEN, as well as challenges which act as barriers to the children’s social integration in a mainstream school. The results further showed that the children's participation in the social activities of mainstream school was not as presumed within a mainstream school environment, one of the reasons was the restrictions of Covid 19. Finally, the main challenge encountered in the teachers- students' relations was related to the communication difficulties of children with SEN. In a mainstream school, the social integration of young children with SEN is challenged by several factors that act as barriers to their fullest social involvement.

Keywords

Primary mainstream school, children with SEN, social integration, social participation, communication challenges for children with SEN.
**Table of Contents**

1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS ....................................................................... 1
   2.1 Research Questions ................................................................................................. 2

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ..................................................................................................... 2
   3.1 Background ............................................................................................................. 2
   3.2 Inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools ......................................... 3
   3.3 Social Integration and Interaction of Children with SEN ....................................... 5
   3.4 Participation of children with SEN at mainstream schools’ activities .................... 6
   3.5 Challenges faced by children with SEN at mainstream schools ............................. 8
   3.6 Teachers work with communication in relation to children with SEN .................... 9
   3.7 The outbreak of Covid 19 and children with SEN ................................................. 11

4. METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................... 11
   4.1 Semi-structured interviews .................................................................................... 12
   4.2 Participants ............................................................................................................. 13
   4.3 Interview process .................................................................................................... 14
   4.4 Analysis method and process ................................................................................ 14
   4.5 Research ethics ...................................................................................................... 15

5. ANALYSIS ......................................................................................................................... 16
   5.1 The social integration of children at the primary mainstream school ..................... 16
      5.1.1 Teachers account for the benefits that occur in the integration of children ......... 16
      5.1.2 Teachers account for the challenges that occur in the social integration of children 18
   5.2 Children’s’ participation in the school’s social activities ........................................ 20
      5.2.1 Participation before the pandemic of Covid 19 ................................................. 20
      5.2.2 Participation during the pandemic of Covid 19 ............................................... 23
   5.3 Communication challenges encountered in the teacher/student interaction ............ 24

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION ............................................................................................... 28
   6.1 The social integration among primary school children ........................................... 28
   6.2 Children's participation in the school’s social activities ......................................... 30
   6.3 Communication challenges encountered in the teacher/student interaction ............ 31

LIST OF REFERENCES ............................................................................................................. 34
APPENDIX .............................................................................................................................. 40
1. INTRODUCTION

During the late 20th century, efforts of integrating children with special educational needs (SEN) at mainstream schools have increased enormously (Shaw, 2017; 292). In the 1980’s, the term “integration” was used for integrating students with SEN partly so they would have equal opportunities to participate in the environment of ordinary schools (Tutt, 2007; 5). Later during the 1990’s, more emphasis took place on using the term “inclusion” as an attempt to focus on how schools adapt their environment and educational approaches to meet the special individual needs of students once they are enrolled in the school. Nepi et al. (2015; 320) claims that the difference between the two terms integration and inclusion lies on “the placement of the student into a pre-existing context that will not be adapted” and “the modification of the environment to better fit the needs of the student”.

Even though many countries have adopted policies and practices related to inclusive education in mainstream schools, scholars still debate about the implementation of inclusive practices for children with SEN in schools. As we both reside in Sweden, we were interested in this topic as one of us is a mother of a special needs child and a former educator in another country that has different inclusion policies and practices at schools. And the other author works at a school for children with SEN and wanted to further deepen the knowledge and understanding of various aspects related to children with SEN at mainstream schools. Accordingly, the current study, based on qualitative research paradigm, is aimed at exploring the teachers’ accounts of how children with SEN are socially integrating and participating in practice at a mainstream school environment. It also investigates the main challenges faced by children with SEN inside their classrooms, as reported by teaching staff working at one of the primary mainstream schools in a municipality in Stockholm County, Sweden.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

While scholars such as Ganz, et al. (2021) and Richardson (2002) have explored the experiences of children with SEN, much emphasis has focused on children with specific types of disabilities such as physical, visual, and hearing disabilities. Other children with developmental and intellectual disabilities often struggle with communication difficulties, therefore, we have decided to focus on young primary school aged children with SEN, who are having difficulties in using verbal language as a means of communication. This includes children with learning disabilities, ADHD, down syndrome, and children on the autism spectrum.

Much emphasis has recently been put on how mainstream schools could benefit the social needs and skills of children with SEN. Therefore, we wanted to explore how the teaching staff assesses the social integration of young children with SEN in an inclusive environment. On the other hand, our
study also highlights the challenges encountered by children with SEN in their social interactions with other typically developing peers, as reflected by teachers and teaching assistants. Additionally, our study also examines the social participation of children with SEN in school’s activities. The study further sheds light on the major difficulties faced by young children with SEN inside their classroom, as reflected by their teaching staff.

We choose to interview the teaching staff about the social integration of children with SEN due to the communication challenges which could arise in interviewing children, especially, because we wanted to focus on exploring the matter in relation to children having developmental and intellectual disabilities. Another reason is because the teachers and teaching assistants are the closest individuals that interact and deal with children with SEN both in school and in classroom settings.

2.1 Research Questions

1. Do children with SEN socially integrate with other children without difficulties as reported by the teachers? What benefits and challenges of integration do teachers identify?
2. How do children with SEN socially participate in the mainstream school activities as reported by teachers?
3. How do teachers work with communication in relation to children with SEN, and what challenges occur inside their classrooms?

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

3.1 Background

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF, 2002), describes disability as a wide term which includes ‘impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions’ (ICF, 2002 cited in WHO, 2011; 7). Disability is related to the ‘negative aspects of the interaction’ between people suffering from a health state or other personal, social, and environmental factors (WHO, 2011; 7). Children having disabilities between the age of (0-14) years old were estimated by the Global Burden of Disease to be 5% (WHO, 2011; 8).

According to the WHO (2011; 11), children with disabilities have higher rates of dropping out of school compared to their typically developing peers. Even though these gaps are found more in the lower-income countries of the world, they are still present in the higher income countries. For example, in the western societies such as in eastern Europe countries, the rates of children’s enrolment in primary school are high, nevertheless, several children with disabilities do not go to school (WHO, 2011).
The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007) classifies students with SEN into three main categories: SEN-a, SEN-b, and SEN-c. The first category includes difficulties related to physical and mental disabilities. The second classification is related to learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties. While the last category refers to students having difficulties due to their social or economic background and conditions.

On the other hand, scholars such as Hornby (2011 cited in Shaw, 2017; 293) explain that the use of ‘special educational needs’ as a term could be perceived as a stigma itself. However, Shaw (2017; 294) suggested that without using such a label, these children will not be provided with the necessary educational demands they require. Therefore, it is important to neutralize such terms and discuss it in wider contexts (Lundin, 2017;21). Lundin (2017) states that we have already come a long way in changing societies, however, children with SEN can still be perceived negatively due to their specific terms and conditions.

3.2 Inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools
In the 21st century, the UN Human Rights Convention of Persons with Disabilities has assured the right of all children with SEN to be included at mainstream schools (United Nations, 2006 cited in Garrote, 2017). The way inclusive education is practiced for children with SEN at mainstream schools depends on how each country is committed to eliminate discrimination against children with special needs. This could be achieved through adopting appropriate legislation and implementing proper actions and policies (WHO, 2011; 15). However, the WHO (2011) further clarifies that for providing SEN children with adequate inclusive education practices, it is often required to have appropriate financial resources in the first place. The UN also states that the teaching staff working with SEN children at mainstream schools should be equipped with appropriate training and skills to meet the needs of each individual child. This shall consequently lead to improving the confidence of the teaching staff in educating and interacting with SEN students (WHO, 2011; 16). On the top of that, Nilholm (2006) argues that it is not enough to place children with SEN in a mainstream school setting and then call it inclusion. Nevertheless, inclusion requires that the attested participation and interaction of children with SEN in inclusive education. Therefore, social participation is a crucial factor before merely stating that everyone can equally have the opportunity for inclusive education at mainstream schools (Nilholm, 2006; 31).

In the Scandinavian countries, Saddler (2013; 149) explains that young children might have a different educational experience at mainstream education compared to other countries. This might be attributed to the strong emphasis which has been focused on the social interaction of young-aged students. Within the Swedish context, a previous study conducted by Göransson et al. (2011) have critically analyzed how inclusive education is applied in the Swedish compulsory school system for children with special needs, both nationally and municipally. In their study, one of the most important
conclusions was related to how many children with SEN were able to influence and enjoy participation in the activities of schools. It was also found that the Swedish inclusive classrooms were mostly democratic compared to an international level of differentiation. However, their findings also reveal that more than 10% of students with special needs do not attain the knowledge goals of the compulsory school system, and some students do not prosper well (Göransson et al., 2011; 551). On a national level, they stated that the concept of inclusive education had adequate support in the governance of official papers (Göransson et al., 2011; 550). However, they found that the policy documents had a more complex structure, while the Swedish municipalities consider the policy documents as a crucial guide for implementation. For example, it was stated that the concept of ‘inclusion’ was not appointed as a clear goal. Therefore, this can lead the schools to create a ‘varying interpretations’ about the inclusion of children with SEN (Göransson et al., 2011;543). Accordingly, Göransson et al. (2011; 550) claims that due to the structure of policy documents, there can be varying differences in the inclusion practices for children with SEN among the Swedish schools depending on the different municipalities. Finally, it is important to highlight that there has been an enormous debate about how mainstream schools could offer either positive or negative outcomes for students with SEN. For example, Krull et al. (2014; 170) describes that in Europe, the inclusion of children with SEN in regular classrooms at mainstreamed education has been controversial. Many studies shows that young children with SEN gain several advantages from their inclusion at regular classrooms (Justice, et al., 2014; Garrote et al., 2017; 13). It was found that through the social interaction between children with SEN and their typically developing peers, SEN children can establish friendships and become more socially accepted (Garrote et al., 2017; 13). Scholars such as Avramidis (2013; 434) also demonstrates that teachers had good perceptions about the social benefits of inclusion for children with SEN. Koster, et al. (2007; 44) further explains that teachers and parents were satisfied with the cognitive, social, and socio-emotional development of children with SEN. Additionally, another study conducted by Justice, et al. (2014) states that the young children with disabilities who were surrounded by their typically developing peers have gained great advantages related to their language skills. Banks (2018; 397) elaborates that many parents of children with SEN are encouraged to enrol their children at a mainstream school because of the opportunities and the possibilities to socially interact with their typically developing peers. On the other hand, several studies also highlighted some risks from the inclusion practices of children with SEN (Avramidis, 2010; Frostad and Pijl’s, 2007; Krull et al., 2014; Nepi et al., 2015). For example, a study conducted by Krull et al. (2014) shows that children with SEN were being less popular at their mainstream educational setting, while another study demonstrates that the SEN children were also less socially accepted in the class than the regularly developing peers (Nepi et al., 2015). Additionally,
another study illustrates that some children with SEN might exhibited more anti-social behaviours such as withdrawing or rule breaking (Avramidis, 2010). Other scholars such as Terzi (2011 cited in Pinto, et al., 2019;819) state that even if children with SEN were included physically in mainstream environment, they would still be excluded emotionally from the ordinary scheme of learning. Children with SEN might have higher levels of being bullied and lower levels of having social support from their typically developing peers (Symes and Humphrey, 2010; 488).

3.3 Social Integration and Interaction of Children with SEN

Nepi et al. (2015; 320) explain that the term integration refers to how schools modify their environment to best meet the individual needs of students. Meynert (2014; 7) further state that the concept is related to how children are included within the school system. Through integration, students would be able to form social relations and build their self-esteem (Meynart, 2014; 9). It also provide students with an opportunity to participate in certain subjects at mainstream classrooms (Meynert, 2014; 8).

During childhood, Banks (2018; 397) emphasize that the model of social learning claims that children learn and acquire social skills and behaviours from their peers, whether these behaviours are positive or negative. Garrote et al. (2016;13-14) further explain that the dimensions of the social interaction of children with SEN includes: relationships and friendships, playing and participating in activities together, and being accepted by typically developing peers. Coon (2018;112) explained that building friendships and social relations supports children’s development and strengthen their skills and abilities. However, several previous studies suggest that children with SEN might have difficulties in building social relations with their typically developing peers (Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Nepi et al., 2015; Sigstad, 2018). For example, Frostad and Pijl’s (2007; 27) conducted a study in mainstream schools in Norway and found that around 25% of the children with SEN were not socially included in their peer group relations. Moreover, Sigstad (2018) found that most of the peer social relations and friendships were within the same group of children with SEN. Frostad and Pijl (2007; 28) further suggest that the insufficient sets of children’s social skills can lead to difficulties in initiating social bonds with typically developing peers, at the same time, the lack of having social bonds can in return lead to hindering the social skills of children with SEN.

When it comes to social participation, researchers such as Boer et al. (2013) and Simeonsson et al. (2001) claim that children with SEN learn more when they socially interact with other peers. Children with SEN develop their communicative abilities and coordinated behaviours (Coon, 2018;112). They notice peers’ actions and behaviours such as gestures, voices, facial expressions, and body language (Conn, 2018; 62-70). In a study conducted by Dolva et al. (2010; 292), the findings demonstrate that
when peers interact socially with children with Down syndrome and provide them with support, the SEN children would get more engaged in the shared activities than when they usually do by themselves. Guralnick et al. (2007; 75) further state that over a two-year period, children with SEN were improved positively from their social participation with other peers and became more reactive and responsive socially. Their findings also demonstrate that these children were more engaged in pair interactive group play and less in solitary play.

Children with and without SEN might use different methods in socialising (Haakma et al., 2021). For example, typically developing peers often initiate the social contact by stroking or putting an arm around the shoulder of a child with SEN. However, many children with SEN do not prefer such physical contact (Haakma et al., 2021). Sigstad (2018; 386) suggest that children with SEN such as those with intellectual disabilities do not often engage or participate socially with other peers without special needs. Frostad and Pijl (2007; 28) elaborate that one of the reasons for such difficulties could be attributed to the children’s “insufficient sets of social skills”. Children with SEN might not be able to consolidate positive social behaviours into more compound social interactions (Guralnick, et al. 2007; 75).

Finally, it is crucial to place children with SEN near their typically developing peers so both sides can have the opportunity to interact together (Haakma et al., 2021). A former study by Kwon, et al. (2011; 275) show that when children with SEN were involved in an inclusive setting, they demonstrate higher social functioning than when they were in a segregated setting. However, another study has found that children with SEN can have less social interaction due to ‘divergent attitudes among typically developing peers’ affected by ‘egocentricity’ or being labelled as having friends with disabilities (Sigstad, 2018; 386). Nevertheless, in Sigstad’s study, these same students showed ‘a great deal of care’ in their social interaction with their peers who have intellectual disabilities (Sigstad, 2018). Additionally, Garrote et al. (2017; 13) findings emphasize that through social interactions with peers, children with SEN can become more socially accepted. When children with SEN form social relations with their typically developing peers, this means that their differences and needs were both acknowledged and accepted (Koster, et al., 2009;135).

3.4 Participation of children with SEN at mainstream schools’ activities

Koster et al. (2009; 134) conducted a literature review to identify a common definition of the participation of children with SEN at primary mainstream education. They propose that researchers can use the term ‘social participation’ for focusing on any chosen research aspect related to the social inclusion of children with SEN (Koster et al., 2009; 136).
On the other hand, Skolverket (2022; 6) state that the school is a safe meeting environment which offers several social and cultural aspects for all children to develop. Moreover, the participation of children in school activities promotes their theoretical and social comprehension (Eriksson, et al., 2007). The social participation at schools means that children are not only involved in specific specialized activities but are also participating in several different forms of activities, such as during breaks, play, and leisure times (Jakobsson, 2022; 194).

In Sweden, even though the Swedish policy of education has focused on providing children with ‘one school for all,’ nevertheless, Barn Ombudsmannen (2002) stated that compared to the participation of typically developing peers, children with SEN were still not participating enough in schools’ activities (Eriksson, et al., 2007; 485). Additionally, in a study conducted in a Dutch primary mainstream school by Koster et al (2010), it was revealed that most children with SEN had a satisfactory level of social participation, however, they had more interaction with teachers and less interactions with their typically developing peers.

Similarly, in another study conducted in Korea by Jeong (2020; 1670), children with SEN had a lower level of participation and involvement in the school’s social activities. Based on Jeong’s findings, the children with SEN were facing more challenges and difficulties in integrating into the usual activities held at their schools (Jeong, 2020; 1671). Their findings show that the participation of children was more influenced by the school's policies and daily routines rather than the level of children’s involvement. Their results demonstrate that children with SEN participated more often in the activities held inside their classroom, this was attributed to the close supervision of their teachers inside the classroom setting (Jeong, 2020; 1671).

Children with SEN have long been perceived as incompetent, and more emphasis was often aimed at their challenges rather than their opportunities (Svenska Unescorådet, 2006; 16). Simeonsson, et al. (2001; 49) explain that it is not enough that children with SEN are present physically at the activities of school. Simeonsson, et al. (2001) have also found that children with SEN participated less in activities. They further explain that if SEN children are not offered opportunities to actively participate, they would not learn or gain the social and educational benefits they need to develop (Simeonsson, et al., 2001; 49). Therefore, providing an equal chance for children with SEN to participate at different activities, while offering them the support they need is crucial for their benefits (Jeong, 2020; 1667). In addition, primary school teachers emphasize the necessity to adjust the demands of activities and provide the support needed for each child with SEN depending on their individual needs (Kang, 2015).

In a study conducted in a Korian elementary school by Hong et al. (2013), one of the main barriers for a successful social participation of children with SEN was building a relationship with their
typically developing peers. Therefore, for the realization of a positive experience related to participation of children with SEN, it is essential that these children become socially accepted by their peers (Garrote et al., 2017; 13). Dolva et al. (2010; 291) clarify that when children with SEN participate with their peers, the typically developing students would try to adjust and modify the shared activities in a way that suits SEN classmates. This was attributed to their teachers and how they have taught them to include and involve their peers with SEN in the activities.

Finally, several previous studies have also found a lack in formulating specific services and programs that are aimed to foster the social skills of children with SEN in mainstream schools (Coster, et al., 2013; Lim, et al., 2016). Jeong (2020; 1672) suggest that by providing SEN children with specialized programs and strategies, this might aid them to achieve pivotal elements and increase their social participation in mainstream schools.

### 3.5 Challenges faced by children with SEN at mainstream schools

Children with SEN might face different difficulties related to their experiences at mainstream schools. Several scholars identify many challenges that might occur when children with SEN interact with other peers at schools (Conn, 2018; Jensen, 2017; McNamara, 2013).

One challenge for some children with SEN is that they might not often feel comfortable in participating in schools’ social gathering and activities. For example, autistic children might not want to be present in an environment with load noises and disturbing movements (Conn, 2018; 82). A second challenge is that even though some children with SEN might have the cognitive abilities to communicate verbally, they might still face other difficulties in maintaining attention during social conversations and interactions. For example, children who have autism can suffer from mutism or repeat words (eco speech) when speaking in social contexts (Jensen, 2017; 57-58). These children might also have difficulties in socializing and recognizing other children’s faces due to a condition called prosopagnosia or face blindness (Conn, 2018; 128-129). A third challenge as pointed out by Jensen (2017; 52) is that it might be difficult for some children with SEN to analyse and read different social situations around. As a result, children can get anxious when they are exposed to challenging situations that they do not comprehend. Jensen (2017) further highlighted that children with SEN might also find it difficult to engage in play activities with other children. For example, some children with SEN might not have the ability to use imagination or engage in pretend play games.

Finally, one of the major challenges which children with SEN might face at their mainstream schools is bullying. Children with SEN often seem gentle, kind, and innocent. And bullies always look for those who have difficulties in standing up for themselves. McNamara (2013; 14) explained that being bullied would depend on the student’s diagnosis, because these children are at more risk than regularly developing peers. The bullies usually look for a position of power, while children with SEN often have less power whether emotionally or physically, this in return can lead to other children taking
advantage of them. McNamara (2013) elaborated that children with SEN might also have difficulties understanding the meaning of being bullied. The fact that they have difficulties in communicating, it could lead to the misinterpretations of different situations within their social context, which means that they do not remember how to deal with such bullies. Another reason might also be because children with SEN have attended special schools or special separated classes and did not really understand the social interactions with other regularly developing peer (McNamara, 2013; 14).

3.6 Teachers work with communication in relation to children with SEN
Skolverket (2022; 165) emphasizes the importance of communication and how it increases the participation of individuals in their daily lives and in society at large. Dunlap & Fox (1999; 3) clarify that it is not enough to just support children with SEN in the schools’ environment, but these students also need to be supported in communicating with others. For example, most students with autism learn how to use speech, however they still face constant challenges in expressing their wishes and needs. Therefore, scholars such as Sigstad (2018) emphasize how the teachers of children with SEN play a leading role in facilitating the development of their students.

In addition, Asmervik, et al. (2001;14) explain how children who have difficulties in communicating with others might often feel that they have failed. And this, in return, can lead them to exhibit different reactions and behaviours. Cook & Ogden (2022; 381) claim that even though many of the teachers working with children having SEN encourage and support the inclusion of students at mainstream education, however, many of these teachers experience challenges in understanding their students’ behaviours, and some may lack the knowledge and confidence in supporting students.

According to Jensen (2017; 56), communication between children with SEN and others may consist of some words, while the rest may consist of emotional states, body language, facial expressions, pauses and tones of voices. Dunlap & Fox (1999; 3) explain that to facilitate the communication skills of children with SEN, different resources can be used, for example, sign language, supplementary materials, and visual aids. As shown in (Picture 1) below, one of the main materials used at schools with SEN children is the Picture Exchange Communication System. Rosales & Mari- Avelino (2022;1-3) explain that PECS implies a behavior-based method that instructs students with SEN to communicate by using visual graphic symbols. It is a learning method for SEN students with limited communicational abilities, and it facilitates their communication and interaction skills.

Nevertheless, scholars such as Komulainen (2007; 17-24) and Spyrou (2011; 153) criticize the way adults might interpret young children's communication by focusing on the use of pictures and visual aids, while ignoring other aspects that reflect their voices such as actions and behaviors. Komulainen claims that this method problematizes the voices of children with SEN because it articulates it as ‘an object’ and restrict their communication to a linguistic pattern (Komulainen, 2007; 17). He further claims that as children with difficulties often express their voice in terms of actions and behaviours
more than using spoken communication, by using such method, their ‘non-verbal’ voices are mostly not realized. Spyrou (2011: 157) explain that this perception emphasizes how SEN children’s ‘unsayable’ words and actions could represent their voices more than the ‘verbalized’ words.

Picture 1: Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
3.7 The outbreak of Covid 19 and children with SEN
In March 2020, the United Nations-WHO have declared the spread of Covid-19 as a universal pandemic. Covid-19 has been affecting all populations including schools' children all over the world. As a precaution to decrease the spread of the Corona virus, the closure of schools has led to many changes in the lives of children with SEN and their families. Accordingly, children with SEN face further challenges due to the disruption of their usual routines, interventions, and lifestyle (Brandenburg, et al., 2020; Kamga, 2021; Zhang, et al., 2020).

Yesil, et al. (2022; 141,148) state how crucial it is to provide SEN children with an adjusted environment that has the same standards followed before the spread of Covid-19. Schiariti (2020; 661) explains that during health emergencies, children with SEN still have the same rights ‘to be respected, included, and treated with dignity’. Houtrow, et al. (2020; 415) further claims that even though children with SEN can be considered as one of the vulnerable populations, however, not much emphasis has been considering the impact of Covid-19 and how it affected the children's needs. Brandenburg, et al. (2020; 32) explain that in addition to the existing challenges which children with SEN face in their daily lives, the spread of Covid-19 and the restrictions of the social distancing have further added more strains related to their social segregation. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Kamga (2021;83) in South Africa, it was found that children with SEN were not provided with adequate resources from their schools to facilitate their learning outcomes.

Additionally, MacEachern, et al. (2022) suggest that children with SEN had lower rates of participation in physical activities which have worsened after the start of Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Zhang, et al. (2020; 2) emphasize the importance of focusing on children with SEN as a vulnerable group during COVID-19 outbreak. For example, during the pandemic of Covid-19, children with ADHD have demonstrated more severe symptoms than the usual state of their symptoms (Zhang, et al., 2020). Accordingly, researchers such as Bruhn, et al. (2022) and Zhang, et al. (2020) have pointed out the importance of establishing and applying new strategies to decrease the negative effects of the pandemic restrictions on children with SEN. For instance, Zhang, et al. (2020) suggested to adopt and implement a ‘disaster risk reduction activities’, while Bruhn, et al. (2022; 270) suggested that further strategies such as remote instructions should be implemented within both schools and districts levels to serve the best interests of students with disabilities.

4. METHODOLOGY
In the qualitative research paradigm, interview is considered as one of the main methods followed by researchers. This could be related to its adaptable, dynamic, and flexible characteristic. The interviewer seeks to understand relevant information regarding the investigated matter through a
‘spontaneous discussion’ (Clark, et al., 2021; 426). The empirical data of this study was qualitative data gained through interviewing the teaching staff at a primary mainstream school in a municipality within Stockholm County. Both teachers and assistants were interviewed to get a holistic picture and reflection of how young children with SEN integrate and participate within a mainstream school setting, and what challenges are encountered while interacting with teachers inside the classrooms. The teaching staff were targeted based on their experience, knowledge, and daily interaction with children.

Koster et al. (2009; 136) have found that several previous research related to children with SEN at primary mainstream education has focused on three main concepts ‘social integration, social participation, and social inclusion’. The term integration is more related to how schools modify their environments to better suit the children (Nepi et al., 2015; 320). As mainstream schools should adapt their activities to the students' needs, we therefore wanted to focus on concepts such as integration and participation to explore the social aspects of children with SEN, rather than focusing on inclusive education. In our study, the mainstream school does not offer inclusive education inside classrooms, which means that children with SEN are not having an inclusive education, but they have their own separate classes for SEN. Moreover, children with and without SEN are integrated into the mainstream school environment by sharing the same cafeteria, corridors, and playgrounds. Even though, children with SEN are included in the general school social activities. However, the teaching staff highlighted that most of the time children with SEN spend their breaks at their own playground rather than on the general mainstream playground. On the other hand, the selected school considers that every occasion held on its premises offers a learning experience for the children. The school also focuses on each child’s individual needs and preferences. However, depending on these individual needs, as assessed by the teaching staff, the classes of children with SEN sometimes arrange visits to regular classrooms where children can be integrated.

According to the OECD (2007) classification, we chose to focus on (SEN-a) which is related to physical and mental disabilities, and (SEN-b) which is related to learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties. The students in our study were mostly having difficulties in expressing themselves verbally. We were aiming for such children as we wanted to explore the social aspects encountered at school as reflected by teachers. Additionally, we also selected the concept of SEN rather than disability because we wanted to explore the educational methods used in communicating inside the classrooms. While disabilities such as visual or hearing impairments were not included in our study.

4.1 Semi-structured interviews
In this study, we followed the approach of semi-structured interviews and have prepared an interview guide initially (Attached Appendix). Clark, et al. (2021; 428) highlights how semi-structured interviews permit researchers to investigate a focused matter of a specific topic. They further state
how semi-structured questions allow participants to answer research questions with relevant knowledge in detail. This was used to gain access to the knowledge of the teachers about children with SEN.

In addition, Clark, et al. (2021; 429) specify that the design of interview questions should focus on a specific topic and how it is related, for example, to places, behaviors, and emotions of interviewee and of others. Accordingly, the interview questions were focused on the experiences of children with SEN as reflected by their teaching staff. Clark et al. (2021; 526) highlights the importance of using open ended questions, so the interviewee feels encouraged and comfortable in sharing informative answers. In the interviews, we used open-ended questions to provide the interviewees with the chance to express their answers freely. The data obtained from the interviews was relevant to the questions and has provided clear answers. The answers were straightforward as the interviewees reflected children’s daily experiences.

Kvale (1996 cited in Clark, et al., 2021; 431) also identifies nine types of interview questions, this includes introducing, following up, and structuring questions. In the interviews we used all three types of questions. This contained asking further questions to follow up the replies of some participants and get more information since the interviewees’ responses were narrowed in some of the questions (Clark, et al., 2021; 426). An example of a follow up question was related to the methods used by children for communicating with others, and which method was easier for the children to use, such as visual methods and sign language. We also needed to rephrase some questions to get more information from some participants.

Moreover, we paid attention to the participants' emotional reactions when answering the interview questions (Farrell, 2005; 34). For example, in one of the questions, all the teaching staff have shown intense emotional reactions related to the challenges of children in communication. We observed how the teaching staff have tried to reflect the challenges experienced by children when they try to communicate with them about what they want, for example, and fail to do so due to communication difficulties. Meanwhile they exhibited strong emotions when they were trying to explain how hard it is for both teachers and children. It was obvious that the teachers and assistants were passionate about providing the best to help SEN children communicate.

4.2 Participants
The advantage of interviewing staff with various positions in the school was to provide instructive responses. Even though we interviewed a small number of participants, rich information related to children’s experiences at their school was reflected. It was planned that we would interview six members of the teaching staff, namely, three teachers and three assistants. However, one of the teachers apologized for not being able to attend the interview or participate in the study. Accordingly, five of the teaching staff were interviewed. The two teachers and three assistants were working at the
section for children with SEN in the mainstream school. The participants of study were all females, and their work experience varied between 2 to 20 years. The interviews took around 30 to 40 minutes each. To keep participants' identities anonymous, the real names of the staff were replaced with fictitious ones as the following details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadja</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>16 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>2 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Interview process
In the process of interviewing study participants, Clark, et al. (2021; 996) emphasize the importance of considering practical issues that can affect the process positively. Clark (2021; 524) describes that a researcher can collect information by using a recording device. Accordingly, our interviews were conducted in a classroom at the end of the school day (a private and quite environment with the comfort of the interviewees), while using an audio recording device during each interview (Clark, et al., 2021; 431). On the other hand, to get accurate feedback in answering our research questions, four interviews were conducted in the Swedish language. However, one of the interviews was conducted in English because one of us did not speak Swedish fluently and wanted to also participate in the interviewing process.

4.4 Analysis method and process
To gain some understanding of the experiences of young children with SEN at a primary mainstream school, a thematic analytical approach was used in our study (Clark et al., 2021). Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 79). They explain that thematic analysis is a research tool that provides researchers with a comprehensive and compound set of data. In the current study, we followed a realist approach of thematic analysis to shed light on the experiences of children with SEN as reflected by their teaching staff. The teachers and assistant shared their perceptions and observations about the daily encounters of primary school students with SEN (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 78). Braun and Clarke (2006) continue to explain that the realist approach of thematic analysis allows researchers to hypothesize and formulate experiences through language, both in a direct and straight forwarded manner: “language reflects and enables us to articulate meaning and experience” (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 85).

For the first phase of analysis, Braun, and Clarke (2006; 87) explain how verbal data such as interviews should be written and transcribed into a form of text. This process took a long time since
we had many interview questions from the five participants. At the beginning, we familiarized ourselves with the collected data. The verbal data included many distinct aspects related to the experiences of young children with special educational needs. We then wrote down all the interviews’ verbal data on a private shared document saved on the OneDrive of Linköping university.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006; 88), the second phase followed in the data analysis is generating initial thoughts and ideas about interesting themes. We narrowed down the collected data and focused on themes development. We identified the interrelation between the concepts related to our research questions and collected data (Clark et al., 2021; 541). Most of the participants shared common perspectives about the experiences of children with SEN.

For the third phase, we focused more on the relationship between the various levels of themes. All important and relevant information was combined within the repeated patterns of themes.

For the fourth phase, Braun, and Clarke (2006; 89,91) state how researchers should refine theme. Accordingly, we analyzed the topic to ensure that it creates a coherent structure. Then we checked that the different themes were related to all the data collected. We have found similar responses from all the participants in the study.

In the fifth phase, we selected which data should be presented. We had three themes to present. These themes provided rich information related to the questions of our study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 82-92).

The last phase of analysis as described by Clark et al. (2021; 541) included writing up insights and reflecting on the most important aspects of the data related to our research problem. We presented data extracts of the themes and provided a thematic analytical approach related to the research question about children’s perspectives, experiences, and stories presented by their teaching staff (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 93).

4.5 Research ethics
At the late nineteen century, Farrell (2005) emphasis on the importance of the application of ethical research has emerged in social science, and especially in children’s research. Clark, et al. (2021; 117) claims that researchers should therefore provide participants with all necessary information to decide whether to participate in the study. According to Clark et al. (2021; 171) the ethical guidelines must be followed in relation to the importance of protecting research participants and their anonymity. Farrell (2005; 31) claims that serious outcomes could occur if the researcher implement ‘low standards’ while thinking that ethical standards are being followed.

In this study, at first, we requested the permission from the school administration to conduct the study activities at the mainstream school. The permission was then granted from the school’s principal to interview some of the teaching staff. This was followed by providing participants with a clear description of the study as well as an explanation about the purpose of the interview and its aim. We
have then obtained the written informed consents of participants, and dates were appointed for the
interviews as convenient.
In which it is quoted in Diener and Crandall (1978 cited in Clark, et al., 2021; 113) We also ensured
that ethical principles were followed whereas the interview questions imposed no harm or invasion
of privacy. The identities of all participants were kept anonymous. No ethical dilemmas were
encountered during the interviewing process. The teachers did not share specific names or specific
information about children. However, general information such as giving examples of how children
behave was provided.

5. ANALYSIS
In our data analysis, we have pointed out three main themes related to the questions of our study.
These themes were focused on the teachers’ accounts in relation to the social integration among
primary school children (with and without) SEN, the participation of children with SEN in the social
activities of the primary mainstream school, and the communication challenges encountered in the
teacher/student interactions.

5.1 The social integration of children at the primary mainstream school

5.1.1 Teachers account for the benefits that occur in the integration of children
Teachers believed that there are many advantages related to the social integration of children with
and without SEN. All children in the mainstream school benefit from this integration as both parties
would know more about each other. The first theme included three different subthemes, mainly: the
benefits of the social integration in the primary mainstream school for children with SEN, the
benefits of the social integration in the primary mainstream school for the typically developing
children without SEN, and the challenges that occur in children’s social integration as accounted for
by the teaching staff.

A) Benefits for children with SEN
Conn (2018; 62) emphasized the importance for children with SEN to socially interact with other
regular students and how it provides an opportunity for them to learn more about social
functioning. In the current study, one of the most important findings about the social integration at a
mainstream school is the opportunity for children with SEN to learn and acquire new skills from their
typically growing peers:

“Many children with SEN imitate other children from regular classes in a positive manner.
When they see other children do their things or behave in a specific way, children with SEN
do it too. for example, during lunch time, they clean food from the table or fetch a glass of
water by themselves as their peers do” (Ruth, Assistant).

The above statement reflects how children with SEN develop their skills and become more
independent. As described above, lunch time is considered a major shared space for students' social
integration. This is consistent with a previous study by Hong et al. (2013; 95-104) which showed that children with SEN were socially integrating the most in school areas such as lunch time activities. In addition, another teacher further explains that children with SEN would be more protected from being bullied when other children from regular classes socially integrate more often with them:

“When regular students get an understanding of special needs children and their conditions, this could prevent children with SEN from future violations and bullying” (Tamara, Teacher).

The above statement reflects how the teachers believe that through social integration, typically developing peers will understand their peers' difficulties and needs.

**B) Benefits for typically developing children without SEN**

Children with SEN represent an important part of society. In mainstream school, the teaching staff reflected how raising awareness about disabilities and children with SEN would lead to higher levels of understanding their differences, needed support, entitled respect, and compassion. Haakma et al. (2021) also found that when peers share inclusive moments with children with SEN, it impacts them positively and has a beneficial effect on them. Eva elaborated:

“It is important that other children without SEN have respect and understanding of their peers' differences. There is always something to learn from each other” (Eva, Teacher).

The above statement demonstrates how the teachers observe that children might behave rudely sometimes with their SEN peers, and they attribute it to lack of knowing enough information about disabilities and how to deal with their fellow students.

When peers get to know more about their schoolmates with SEN, it can lead to better social integration and interaction (Haakma et al., 2021). Tina further added a similar expression:

“All children learn a lot from each other” (Tina, Assistant).

Additionally, the teaching staff emphasize the importance of children’s social integration as it offers a chance to gain deeper understanding of and about each other. Shijo (2012) emphasized how including children with SEN in an inclusive mainstream environment has a good influence on the behaviors of their typically developing peers.

Moreover, the findings of this study demonstrated that children from regular classes show curiosity and interest in learning more about their fellow peers with SEN and their special conditions. For example:

“Sometimes students from regular classes ask us why children with SEN cannot talk? Or why is that student sitting in a wheelchair? We then clarify and explain to them” (Nadja, Assistant).
The above also show how children from regular classes do not have adequate information about children with SEN. Therefore, the children might judge their peers with SEN based upon what they see, and they further ask for clarifications from their teachers. This was also consistent with the study findings of Haakma et al. (2021) which showed how assistants provide answers to peers’ inquiries and offer them with suggestions that could help and support children with SEN at mainstream settings.

Another example about the importance of providing regular students with clear answers about children with SEN and their diverse needs was:

“These children have different needs, for example, this boy needs help with this and that...etc...” (Tamara, Teacher).

The above statement identifies how each student with SEN has an individual need different than other students. Each child with SEN would need a different type of support based upon his or her condition.

5.1.2 Teachers account for the challenges that occur in the social integration of children

In this study, as reflected by the teaching staff, although children with SEN might be physically included within an inclusive mainstream school environment, it does not necessarily mean they are sufficiently integrated socially. The interviews showed that this could be attributed to two main aspects: a) students with SEN not being able to integrate socially with peers, and b) students who want to socially integrate but are not allowed by their peers.

A) Students with SEN not being able to socialize

Frostad and Pijl (2007 ;15) suggested that children with SEN might face difficulties in establishing social relationships with their peers at the mainstream educational settings. They elaborated that one of the main important aspects to establish a positive social bond with other students is having appropriate age-group social skills. Frostad and Pijl (2007; 15) found that 25% of children with SEN were not included socially with their typically developing peers. Their exclusion was attributed to ‘insufficient set of social skills.’ In our current study, even though the school is trying to integrate and involve children with SEN in its diverse social activities, the data showed that children might still find it difficult to integrate with their typical developing peers at school.

According to the statement bellow, teachers believed that these difficulties were attributed to several factors including the lack of using spoken and verbal language as means of communication:

“It is quite difficult for our students who do not have the typical skills to integrate with other children because there are often misunderstandings. For example, when you cannot approach each other linguistically or cannot say what you want, it will be difficult to communicate, especially when the children are in need to integrate with each other” (Eva, Teacher).

It was also found that some of the children use another way to communicate, through using nonverbal language with their peers. A teaching assistant added:
“Our students do not interact much with other children from regular classes. Because they do not master the spoken language, it can be difficult for them to communicate with the students of regular classes. However, some of our students communicate by waving their hands or teasing their peers by poking each other” (Tina, Assistant).

This was consistent with a study done by Shijo (2012) which suggested that SEN children who are having difficulties in using words to establish communication, interact with others by using their own other strategies and methods. The findings were like a study by Sigstad (2018) which explained that most peer friendships and relationships develop within the same group of children with SEN rather than with other children without SEN. Even though, the findings of our study state that some children with SEN might wave or poke their peers sometimes, this, contradicts with the findings of Nijs and Maes (2014) which showed that children with SEN do not usually use other means of communications such as pointing to or waving.

**B) Students who want to socialize, but are not allowed by peers**

Even though some children with SEN would want to play and socially get involved with their peers, the reality is sometimes different. An additional factor which hinders the social integration between children is the fact that most children do not fully understand the nature and behaviours of children with SEN, or they simply do not prefer to interact or play with the children who are having SEN:

“We have students with SEN that are interested in socializing with other students in school. For example, when we walk and see other children playing football, one of our students with SEN always runs away from us because he wants to join the children playing. But unfortunately, that student does not understand the rules of the game, and he needs an adult to be present with support and guidance regarding the rules and so on” (Tamara, Teacher).

This was also corresponding with Jensen’s (2017;52) study, which found that children with SEN might have difficulties in reading situations, therefore it can become a challenge for them to socially integrate with others or know what is expected from them. On the other hand, the findings of Nepi et al., (2015) indicated that students with SEN were less accepted socially and often were not selected by their typically developing peers as favoured classmates. Similarly, in our study, a teacher elaborated:

“Unfortunately, regular students from other classes do not have much understanding of the needs of our SEN students, this might lead to avoidance. However, with our support as adults, our children can get help with being involved with their peers and get understood correctly” (Tamara, Teacher).
The above highlight teachers' perception of how the lack of understanding can lead other children to avoid dealing with them. However, teacher Tamara emphasizes the importance of their role in supporting the social integration of children. This was confirmed in a study by Dolva et al. (2010; 291) which found that the peers try to adjust and modify shared activities in a way that suits SEN classmates. They suggest in their study that this approach was attributed to the teachers and how they taught them to integrate and involve their peers with SEN. This has provided children with SEN equal participation. Another study by Sigstad (2018; 386) also showed ‘a great deal of care’ in the social interaction of peers with their schoolmates who have intellectual disabilities.

In some cases, when some children with SEN could use verbal language, they would be able to socially integrate with peers, however their peers might still bully them:

“We have 2 children in our class that can talk, and like to communicate and play with other children, but not all our children can use spoken language. However, not all students respect the special needs of our children. There are children in normal classes that do not want to be with our students, and we see that in places such as playgrounds and lunchroom” (Ruth, Assistant).

The above statement shows that the teaching staff have experienced how SEN children may face discrimination from their peers. Such encounters usually occur during lunchtime or during breaks in the schoolyard. McNamara (2013; 14) stated how children might feel superior and bully children with SEN because they are perceived with less power. Also in our study, as explained by some teachers, many children do not want to stay in the same place with children with SEN. McNamara (2013; 14) further claims that less interaction with typically developing peers in a mainstream environment might lead to more difficulties in the social skills of children with SEN.

5.2 Children’s’ participation in the school’s social activities

The finding of this study showed how the teaching staff emphasize the importance for children with SEN to participate in social activities with their typical developing peers. Shijo (2012) stated that by supporting the social participation of children with SEN, this would lead to building and creating better social skills and connections with others. Accordingly, the second theme includes how teachers reflect children’s participation within two different conditions, namely, before the pandemic of Covid 19, and during the pandemic.

5.2.1 Participation before the pandemic of Covid 19

At the primary mainstream school, children with SEN were integrated in the school activities on various occasions like the school’s graduations ceremonies. During these activities, the children with SEN were involved with the other students attending the mainstream primary school. It was found
that when participating in major school activities, children with SEN learn, perform, and build stronger social skills together.

“When I first started to work as a teacher in this school, I always used to rehearse a song with my students and perform that song at the end of school year. Several times we stood at the stage and sang Maya's alphabet songs. It was great fun for our children as they performed together with each other and sang for the whole school” (Eva, Teacher).

From the teacher’s comment above, she expresses that children with SEN have been involved socially while taking the lead in social activities such as singing. Eva further explains how children used to enjoy such social participation. In a study done by Haakma et al. (2021), it was also found that even though children with SEN might not be directly involved within a social activity, they still enjoy being a part of the social activity which can be considered as a social participation as well. In their study, even though a child with SEN did not sing with the group, he still enjoyed watching his peers playing musical instruments.

According to Nilholm (2006;17) mainstream schools should match the activities so the children with SEN get involved in their own terms of development. In this study, most of the teachers mentioned how the school’s activities were not directly adapted for the needs of each individual child. Because not all SEN children were efficiently able to participate in the different social activities or get the opportunity to share and experience the joint social activities with their typically developing peers. The participation and involvement of children with SEN with the other students without SEN depended on the individual condition of each student. So even though teachers try to facilitate the participation of all children with SEN in the social activities of the mainstream school, they also consider the individual needs of each student and judge upon the situation and the condition of each child separately. For example, some children might not use the linguistic pattern of communication, or even use pictures as an aid to show what they want. However, in such cases, the voices of children are still translated through their actions in a specific situation when they are not comfortable with the social surroundings. The teachers usually comply with children’s wishes about how they feel and what they want, and then they also act upon it. Tina added that:

“When our children participate in social activities with other regular classes, sometimes, it can be too loud for them. For example, if there is a big activity at school, such as a concert, we usually take some of the children, the ones who can attend. We also try to include all our children with SEN, but if it does not work for some children, we then take them and go back to our section of school” (Tina, Assistant).
The above statement shows that not all children with SEN can join the school’s activities. A similar aspect was found by Haakma et al. (2021) that due to the physical and intellectual difficulties that SEN children might have, the engagement at some activities was difficult for some students.

Another finding in this study was that some children with SEN could join some of the lessons taught in regular classes, while others were not. The staff highlighted that this was related to the student's ability to act in a specific manner without interrupting the classroom's usual setting during the lesson:

“Previously, we used to have some of the children with SEN visiting other regular classes, not all students though, but the ones who can fit (sit in the classroom and listen to instructions). Before such visits, we used to practice with our students in a theater and invited other regular classes to watch. There was a good interplay between them and other students. However, these visits have recently stopped due to the shortage of staff. But our children with SEN are still included in other social activities, such as afternoon on-call leisure activities. We try to include all our children with SEN in the school’s social environment and activities such as barbecuing along with the students of regular classes” (Nadja, Assistant).

The statement above reflects that some students with SEN used to enjoy the shared social activities with their peers in the joint classes, however this has stopped because the school does not have enough teaching staff as before. This is consistent with a study done by Dolva et al. (2010; 292), which found that when children with SEN formally join a specific mainstream classroom, it formed a formal sense of belonging that validates social participation. Such sense of belonging affected levels of ‘acceptance of diversity’ between peers and children with SEN in regular classrooms.

The teaching staff explain how the children with SEN are not currently included in the regular activities at the mainstream school, but they are usually present with other regular classes during the lunch breaks. Even though the teachers intend to include children socially, children with SEN could sometimes refuse to follow these demands:

"We try to include our students with other children from regular classes based on their own individual needs. Usually, it does not go so well when we try to push or force them which should not be done either, but they must also be active based on their own conditions” (Tamara, Teacher).

Although SEN children might not want to participate in certain joint school activities, the staff usually try to impose children’s interactions beyond their boundaries and limits. Ruth thinks that most of her students find it difficult to get involved in the activities:
Some students refuse to get involved with other children, and some of the children with SEN may sometimes join their peers, but for a brief period. Each day is different for our students” (Ruth, Teaching Assistant).

The statement above reflects how the teaching assistant assesses the students’ needs and uses encouraging techniques which entice SEN students to socially participate with peers. This was like the findings of Haakma et al., (2021) in how assistants corroborate peers’ social interaction and facilitate it.

5.2.2 Participation during the pandemic of Covid 19
Aishworiya and Kang (2020) state that the spread of Covid 19 has changed the world and affected many children, including children with SEN at different social and health aspects. Şahin et al. (2022) also explain that the pandemic has affected the participation of children with SEN in the activities of mainstream primary schools. The teaching staff of our study described how their students used to benefit from their social involvement at the various school activities and how it helped them to positively engage in the social context around them. Most of them agreed that this has been affected and decreased as an effect of Covid-19 restrictions:

“Our students with SEN used to perform on stage and participate in the school’s graduation ceremony. They were getting involved with other students in many social activities; however, this has changed lately due to the pandemic of the Corona virus” (Eva, Teacher).

The above statement is like the findings of another recent study conducted in Turkey by Şahin et al., (2022). Their study also focused on primary school children with SEN aged between 5 to 12 years old. As in our study, their findings showed that children with SEN participated less frequently in the schools’ activities after the start of the pandemic. Moreover, Covid 19 has added additional barriers to children’s participation and has affected the children with SEN negatively. They also found that children with SEN needed more support from their school than they did before the pandemic of Covid19.

Additionally, the findings of our study showed that the participation of children with SEN at the mainstream school activities before Covid 19 was not only limited to graduation ceremonies, but their involvement was also included in different physical and social activities during both the summer and Christmas seasons. Leo et al., (2018) explains that the joint school programs and outdoor play and activities is crucial to support healthy development for children with SEN. During the pandemic of Covid-19, Moore et al., (2021; 11) claims that the joint activities and play spaces at schools were no longer accessible for many children with SEN. This has added further barriers and challenges to their social participation in schools. Tina stated that:
“It was good for our students with SEN to get involved in several different activities with other students from regular classes, but now this has changed, because of covid 19” (Tina, Assistant).

Due to the pandemic restrictions, the findings showed that the children with SEN mostly engaged and participated in the school activities at their own separate section of school. Regarding the participation of children in play and other physical activities, Moore et al. (2021; 1) suggested that children with SEN have less opportunities in comparison to their typically developing peers. Children with SEN get more engaged in ‘sedentary behaviors,’ and Covid-19 has further reduced and hindered their participation in joint outdoor activities (Moore et al., 2021). An assistant added that:

“Since the start of the pandemic, our students with SEN mostly celebrate events with each other, at our own section of school” (Tina, Assistant).

On the other hand, the study's findings also show that the teaching staff did not feel that the needs of children with SEN were met as required in the mainstream school environment. Tina further elaborated:

“Some of the children who can attend regular classes used to join some lessons there, but since the pandemic, we had to stop everything, and all classes were completely separated” (Tina, Assistant).

The above finding shows how children with SEN were affected at their social inclusion in their mainstream school. One of the reasons could be related to how the school did not put much emphasis during the pandemic on the inclusion needs of children with SEN. This was relevant to Qi and Hu (2020) findings who emphasized that if a special needs perspective is not well considered on the regulations for controlling infectious diseases, the required demands of people with special needs would not be met efficiently.

5.3 Communication challenges encountered in the teacher/student interaction
The last theme focusses on the methods used in communication inside the classrooms and the difficulties encountered in the interaction between children with SEN and their teaching staff. As many children with SEN are unable to use the linguistic pattern, the use of other alternatives as means of communication, such as sign language, gives children the opportunity to express themselves and communicate with others. The data showed that teachers and assistants also use visual aids like (PECS) with children. In addition to that, they also use short verbal instructions and make eye contact as another form of nonverbal communication to ensure that children with SEN follow and understand what has been communicated. Even though children with SEN use such methods for communicating, the data showed how communication can still be considered as a challenge faced by children in their daily interactions. A teacher added the following:
“Language and communication are the most difficult challenges. Children often get angry, and you do not know why. It takes a lot to be able to understand their needs. You need to have a clear and slow flow of communication. It is crucial for us to make sure that SEN children have understood our instructions” (Eva, Teacher).

The statement above shows how the teacher emphasize the importance of having adequate knowledge about how to deal with children with SEN. For children with SEN, Lopez, and Corcoran (2014) explain the social interaction and relationship between the teacher and student plays a significant role at schools. It can be difficult for others, including the teachers of children with SEN to understand their behaviors and emotional reactions. In this study, most of the teaching staff showed strong emotional reactions as a reflection of the occurrence of tricky situations related to children's communication in their daily interactions:

“I think that the most challenging thing for children with SEN is communication. It can also be so difficult for us to communicate with them. We do not know how to understand their feelings and emotions, for example, whether they are angry, sad, or in pain. Children usually cry and we do not know the reason behind it. They just get angrier and refuse to listen or use support pictures. I do not know how to handle it!’ One time a child had an operation on his foot, but we did not know the details or from where the pain came. We did not have a picture of the foot, so we had to search physically on his foot. In such cases some children benefit a lot from the use of sign language, however some children are not able to use it” (Tina, Assistant).

As mentioned in the statement above, the teaching assistant claims that in some cases children with SEN neither use words nor agree to use support pictures (Picture 2) to show what they want or need. However, she emphasizes how the use of sign language is important as it could benefit children with SEN in some situations. This is consistent with a study conducted by McWhirter (2016) which found that some teachers who are working with SEN children might find it difficult sometimes to deal with some of their students' characteristics and special needs. Scholars such as Aspelin et al. (2021) suggested that the teachers who are working with children with SEN might not often be sufficiently prepared to deal with the emotional aspects of their students. However, Sabol and Pianta (2012) point out when teachers adopt a positive approach in their relationship with their students, this could reduce the episodes of children’s problematic behaviors.
Additionally, regarding the importance of the use of sign language, another assistant clarified that:

“The lack of communication is a problem, as well as their ability to express themselves. Pictures cannot help children with SEN all the time because it is not always available. For example, outside the school how would special needs children communicate without having the pictures! that is why it is also important for them to learn and use sign language” (Ruth, Assistant).

The statement above claims that the use of pictures does not always provide enough support for children with SEN. And in some cases, it might not be always available, this can also lead to difficulties for children with SEN to handle their emotions. Therefore, the findings demonstrate how the use of sign language is crucial. Moreover, Dunlap and Fox (1999; 3) clarify that even if children with SEN receive the right resources, there might always be other challenges and difficulties when it comes to their ability to express themselves.

On many occasions, children struggle to express themselves about what they want or how they feel. Accordingly, it is apparent from the data that when children do not know how to communicate with others, or when they feel that they are not heard or understood properly, this will lead them to exhibit stronger emotional upset such as becoming angrier and more frustrated. An assistant elaborated by saying the following:

“Communication is a struggle for children with special needs, I mean when they cannot talk. For example, when children want to say something to us, and we do not understand them, you can see that children have outbursts. We had a student who used to communicate by screaming so much at the beginning. Then we formed an individual

Picture 2: Picture support
plan such as a visual schedule for that student, and we tried to get everyone in the class to follow. It worked!” (Nadja, Assistant).

Another teacher further added:

“It is a challenge when some children do not have the opportunity to use sign language. They scream and become uncompliant, and we do not know then what they want, think, or feel” (Tamara, Teacher).

As the findings stated above, children with SEN can sometimes get frustrated when they have difficulties in conveying what they want. This is consistent with the study of Fujiki M et al. (2008) which stated that children with language difficulties could face challenges in understanding and conveying different emotional aspects. They declared that language impairments might lead children to problems in dealing with emotions, and this in return could also contribute to further problematic behaviors for the children with SEN. However, in this study, an assistant stated that by forming an individualized plan for children with SEN such as visual schedules (Picture 3), it would be easier for the children to know what is expected from them, and this would help them to communicate and better follow their routines inside the classroom.

Picture 3: Visual schedule
6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION
This research aimed to reflect the teachers' perspective on the social integration of young children with SEN at a primary mainstream school. Accordingly, three main themes were identified. The first theme emerged was the social integration among primary school children (with and without) special educational needs. This theme was grouped into three subthemes, namely, the advantages of the social integration for children with SEN, the advantages of the social integration for children without SEN, and the challenges which hinder the SEN students' social integration. The second theme was focused on the participation of children with SEN in the social activities at the mainstream school. The second theme was also grouped into two categories: the social participation of SEN students before the restrictions of Covid-19, and the social participation of SEN students after the restrictions of Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, the third theme identified the communication challenges encountered in the teacher/student interactions inside the classrooms.

6.1 The social integration among primary school children
The study revealed that on many occasions, primary school aged children with SEN integrate socially with their peers from regular classes. However, it was found that some children with SEN might still find it difficult to socialize with their typically developing peers. Moreover, the study has shown how the social integration of children with SEN and how they interact with other regular children at the mainstream school could produce positive results for all. The teachers also reflected their perceptions about different advantages and challenges as encountered by the SEN students at their mainstream school.

Conn (2018; 62) explains how mainstream environments enhance the social functioning skills of SEN children and develops their abilities. As reflected by the teaching staff, the findings of the current study support this aspect as it showed that children with SEN develop and acquire new skills through their interaction with other peers from regular classes, for example, by imitating their behaviors during lunch break. This is also correspondent with the theory of social learning created by Bandura (1971). The social learning theory emphasizes the importance of children’s social interaction and how crucial it is for children’s development. Children with SEN get the opportunities to gain additional competence by imitating other children and modeling their positive behaviors. Additionally, the teaching staff emphasized the importance of integrating children at a mainstream school and how it would lead to a better understanding of SEN within the school’s environment and society at large. For example, similarly to the findings of Koster et al. (2009;135) the teaching staff believed that when all children interact together, they will be more accepted and involved socially while lowering their chances of getting bullied. When children spend time together a relationship develops, which can
sometimes lead to friendships (Koster, et al., 2009; 135). The findings of this study also showed that typically growing peers demonstrate curiosity and interest in knowing more details about children’s special needs and behaviors. This could also raise a question about whether the mainstream school provides adequate knowledge for regular classes about disabilities and about their peers with SEN. However, the teaching staff of this study explained how they persist in providing accurate answers to students when they are asked, because they believe that this might lead to better care and understanding towards children with SEN. Students become more understanding, supportive, and compassionate in dealing with SEN fellow students in the mainstream school environment (Dolva et al., 2010; 292).

The findings of this study as of previous studies by Avramidis (2013; 434), Pinto et al. (2019; 833), and Guralnick et al. (2007; 75) have proved different advantages of the student’s social integration as met by the teaching staff. However, comprehensive social integration and interaction of SEN children with other peers could sometimes be difficult for both parties. Even though children with SEN might be physically included in an integrated school environment, it does not necessarily mean they are all socially interacting with their typically developing peers as presumed (Frostad and Pijl, 2007 ;15: Terzi, 2011 cited in Pinto, et al., 2019; 819). In this study, two main aspects were found as challenges faced by students in their attempts to socially integrate. The first aspect was related to the teachers' claims of how it becomes difficult for some children to understand each other due to the lack of using the verbal language. Teachers described it as the biggest challenge for children with SEN in their social integration. They highlighted how children with SEN were individually different on how much they cope with the social contexts around. For example, some students could socially interact with peers by using nonverbal communication skills, while others could not follow the same pattern. Jensen (2017; 56) clarifies that children with SEN might misunderstand the social context and what is meant during a social conversation, and this can also happen to those children who have a better command of verbal language skills. Additionally, in this study, the second aspect that raised as a challenge in the social integration of children was related to the lack of motivation for regular students to engage in play or interact socially with special needs children. One of the reasons related to that could be because children with SEN might have difficulties in initiating games or playing. Jensen (2017; 52) explains that children with SEN may have difficulties in joining a social context, and some might also lack imagination and fantasy while playing with others. For example, a teacher stated how a student with SEN has always tried to run and join a football match; however, it was difficult in his case to understand the rules of the game or to join the game without the support of his teachers. So even though some children with SEN might get interested in socially interacting with their peers in the integrated mainstream school environment, children from other regular classes
might not usually show the same preference in dealing with their SEN peers. Additionally, this study's findings have also shown that in some cases negative behaviors such as avoidance can develop into more aggressive behaviors towards children with SEN such as bullying. In addition, McNamara (2013; 14) explains that children with SEN might be perceived as vulnerable and therefore students from regular classes might take advantage of their weakness and choose to treat them differently.

6.2 Children's participation in the school's social activities
Nilholm (2006; 31) highlights the inclusion of children with SEN requires their participation at active social interaction settings, rather than merely being involved within a mainstream environment. The findings of the study have showed that the participation of children at the mainstream school activities included getting engaged in the graduation ceremonies, summer and Christmas celebrations, concerts, and other school's social activities such as barbecuing. As reflected by the teaching staff, the findings have also shown how children with SEN gain important social skills from participating in the school’s joint events. The SEN children were better able at coping with the social context. For example, children build their confidence socially through rehearsing and performing in front of the whole school, and work in a team spirit while forming a social bond by singing together. However, it was also found that the participation and the involvement of children with SEN in the school’s social activities depends on the individual condition of each child. It was also found that not all the children with SEN participate in the social activities joined at the mainstream school. However, a previous study by Haakma et al. (2021) has shown that even though children might not directly participate directly, they can still enjoy their involvements in the school’s shared activities. In the current study, an example of how SEN children participate and join their typically developing peers was through mainstreaming some of them in a regular classroom to attend few lessons along with their peers. The selected SEN children attending such lessons were mostly the ones who can follow instructions and join the classroom social setting without exhibiting challenging behaviors. On the other hand, the teaching staff have also considered the individual needs of each child, such as when the child does not feel comfortable with a specific situation during his/her participation in social activities. They explained that even though some children cannot say what they want or how they feel, teachers still comply with what the children want by observing and understanding children's behaviors and actions. For example, as stated by Conn (2018; 82) The teachers of this study also explained that there can be too much noise in the environment, where the children cannot handle it well. The teachers usually try to encourage the children to participate, but sometimes this does not work for all the children with SEN.

In addition, the findings have also showed that children with SEN might not always have enough motive to participate in certain joint school activities, therefore the staff reflected that they usually try to impose children’s social interactions beyond their boundaries and limits by using rewarding
techniques such as positive reinforcements. Even though the teachers usually try to encourage children to participate, however sometimes this does not work for all the children with SEN. On the other hand, the findings have showed that the participation of children with SEN in the social activities of school has majorly been affected by the restrictions of the social distancing strategies aiming to protect children from the spread of COVID 19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, the teaching staff reflected how children with SEN have benefited from joining the various social activities and celebrations with the rest of the school, however recently, children with SEN celebrate the special occasions within their own section at the mainstream school.

6.3 Communication challenges encountered in the teacher/student interaction

The study's findings showed that children with SEN differ in their abilities and needs, so different methods were used in the communication between the children and their teaching staff. Some children with SEN can use sign language; however, some of them cannot express themselves using this method for communicating with others. In such cases, the staff usually uses symbolic materials or (PICS) binders. Other methods used in communication included using short verbal instructions and making eye contact with the SEN children. Arciuli and Brock (2014; 21) highlighted that when children with SEN merely use symbolic materials in communicating with others, they become more dependent on the materials and on the support of adults to meet their needs. Likewise, the findings of the current study have showed that when some children are dependent on pictures, and cannot express themselves with sign language, it can become problematic for them in many situations, for example, when they cannot talk, and they do not have access to the exact material that describes the specific situation that is happening.

Also, the findings showed that the teaching staff considered not understanding what the children want one of the biggest challenges for them. In the same manner, Keen 2003 (cited in Arciuli & Brock, 2014;15) explained that children with SEN might have a greater risk of outbursts when they have difficulties in using and understanding the spoken language. The teaching staff of the current study further claimed that they try to understand the behaviors of SEN children by observing their reactions at different situations, however this can sometimes be challenging because they do not often know how to act and deal with the children’s emotions. In addition, the findings also showed how children with SEN can sometimes get affected by the fact that their teachers/assistants do not understand what they want. For example, at times, the student with SEN might feel trapped in a situation where even pictures do not aid or provide the support needed. In such cases, the teaching staff reflected that children may exhibit different emotional reactions. Such situations might sometimes lead to bigger challenges as children with SEN may get frustrated, hopeless, or angrier.

Our choice of teachers and assistants’ interviews as a method for gathering data about the social integration of children with SEN was driven from the fact that in schools, the teaching staff are the
closest individuals who are working and interacting with children with SEN in daily basis. Another reason for seeking the teaching staff's perspectives about the social integration of children with SEN was related to the lack of verbal language by the SEN students who were the focus of our study. However, there might be some implications related to how the voices of teachers can reflect the experiences of children with SEN and their social integration in their mainstream school. For example, the teaching staff explained that they determine how much individual students with SEN would benefit from participation in joint social activities in the mainstream school. However, these accounts also illustrate the difficulties of obtaining information about the children's experiences by merely interviewing their teachers. Moreover, we might also think about what information the teaching staff might have missed, misunderstood, or misrepresented regarding the experiences of students with SEN? Is there any risk that the teaching staff will want to perceive SEN children as being more integrated than they experience themselves to be? for example, because the teachers want to think that their work duties are successful, or they do not want to think that there might be a dereliction of duty in any way of the matter?

Moreover, it would have been essential to represent the voices of children with SEN through conducting observations as a tool to gather information about their social interaction and participation with their typically developing peers and teachers at the mainstream schools. In such a case, would the outcomes of our study differ? Nevertheless, the period allowed for this study has added constraints in conducting observations with SEN children. Like the findings of McNamara (2013; 14) about how children with SEN were singled out at the mainstream schools' social structure, the participants of our study also reflected how the school adopted social inclusion practices in the lunchroom and sometimes in the shared playground, however other social inclusion activities for SEN students have been stopped after the spread of Covid 19. Furthermore, our study findings cannot be generalized, as we believe that the selected mainstream school was insufficiently equipped to fully support the social inclusion and participation of children with SEN. The reason for that can be explained by the findings of Göransson et al. (2011; 550) as they claimed that there are varying differences in the inclusion practices for children with SEN among the Swedish schools depending on the different municipalities.

An additional study limitation was the focus on one mainstream primary school rather than covering a larger geographical and demographic range of mainstream schools. This was related to the short timeframe and the financial lack of resources. Additionally, about examining how the pandemic of Covid-19 has recently affected the social participation of children with SEN, it would be beneficial if further studies could investigate the aspect in a broader scoop and further explore strategies that could be applied as intervention programs at mainstream schools.
Finally, the use of the qualitative research design and of interviews as the main tool for gathering data related to children with SEN were very fruitful. It has provided us with valuable information about children with SEN as reflected by the perspectives of their teaching staff working at a mainstream primary school.


APPENDIX

Interview Guide

1. What do you think is the main difference between working at a regular primary school and at a mainstream school that includes children with disabilities?

2. How is the school's environment adapted for the children with special needs?

3. Can you tell us about your daily routine at the school with disabled children?

4. How do you communicate with the children with special needs? And how can children express themselves?

5. How are the disabled children involved in the school's daily activities?

6. Does children interact socially with other children without disabilities? If yes how and when?

7. Do you think the children benefit from interacting with children without disabilities? If yes how and in which manners?

8. Are there different methods or strategies used to instruct children with special needs?

9. What encourages children with disabilities to learn? And how do you entice their learning?

10. What resources do you usually use as teaching aids or materials?

11. Can you describe the school/home relations and how they collaborate for the child's learning?

12. As a teacher/assistant, can you identify the positive learning outcomes which you have encountered in educating children with disabilities at mainstream schools?

13. From your own experience as a teacher/assistant, can you please tell us what are the challenge or difficulties faced by the children with disabilities at mainstream schools? Such as in communication, social interaction, etc...

14. Would you like to add any additional information that you believe will contribute to a better learning experience of children with disabilities at mainstream education?