

## Exploring Teachers' Challenges, Instructional Strategies, and Support Needs in Teaching Social Interaction Skills to Students with Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Secondary School.

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### Abstract

Social interaction skills are fundamental to promoting the meaningful participation of students with special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive education. However, teachers continue to encounter various challenges in delivering effective instruction to develop these skills. This study aimed to explore teachers' challenges, instructional strategies, and support needs in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs within inclusive education programmes in secondary schools. A qualitative case study design was employed. Prior to data collection, a semi-structured interview protocol was reviewed and validated by three experts. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers who had experience teaching students with special educational needs in inclusive education programmes. Expert validation data were analysed descriptively, while interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings generated four major themes: the importance of social interaction skills, teachers' challenges, instructional strategies, and teachers' support needs. Participants emphasised that social interaction skills are essential for helping students adapt to inclusive learning environments, establish positive peer relationships, and actively participate in school activities. The main challenges identified included students' social skill deficits, diverse learning needs, limited instructional time, and insufficient teaching resources. Teachers reported implementing various evidence-informed instructional strategies, including cooperative learning, behavioural modelling, role-play, peer-mediated support, visual supports, and social stories. The findings further highlight that continuous professional development, strong administrative support, collaborative practices among teachers, and the provision of systematic teaching resources are critical for enhancing the effectiveness of teaching social interaction skills in inclusive secondary education...

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education Programme, social interaction skills, students with special educational needs, teacher challenges, instructional strategies, teacher support, qualitative study.

### INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an educational approach that upholds every student's right to access quality education regardless of disability, background, or individual ability. This approach aligns with the principle of Education for All, which advocates participation, equity, and equal access to learning opportunities within environments that support students' academic, social, and emotional development. At the international level, inclusive education continues to be promoted through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all learners. In Malaysia, this commitment is reflected in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP), which aims to increase the meaningful participation of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2013). Nevertheless, the success of inclusive education extends beyond the physical placement of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms; it requires the provision of meaningful learning experiences that effectively support their academic, social, and emotional development (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Within inclusive education, social interaction skills constitute a fundamental component that enables students with SEN to participate actively in both classroom learning and broader school life. These skills encompass the ability to initiate communication, respond appropriately in social situations, establish positive peer relationships,

collaborate in group activities, resolve conflicts constructively, and adapt behaviour according to social expectations. The development of social interaction skills not only contributes to students' psychosocial well-being but also enhances learning engagement, academic motivation, and educational achievement. Wang et al. (2023) identified four key dimensions of social participation among students with special educational needs: participation in shared activities, social behaviour, peer relationships, and social self-perception. Their findings demonstrate that higher levels of social participation are associated with better school adjustment, improved emotional well-being, and more meaningful learning experiences.

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering students' social interaction skills through purposeful, responsive, and student-centred instructional practices. Beyond delivering curriculum content, teachers act as social facilitators who guide students in developing interpersonal relationships, managing social behaviours, and engaging effectively in collaborative learning. However, teaching social interaction skills within inclusive classrooms remains a complex and demanding process. A recent scoping review by Chow et al. (2024) reported that teachers continue to face multiple challenges, including insufficient professional training, limited knowledge of evidence-based social intervention strategies, time constraints, heavy workloads, and inadequate instructional resources. These challenges directly influence teachers' self-efficacy and the overall effectiveness of inclusive educational practices.

To address these challenges, the special education literature has identified a range of evidence-informed instructional approaches, including explicit instruction, behavioural modelling, role-play, peer-mediated learning, visual supports, and positive reinforcement. Although these approaches have been widely reported to improve the social interaction skills of students with SEN, their effectiveness depends largely on teachers' professional competence, the appropriateness of implementation according to students' functional abilities, and the level of institutional support provided by schools. This suggests that successful implementation is influenced not only by pedagogical approaches but also by the broader educational ecosystem that supports teachers' instructional practices.

Despite the growing body of research on inclusive education, several important research gaps remain. First, previous studies have primarily focused on teachers' perceptions of inclusive education or the effectiveness of specific interventions rather than examining teachers' lived experiences in teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN. Second, existing studies have generally investigated teachers' challenges, instructional strategies, and support separately, with limited attention to the interrelationships among these elements within authentic classroom practice. Third, empirical research focusing specifically on Malaysia's Inclusive Education Programme at the secondary school level remains limited compared with studies conducted in primary schools, despite substantial differences in curriculum demands, learning environments, and students' developmental needs. This lack of contextualised empirical evidence restricts efforts to design professional development programmes, strengthen school support systems, and enhance pedagogical practices that effectively address the needs of both teachers and students with SEN.

In response to these research gaps, this study aims to explore the challenges encountered by teachers, the instructional strategies they employ, and the forms of support they require when teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN in inclusive secondary education. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education by providing deeper insights into teachers' experiences as key implementers of inclusive practices. Furthermore, the study seeks to generate empirical evidence to inform teacher professional development, strengthen school support systems, and improve instructional practices for teaching social interaction skills within the Malaysian inclusive education context. Specifically, this study aims to: (i) identify the challenges faced by teachers in teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN; (ii) explore the instructional strategies employed by teachers to develop students' social interaction skills; and (iii) identify the forms of support required to enhance the effectiveness of teaching social interaction skills within Malaysia's Inclusive Education Programme at the secondary school level.

## 2. Literature Review

Inclusive education is an educational approach that emphasises the right of all students to learn together in learning environments that value diversity, participation, and equity. It is no longer viewed merely as the physical placement of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms; rather, it involves creating meaningful learning experiences that enable every student to participate actively in academic, social, and emotional aspects of school life. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that high-quality inclusive education requires comprehensive changes in educational policy, school culture, curriculum, and pedagogical practices to ensure that every learner has equitable opportunities to achieve their full potential without discrimination. Consistent with this aspiration, Malaysia has implemented the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) to promote equitable access to education by facilitating the meaningful participation of students with SEN in mainstream learning environments (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2013).

Within inclusive education, social interaction skills are recognised as a key indicator of successful participation among students with SEN. These skills include the ability to initiate communication, respond appropriately in social situations, establish positive interpersonal relationships, collaborate with peers, and regulate behaviour according to social norms. The development of social interaction skills contributes not only to students' psychosocial well-being but also to their learning motivation, sense of belonging within the school community, and academic achievement.

Recent literature indicates that inclusive education supported by positive social interactions enhances students' self-confidence, communication skills, peer relationships, and social adjustment, while simultaneously benefiting typically developing students by fostering empathy, acceptance of diversity, and inclusive attitudes. Despite the continued expansion of inclusive education, numerous studies have shown that students with SEN continue to experience challenges in achieving meaningful social participation within inclusive classrooms (Lindner et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Among the most frequently reported challenges are difficulties in developing positive peer relationships, communicating effectively with classmates, participating in collaborative learning activities, and adapting behaviour to different social contexts (Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, students with SEN consistently demonstrate lower levels of social participation than their typically developing peers in terms of social acceptance, friendship formation, and engagement in school activities (Lindner et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the physical placement of students with SEN in inclusive classrooms alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful social participation. Instead, teachers must implement appropriate pedagogical strategies and provide systematic learning support to promote students' social engagement within inclusive learning environments (UNESCO, 2023).

The successful development of social interaction skills within inclusive education depends largely on teachers, who serve as the primary agents of pedagogical implementation. Beyond delivering curriculum content, teachers are responsible for creating learning environments that foster social interaction through evidence-informed instructional strategies, differentiated learning activities, and the cultivation of positive peer relationships (Lindner et al., 2022). Nevertheless, numerous studies have reported that teachers continue to face challenges related to professional knowledge, specialised training, and the availability of appropriate instructional resources for students with SEN. Recent evidence indicates that continuous professional development, inclusive education training, teaching experience, and organisational support are significant factors in enhancing teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and professional competence in implementing effective inclusive educational practices (Chow, 2024; Wood et al., 2025).

Overall, the literature suggests that although inclusive education is widely recognised as an effective approach for promoting the social development of students with SEN, its successful implementation depends on the dynamic interaction among student characteristics, teacher competencies, and the broader school environment. Previous studies have primarily focused on the effectiveness of specific interventions or teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. In contrast, research examining teachers' challenges, instructional strategies, and support needs simultaneously within the context of teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN in Malaysian inclusive secondary education remains limited. This gap highlights the need for context-specific empirical research to inform evidence-based pedagogical practices, teacher professional development, and school support systems that are responsive to the needs of both teachers and students within inclusive education.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) within Malaysia's Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) at the secondary school level. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a phenomenon within its natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is particularly appropriate for investigating complex and context-dependent educational issues that require rich and detailed descriptions. A case study design was employed because the study focused on exploring the phenomenon of teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN within the real-life context of inclusive secondary education. Case study research enables researchers to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, instructional practices, and contextual factors that shape the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, this design is particularly suitable for addressing "how" and "why" research questions concerning contemporary educational practices within specific settings (Yin, 2018).

#### **3.2 Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed relevant knowledge, professional expertise, and practical experience in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). Purposive sampling is widely

employed in qualitative research because it enables researchers to obtain rich and information-rich data from individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of nine participants were recruited, comprising three experts and six secondary school teachers. Participant selection was guided by predetermined inclusion criteria to ensure that the collected data adequately addressed the research objectives.

The three experts were purposively selected based on their recognised expertise and extensive experience in special education and inclusive education. They possessed substantial experience in research, teacher education, professional development, and the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme. Their primary role in this study was to evaluate the content validity of the semi-structured interview protocol by reviewing the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the interview questions, as well as providing recommendations for improvement to ensure that the protocol was capable of generating accurate and meaningful data aligned with the research objectives.

The six teacher participants were recruited from secondary schools implementing the Inclusive Education Programme. All participants had direct experience teaching students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms and were actively involved in developing students' social interaction skills and managing inclusive learning environments.

The number of participants was considered appropriate for the purpose of this qualitative case study, which emphasises obtaining rich, in-depth, and context-specific data rather than achieving statistical representation. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research prioritises the selection of information-rich participants who are able to provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Consequently, the inclusion of three experts and six teachers was considered sufficient to provide comprehensive insights into the challenges, instructional strategies, and support required for teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN within Malaysia's Inclusive Education Programme at the secondary school level.

**Table 1: Selection Criteria for Expert Panel Members**

| Criteria                 | Description                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Area of expertise        | Special Education, Inclusive Education, or Curriculum/Module Development                                                                                     |
| Professional experience  | Minimum of 10 years of professional experience                                                                                                               |
| Academic qualification   | Master's degree or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in a relevant field                                                                                            |
| Professional involvement | Active involvement in research, teacher education, professional development, curriculum development, or the implementation of inclusive education programmes |

### Expert Panel Profile

The expert panel comprised three professionals with extensive expertise in special education, inclusive education, educational leadership, and higher education. Their diverse professional backgrounds provided comprehensive perspectives in evaluating the content validity of the semi-structured interview protocol.

Expert 1 was a secondary school principal holding a Master's degree in Education with 28 years of professional experience in the education sector. His extensive experience in school leadership and the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) enabled him to provide valuable insights into the needs, challenges, and institutional support required to enhance teaching and learning for students with special educational needs (SEN).

Expert 2 was a Senior Assistant for Special Education with a Master's degree in Education and 25 years of experience in special education. Her direct involvement in managing special education programmes and supervising teachers working with students with SEN provided valuable perspectives on instructional practices, social interaction skills, and the implementation of inclusive education at the school level.

Expert 3 was a university lecturer holding a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Education with 20 years of experience in higher education and educational research. His expertise in special education, curriculum development, and educational research contributed significantly to the evaluation of the theoretical foundation, content relevance, and instructional strategies incorporated into the interview protocol.

Collectively, the three experts possessed between 20 and 28 years of professional experience in education. Their complementary expertise in educational leadership, special education administration, curriculum development,

and educational research ensured a comprehensive review of the interview protocol and strengthened its content validity before data collection.

**Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Expert Panel**

| Expert | Position                               | Highest Qualification        | Professional Experience | Area of Expert                                                  |
|--------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| E1     | Secondary School Principal             | Master of Education          | 28 years                | Inclusive Education, Education Leadership                       |
| E2     | Senior Assistant for Special Education | Masters of Special Education | 25 years                | Special Education, Inclusive Education                          |
| E3     | University Lecturer                    | PhD in Sepcial Education     | 20 years                | Special Education, Curriculum Development, Educational Research |

### Profile of Teacher Participants

This study involved six teachers with experience in teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) at the secondary school level. All participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and direct involvement in the implementation of inclusive education.

Participant R1 was a 30-year-old female teacher holding a bachelor's degree, with six years of teaching experience, including three years in the Inclusive Education Programme. Participant R2 was a 39-year-old female teacher with 15 years of teaching experience, five of which were in the IEP.

Participant R3 was a 43-year-old female teacher with 18 years of teaching experience, including seven years in the IEP. Participant R4 was a 49-year-old female teacher holding a master's degree, with 22 years of teaching experience and eight years of experience in the Inclusive Education Programme.

Among the male participants, R5 was a 45-year-old teacher holding a bachelor's degree, with 20 years of teaching experience, including eight years in the Inclusive Education Programme. Participant R6 was a 52-year-old teacher holding a master's degree, with 25 years of teaching experience, six of which were in the IEP.

**Table 3. Demographic Profile of Teacher Participants**

| Participant | Gender | Age      | Academic Qualification | Teaching Experience | Teaching Experience in the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) |
|-------------|--------|----------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| R1          | Female | 30 years | Bachelor's Degree      | 6 years             | 3 years                                                        |
| R2          | Female | 39 years | Bachelor's Degree      | 15 years            | 5 years                                                        |
| R3          | Female | 43 years | Bachelor's Degree      | 18 years            | 7 years                                                        |

|    |        |          |                   |          |         |
|----|--------|----------|-------------------|----------|---------|
| R4 | Female | 49 years | Master's Degree   | 22 years | 8 years |
| R5 | Male   | 45 years | Bachelor's Degree | 20 years | 8 years |
| R6 | Male   | 52 years | Master's Degree   | 25years  | 6 years |

### 3.3 Demographic Analysis of Teacher Participants

This study involved six teachers with experience in teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) at the secondary school level. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to obtain in-depth insights into the challenges they encountered, the instructional strategies they employed, and the types of support required for teaching social interaction skills. Demographic data collected included gender, age, academic qualification, teaching experience, and years of experience in the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP).

**Table 4. Demographic Profile of Teacher Participants (n = 6)**

| Demographic Variable                                           | Category           | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender                                                         | Female             | 4             | 66.7           |
|                                                                | Male               | 2             | 33.3           |
| Age                                                            | 30-39 years        | 2             | 33.3           |
|                                                                | 40-49 years        | 3             | 50.0           |
|                                                                | 50 years and above | 1             | 16.7           |
| Academic Qualification                                         | Bachelor's Degree  | 4             | 66.7           |
|                                                                | Master's Degree    | 2             | 33.3           |
| Teaching Experience                                            | 1-10 years         | 1             | 16.7           |
|                                                                | 11-20 years        | 3             | 50.0           |
|                                                                | 21 years and above | 2             | 33.3           |
| Teaching Experience in the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) | 1-5 years          | 2             | 33.3           |
|                                                                | 6-10 years         | 4             | 66.7           |

Top of FormBottom of Form

Based on Table 4, the majority of the participants were female teachers, comprising four participants (66.7%), while the remaining two participants (33.3%) were male. In terms of age, most participants were between 40 and 49 years old (50.0%), followed by two participants (33.3%) aged between 30 and 39 years, and one participant (16.7%) aged 50 years and above.

Regarding academic qualifications, most participants held a bachelor's degree (66.7%), while the remaining two participants (33.3%) possessed a master's degree. These findings indicate that all participants had relevant academic qualifications in the field of education.

With respect to teaching experience, half of the participants (50.0%) had between 11 and 20 years of teaching experience, while two participants (33.3%) had more than 21 years of teaching experience, and one participant (16.7%) had fewer than 10 years of teaching experience. This distribution suggests that the majority of the participants were highly experienced educators.

In terms of experience within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP), four participants (66.7%) had between six and ten years of experience, whereas two participants (33.3%) had between one and five years of experience. These findings indicate that all participants possessed sufficient experience in implementing inclusive education and were therefore well positioned to provide valuable insights into the requirements for developing a social interaction skills teaching module for students with special educational needs (SEN).

Overall, the demographic profile indicates that the participants possessed substantial teaching experience, appropriate academic qualifications, and relevant expertise in inclusive education. These characteristics enhance the credibility of the findings and provide a robust foundation for identifying the requirements for developing a

social interaction skills teaching module for students with special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive secondary school settings.

### **3.4 Research Instruments**

#### **a. Expert Evaluation Questionnaire**

An expert evaluation questionnaire was employed to establish the content validity of the semi-structured interview protocol prior to data collection. The instrument comprised two sections: (1) experts' demographic information and (2) evaluation items assessing the clarity of language, content relevance, alignment of the interview questions with the research objectives, logical sequence of the questions, and the overall usability of the interview protocol. Each item was rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The data were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to determine the level of expert agreement regarding the content validity of the interview protocol. In addition, qualitative feedback and recommendations provided by the experts were reviewed to refine and improve the interview protocol before it was administered to the teacher participants.

#### **b. Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' experiences, challenges, and needs in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). The interview protocol was developed based on the research objectives and an extensive review of the relevant literature. Individual interviews were conducted with six teachers and were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. The interview recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to the development needs of a social interaction skills teaching module.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection for this study was carried out in two phases.

#### **Phase 1: Expert Evaluation of the Interview Protocol**

In the first phase, the expert evaluation questionnaire was administered to three experts selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and extensive experience in special education and inclusive education. The purpose of this phase was to evaluate the clarity, relevance, appropriateness, and logical organisation of the semi-structured interview protocol developed in accordance with the research objectives. In addition, the experts were invited to provide recommendations for improving the content validity and practical usability of the interview protocol prior to its implementation in the data collection process.

The completed evaluation forms were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to determine the level of expert agreement. Qualitative feedback provided by the experts was also systematically reviewed and incorporated to refine the interview protocol before it was administered to the teacher participants.

#### **Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers**

In the second phase, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers who were purposively selected based on their experience in teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) at the secondary school level. The interviews were guided by the interview protocol that had been reviewed and validated by the expert panel. Each interview session was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent before being transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview data were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes and subthemes related to the challenges encountered by teachers, the instructional strategies they employed, and the types of support required for teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) in the Inclusive Education Programme.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

#### **a. Analysis of Expert Questionnaire Data**

Data obtained from the expert evaluation questionnaire were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The analysis aimed to determine the level of expert agreement regarding the appropriateness of the semi-structured interview protocol in terms of language clarity, content relevance, alignment of the interview questions with the research objectives, logical sequence of the questions, and overall usability of the instrument. The findings served as the basis for refining the interview protocol based on the experts' recommendations, thereby ensuring adequate content validity and enhancing the instrument's capacity to generate accurate and comprehensive data.

#### **b. Analysis of Teacher Interview Data**

The semi-structured interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved verbatim transcription of the interview recordings, repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data, systematic coding, grouping related codes into categories, and the development of themes and subthemes. This process enabled the identification of the challenges encountered by teachers, the instructional strategies they employed, and the types of support required for teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN).

The resulting themes and subthemes were then used to interpret the findings and address the research objectives.

### **3.7 Content Validation of the Interview Protocol**

To ensure the adequacy of the content validity of the semi-structured interview protocol, an expert validation process was conducted prior to data collection. Content validity refers to the extent to which the items of an instrument adequately represent the construct being measured and are aligned with the research objectives (Polit & Beck, 2006). In this study, the interview protocol was developed based on an extensive review of the literature on inclusive education, social interaction skills instruction, and special education. The protocol was also designed to address the research objectives, which focused on the challenges encountered by teachers, the instructional strategies they employed, and the forms of support required for teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). Developing the protocol based on both the literature and the research objectives ensured that each interview question was relevant, comprehensive, and capable of eliciting rich and meaningful data.

To evaluate the content suitability of the interview protocol, it was reviewed by three experts selected through purposive sampling. The experts were chosen based on their academic qualifications, professional experience, and expertise in special education, inclusive education, and qualitative research. Their involvement was essential to ensure that the interview protocol met academic standards and was capable of generating high-quality qualitative data. Each expert evaluated the interview protocol using an expert evaluation questionnaire covering five key dimensions: language clarity, appropriateness of the interview questions, content relevance to the research objectives, logical sequencing of the questions, and the overall usability of the interview protocol. In addition to rating these dimensions, the experts provided written comments and recommendations to improve the content accuracy, language clarity, and coherence of the interview questions.

The expert evaluation data were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to determine the level of agreement across the evaluated dimensions. This analysis enabled the researcher to identify both the strengths of the instrument and areas requiring further refinement before its use in the actual data collection process. The qualitative feedback provided by the experts was systematically reviewed and incorporated into the revised interview protocol. The revisions included reorganising the sequence of interview questions to improve logical flow, refining the wording to enhance clarity, revising terminology for greater precision, and aligning the content more closely with the research objectives. These improvements ensured that the interview questions followed a coherent structure and facilitated participants in providing clear, detailed, and reflective responses regarding their professional experiences.

The expert validation process constituted an essential step in enhancing the methodological rigour of the study, particularly in qualitative research where interviews serve as the primary data collection method. A systematic review of the interview protocol enabled the identification and correction of potential weaknesses before the instrument was administered in the main study. The revisions made based on expert feedback not only strengthened the content validity of the interview protocol but also minimised the risk of ambiguous wording, overlapping questions, and participant misinterpretation. Consequently, the revised interview protocol was considered sufficiently clear, relevant, and appropriate for generating comprehensive data on the challenges, instructional strategies, and support required for teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) in the Inclusive Education Programme. A well-validated interview protocol also enhances the credibility of the study findings and contributes to the overall achievement of the research objectives.

### **3.8 Trustworthiness**

To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the study findings, the research adopted the trustworthiness framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), encompassing four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was established through the use of a semi-structured interview protocol that underwent expert review and content validation prior to data collection. All interview sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. Where appropriate, participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts to verify the accuracy of the recorded information (member checking)

Transferability was enhanced by providing a detailed description of the research context, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis process. Such contextual information enables readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

## **4. Results**

This section presents the findings derived from two sources of data: the expert evaluation of the semi-structured interview protocol and the semi-structured interviews conducted with teacher participants. The expert evaluation data were analysed using descriptive statistics, whereas the interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to address the research objectives.

### **4.1 Expert Validation Findings**



The evaluation conducted by the three expert participants indicated that the semi-structured interview protocol demonstrated a high level of content validity and was well aligned with the objectives of the study. The experts agreed that all 17 interview questions were capable of exploring the three key areas of the research, namely the challenges encountered by teachers in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN), the instructional strategies employed, and the forms of support required by teachers within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP).

Although the experts considered the interview protocol to be appropriate for data collection, they recommended several refinements to enhance its effectiveness. These included encouraging participants to provide authentic examples from their teaching experiences, further elaborating on the context of the challenges encountered, and incorporating additional probing questions to elicit richer and more comprehensive responses. Overall, the expert panel confirmed that the interview protocol was suitable for use in the main data collection phase.

**Table 5. Expert Agreement on the Teacher Interview Protocol**

| Evaluation Aspect                                                    | Experts in Agreement (n) | Agreement (%) | Level of Agreement |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Clarity of interview questions                                       | 3                        | 100           | Very High          |
| Relevance of content to the research objectives                      | 3                        | 100           | Very High          |
| Appropriateness of the questions for the inclusive education context | 3                        | 100           | Very High          |
| Ability of the protocol to generate in-depth data                    | 3                        | 100           | Very High          |
| Organisation and logical flow of the questions                       | 3                        | 100           | Very High          |
| Need for refinement of selected items                                | 2                        | 67            | High               |
| Overall suitability of the interview protocol                        | 3                        | 100           | Very High          |

The findings indicate that the interview protocol achieved a very high level of expert agreement across all major evaluation criteria, including the clarity of the interview questions, content relevance, appropriateness for the inclusive education context, logical organisation, and overall suitability of the instrument. All three experts agreed that the interview questions were capable of eliciting teachers' experiences concerning the challenges of teaching social interaction skills, the instructional strategies employed, and the support required within the Inclusive Education Programme.

Furthermore, the experts considered the interview protocol to have strong potential for generating rich and comprehensive qualitative data because the questions addressed multiple dimensions of teachers' professional experiences. Nevertheless, two of the three experts recommended several refinements, including the addition of probing questions, encouraging teachers to provide authentic classroom examples, and expanding questions related to teacher professional development, instructional resources, and professional collaboration. These recommendations were incorporated into the revised interview protocol prior to the teacher interview phase.

**Table 6. Thematic Analysis of Expert Feedback**

| Theme                              | Description                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Clarity of the Interview Questions | The interview questions were easy to understand and used language that was appropriate for the teacher participants. |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Content Relevance            | The interview questions were aligned with the research objectives and the context of inclusive education.                                           |
| Depth of the Data            | The interview questions were considered capable of generating rich and in-depth data, particularly by drawing on teachers' professional experiences |
| <b>Instrument Refinement</b> | The experts recommended adding probing questions and authentic examples to obtain richer and more comprehensive data.                               |

#### b. Teacher Participants

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with six teacher participants generated four main themes:

The Importance of Social Interaction Skills

Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Social Interaction Skills

Instructional Strategies for Teaching Social Interaction Skills

Teacher Support and Professional Needs

**Table 7. Summary of Themes and Subthemes Identified from the Thematic Analysis**

| Theme                                       | Subtheme                                                                              | Number of Participant (n=6) |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| The Importance of Social Interaction Skills | Adaptation to the inclusive learning environment                                      | 6                           |
|                                             | Development of peer relationships                                                     | 5                           |
|                                             | Participation in school activities                                                    | 4                           |
|                                             | Preparation for post-school life                                                      | 2                           |
| Teachers' Challenges                        | Deficits in students' social interaction skills                                       | 6                           |
|                                             | Diversity of students' abilities and behavioural characteristics                      | 6                           |
|                                             | Time constraints in teaching                                                          | 6                           |
|                                             | Difficulties in interactions between students with SEN and typically developing peers | 6                           |
|                                             | Limited instructional resources and teaching modules                                  | 6                           |
| Instructional Strategies                    | Behavioural modelling                                                                 | 4                           |
|                                             | Role-playing and simulation                                                           | 4                           |
|                                             | Cooperative learning and group activities                                             | 5                           |
|                                             | Peer-mediated support                                                                 | 3                           |

|                                        |                                                                  |   |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
|                                        | Use of visual materials and social stories                       | 3 |
| Teacher Support and Professional Needs | Support from school administrators                               | 6 |
|                                        | Collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers  | 6 |
|                                        | Need for professional training                                   | 6 |
|                                        | Need for a specialised social interaction skills teaching module | 6 |

### Theme 1: The Importance of Social Interaction Skills

All teacher participants emphasised that social interaction skills are essential for ensuring the successful inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). According to the participants, these skills enable students to communicate effectively with their peers, build self-confidence, and participate more actively in classroom learning and co-curricular activities. Furthermore, social interaction skills were viewed as fundamental for fostering independent living and successful social adaptation beyond school.

Representative excerpts illustrating this theme include:

*“Social interaction skills are very important because they help students with SEN communicate and adapt to their peers at school.”* (R1)

*“These skills form the foundation for students' success in inclusive settings and in life after school.”* (R5)

### Theme 2: Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching Social Interaction Skills

This theme emerged as the most dominant across the interview data. The participants reported numerous challenges in teaching social interaction skills to students with autism in inclusive classrooms. These challenges included students' difficulties in initiating social interactions, limited responsiveness during social activities, repetitive behaviours, and difficulties transferring acquired social skills to authentic situations. In addition, the wide variation in students' functional abilities required teachers to adopt diverse instructional approaches and strategies.

The participants also highlighted time constraints within inclusive classrooms, where teachers were required to divide their attention between students with SEN and their typically developing peers. Furthermore, the lack of specialised teaching modules and systematic instructional resources was identified as a major challenge in delivering effective social interaction skills instruction.

Representative excerpts include:

*“There is a lack of specialised teaching modules that can serve as practical instructional guidelines.”* (R5)

*“The allocated teaching time is insufficient to implement social interaction activities in depth.”* (R4)

### Theme 3: Instructional Strategies for Teaching Social Interaction Skills

The teacher participants reported employing a variety of instructional strategies to enhance students' social interaction skills. The most frequently adopted strategies included cooperative learning, group-based activities, behavioural modelling, role-playing, social simulations, peer-mediated support, and the use of visual materials. These strategies were perceived as helping students understand social rules, improve communication skills, and practise appropriate social behaviours in authentic contexts.

Based on the participants' experiences, behavioural modelling, role-playing, cooperative learning, social stories, peer-mediated support, and positive reinforcement were considered the most effective approaches. Teachers also evaluated the effectiveness of these strategies through classroom observations, checklists, and feedback obtained from fellow teachers and parents.

Representative excerpts include:

*“Behavioural modelling and role-playing are effective because students with SEN can observe clear examples of appropriate social behaviours.”* (R1)

*“Peer-mediated support is effective because students feel more comfortable learning from classmates they already know.”* (R2)

### Theme 4: Teacher Support and Professional Needs

The final theme highlights the various forms of support required to enhance the effectiveness of teaching social interaction skills. All participants acknowledged that support from school administrators, together with collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers, contributed positively to the implementation of inclusive education. However, the participants believed that the professional training and courses currently available were insufficient, particularly in relation to instructional strategies for teaching social interaction skills to students with autism.

The participants also emphasised the need for a systematic, practical, and user-friendly teaching module to support classroom instruction. In addition, collaboration with specialists, such as speech and language therapists and educational psychologists, together with active parental involvement, was considered essential for supporting students' social development.

Representative excerpts include:

*"I need a teaching module that is systematic, practical, and easy to use."* (R1)

*"Continuous professional training related to social interaction skills and autism is essential."* (R2)

#### 4.2 Distribution of Themes Across Participants

The thematic analysis of the interviews with the six teacher participants revealed that all four main themes were consistently identified across the dataset. This finding indicates a high level of agreement among the participants regarding the importance of social interaction skills, the challenges associated with teaching these skills, the instructional strategies employed, and the types of support required to enhance the effectiveness of teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP).

For Theme 1: The Importance of Social Interaction Skills, all participants emphasised that these skills are fundamental to the successful inclusion of students with SEN in inclusive educational settings. Further analysis revealed that the subtheme *adaptation to the inclusive learning environment* was identified by all six participants (100%). The teachers highlighted that social interaction skills enable students to adapt to their peers, understand social expectations, and participate more actively in school activities. In addition, the subtheme *development of peer relationships* was identified by most participants, indicating that social interaction skills play a crucial role in reducing social isolation and enhancing students' self-confidence.

Theme 2: Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching Social Interaction Skills emerged as the most dominant theme. All participants reported challenges related to students' deficits in social interaction skills, the diversity of students' functional abilities and behavioural characteristics, time constraints in inclusive classrooms, difficulties facilitating interactions between students with SEN and their typically developing peers, and the limited availability of specialised instructional resources and teaching modules. The consistency of these findings across all participants suggests that teachers experience similar challenges despite differences in their teaching contexts. These findings further highlight the need for a more systematic instructional approach supported by appropriate teaching resources.

For Theme 3: Instructional Strategies for Teaching Social Interaction Skills, the most frequently reported subtheme was cooperative learning and group-based activities, identified by five of the six participants. Teachers perceived group activities as providing authentic opportunities for students with SEN to interact with their peers. Other frequently reported strategies included behavioural modelling, role-playing, social simulations, peer-mediated support, and the use of visual materials and social stories. The diversity of instructional strategies employed demonstrates teachers' efforts to adapt their teaching practices to meet the varying needs and functional abilities of their students.

The final theme, Teacher Support and Professional Needs, was also consistently supported by all participants. All teachers acknowledged that support from school administrators, collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers, and continuous professional training were essential for improving the effectiveness of teaching social interaction skills. At the same time, every participant expressed the need for a systematic, practical, and user-friendly teaching module specifically designed to support the teaching of social interaction skills. Several participants also emphasised the importance of involving specialists, including speech and language therapists and educational psychologists, as well as parents, in supporting the social development of students with SEN.

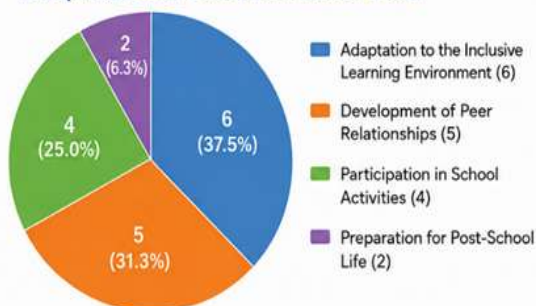
Overall, the distribution of themes across participants demonstrates that all four main themes were consistently supported throughout the interviews, thereby strengthening the credibility of the study findings. The high level of agreement among teachers regarding the challenges, instructional strategies, and professional support required provides strong justification for the development of a comprehensive teaching module to support the teaching of social interaction skills for students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme.

Dependability was ensured by using the same semi-structured interview protocol for all participants and by implementing a systematic thematic analysis process. The analytical procedures included verbatim transcription, repeated reading of the transcripts, systematic coding, categorisation of codes, and the development of themes and subthemes, thereby enhancing the consistency and transparency of the analytical process.

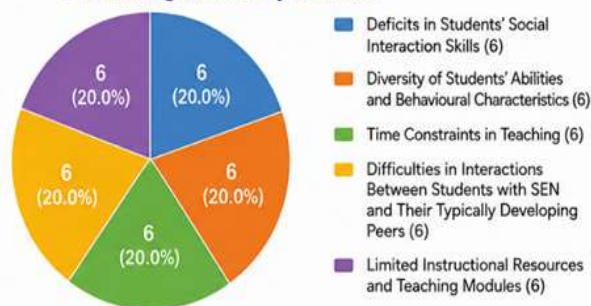
Confirmability was achieved by ensuring that the interpretation of the findings was grounded in the interview data provided by the participants. In addition, an audit trail comprising interview transcripts, field notes, and records of the analytical process was maintained throughout the study to support the transparency and objectivity of the research

### Distribution of Subthemes Across Teacher Participants (n = 6)

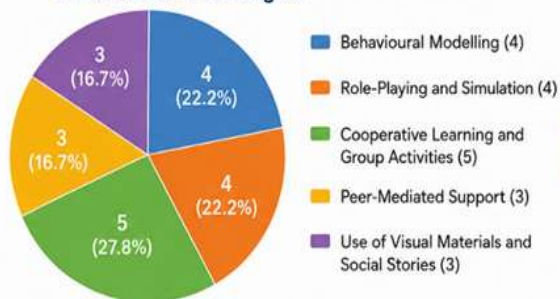
#### 1. Importance of Social Interaction Skills



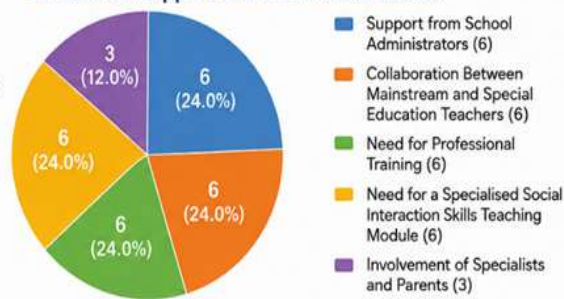
#### 2. Challenges Faced by Teachers



#### 3. Instructional Strategies



#### 4. Teacher Support and Professional Needs



Note: Values in each pie chart represent the number of teacher participants who identified each subtheme. Percentages are calculated based on the total number of participants (n = 6).

## 5. Discussions

This section discusses the study findings based on the needs analysis conducted. The discussion focuses on the major themes that emerged from the teacher interviews and the expert validation findings by relating the results to relevant theories, previous empirical studies, and the context of inclusive education implementation.

Overall, the findings indicate that both teachers and experts recognised the importance of social interaction skills as a fundamental component in supporting the participation of students with special educational needs (SEN) within inclusive educational settings. The findings also identified the need for a systematic teaching module, appropriate instructional strategies, enhanced teacher professional competence, and multi-stakeholder support to ensure the effective implementation of social interaction skills interventions. Collectively, these findings provide a robust empirical foundation for developing a structured, evidence-informed teaching module that addresses the actual needs of teachers and students in the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP).

The discussion is organised according to the four major themes identified through the thematic analysis: (i) teachers' roles and professional needs, (ii) the need for a social interaction skills teaching module, (iii) instructional strategies for teaching social interaction skills, and (iv) challenges and support in implementing social interaction skills instruction. Each theme is discussed with reference to Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Jerome Bruner's Social Constructivist Theory, together with relevant empirical evidence from previous studies.

### 5.1 Teachers' Roles and Professional Needs in Teaching Social Interaction Skills

The findings demonstrate that teachers play a pivotal role in supporting the development of social interaction skills among students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). Beyond delivering academic content, teachers serve as facilitators, mentors, and social role models who guide students in developing appropriate social behaviours. Nevertheless, the participants also highlighted the need to strengthen their professional knowledge and competencies in teaching social interaction skills to students with SEN.

These findings are consistent with the work of Laugeson, who emphasised that the effectiveness of social skills interventions depends largely on teachers' ability to implement instructional strategies systematically and consistently. Likewise, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reported that continuous professional development enhances teachers' instructional effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of students with special educational needs.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which proposes that learning occurs through social interaction and guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. Within this context, teachers function as providers of instructional scaffolding, enabling students with SEN to progressively acquire and apply social interaction skills.

### **5.2 The Need for a Systematic and Flexible Social Interaction Skills Teaching Module**

The findings indicate that teachers require a specialised teaching module to serve as a practical guide for teaching social interaction skills. The proposed module should incorporate a clear instructional structure, practical learning activities, and sufficient flexibility to accommodate the diverse functional abilities and learning needs of students with SEN.

These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that teachers often experience difficulties in planning and delivering social interaction instruction without systematic instructional guidance. Research has further demonstrated that structured intervention modules enhance opportunities for students with SEN to practise and generalise social interaction skills across different learning contexts.

The need for a flexible teaching module also aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasise adapting curricula and instructional approaches to accommodate individual learner needs. Consequently, developing a teaching module grounded in the actual needs of teachers and students is expected to enhance the effectiveness of the Inclusive Education Programme.

### **5.3 Effective Instructional Strategies for Teaching Social Interaction Skills**

The findings reveal that teachers prioritised instructional strategies such as explicit instruction, behavioural modelling, role-playing, coaching, and authentic learning activities to facilitate the acquisition of social interaction skills among students with SEN.

These findings are supported by previous research demonstrating that direct, structured instructional approaches represent among the most effective evidence-based practices for students with autism. Strategies such as behavioural modelling and role-playing provide opportunities for students to observe, imitate, and practise appropriate social behaviours before applying them in authentic social settings.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support Jerome Bruner's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasises learning through experience, interaction, and guided participation. The use of simulations and authentic learning situations enables students with SEN to construct meaningful social understanding through direct participation and experiential learning.

### **5.4 Challenges and Support in Implementing Social Interaction Skills Instruction**

The study also identified several challenges encountered by teachers, including time constraints, increasing workload, the diversity of students' functional abilities, and the limited availability of appropriate instructional resources. Furthermore, teachers emphasised the importance of support from school administrators, colleagues, and parents in ensuring the successful implementation of social interaction skills instruction.

These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that successful inclusive education depends upon effective collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Without sufficient organisational and professional support, teachers face considerable difficulties in implementing social interaction interventions consistently and effectively.

Accordingly, the development of a practical, user-friendly teaching module accompanied by clear implementation guidelines has the potential to reduce teachers' instructional burden while increasing their confidence and competence in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs.

The present study has important implications for educational research, special education practice, inclusive education implementation, instructional module development, and educational policy. The needs analysis findings obtained from both teachers and expert participants demonstrate that social interaction skills constitute a critical component in enhancing the participation and educational outcomes of students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) at the secondary school level. The implications of this study are discussed in the following sections.

### **5.5 Implications for Teachers and Instructional Practice**

The findings indicate that teachers require more systematic guidance in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN). Accordingly, this study highlights the need to strengthen teachers' professional development and competencies to ensure that they possess the knowledge, pedagogical skills, and confidence required to deliver effective social interaction skills instruction.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that evidence-based instructional strategies, including explicit instruction, behavioural modelling, simulation, role-playing, coaching, and generalisation activities, represent appropriate

approaches for supporting students with SEN in developing social interaction skills. Therefore, teachers may utilise the findings of this study to enhance their pedagogical practices and improve the effectiveness of instruction within inclusive classroom settings.

### **5.6 Implications for Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

This study has significant implications for the social and emotional development of students with special educational needs (SEN). The development and implementation of a teaching module based on the actual needs of teachers and students are expected to enhance students' social awareness, ability to initiate social interactions, provide appropriate social responses, communicate effectively, regulate social behaviour, collaborate with peers, and manage emotions across a range of social situations.

Enhancing these social interaction skills is expected to facilitate students' successful adaptation to inclusive educational environments while improving their self-confidence, participation in school activities, peer relationships, and overall social well-being. In the long term, these competencies may also contribute to greater independence and an improved quality of life.

### **5.7 Implications for the Inclusive Education Programme**

The findings indicate that the development of social interaction skills is a critical factor influencing the success of inclusive education. Consequently, the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) should extend beyond a sole emphasis on academic achievement to include the systematic development of social interaction skills as a fundamental component of holistic education.

The findings further suggest that systematic social interaction skills interventions can enhance students' ability to interact effectively within the school environment, thereby improving social acceptance and participation within the school community. Accordingly, the proposed teaching module has the potential to support the objectives of inclusive education by promoting the meaningful participation and inclusion of all students throughout the educational process.

### **5.8 Implications for School Administrators and Other Stakeholders**

The study demonstrates that the successful implementation of social interaction skills instruction requires comprehensive support from school administrators, teachers, parents, and the wider community. School administrators therefore play a crucial role in providing a supportive learning environment, adequate instructional resources, and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers.

In addition, collaboration between schools and parents should be strengthened to ensure that the social interaction skills acquired in school are consistently reinforced at home and within the community. Such collaborative partnerships are expected to enhance the effectiveness of interventions and facilitate the generalisation of social interaction skills across different social contexts.

### **5.9 Implications for Educational Policy**

From a policy perspective, this study provides empirical evidence that may inform the Ministry of Education in planning teacher professional development programmes, enhancing the special education curriculum, and developing instructional resources related to social interaction skills for students with special educational needs (SEN).

The findings also highlight the need for more comprehensive guidelines regarding the teaching of social interaction skills within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). The development of such guidelines would provide schools with a clear framework for implementing systematic and effective social interaction skills interventions, thereby strengthening the quality and consistency of inclusive education practices.

## **6. Conclusions**

This study was conducted to explore the challenges, instructional strategies, and support experienced by teachers in teaching social interaction skills to students with special educational needs (SEN) within the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) at the secondary school level. Through semi-structured interviews with teachers directly involved in teaching students with SEN, the study provided an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, instructional practices, and professional needs in supporting students to develop the social interaction skills necessary for successful participation in inclusive educational settings.

The findings revealed that teachers encounter a range of challenges in teaching social interaction skills, including differences in students' functional abilities, difficulties in interpreting and responding to social cues, limited instructional time, increasing teaching responsibilities, and the lack of appropriate instructional resources and teaching materials. These challenges influence the effectiveness of social interaction skills instruction and highlight the need for pedagogical approaches that are responsive to the diverse needs of students with SEN.

Despite these challenges, the study found that teachers employ various evidence-informed instructional strategies to support the development of students' social interaction skills. The most frequently reported strategies included explicit instruction, behavioural modelling, role-playing and simulation, continuous coaching, and opportunities to practise social skills in authentic situations. These instructional approaches were perceived to facilitate students' understanding, acquisition, and application of appropriate social behaviours within the school environment.

The findings also demonstrate that support from school administrators, colleagues, parents, and the wider school community plays a vital role in strengthening the implementation of social interaction skills instruction. Overall, the study successfully achieved its research objectives by identifying the challenges, instructional strategies, and support required by teachers within the context of inclusive education. The findings provide valuable empirical evidence to inform the development of a systematic and evidence-informed social interaction skills teaching module and are expected to serve as a useful reference for teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in strengthening instructional practices and enhancing the quality of inclusive education and the social development of students with special educational needs..

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