● child studies ○

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# “After a While, it Became a Normal Thing”: Swedish children’s Experiences of Everyday Life in School During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## “Depois de algum tempo, tornou-se algo normal”: as experiências das crianças suecas no dia a dia escolar durante a pandemia da COVID-19

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## Abstract

The article investigates how Swedish children (aged 8–12) with intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder describe their school-situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. A socio-ecological perspective is used to understand how the pandemic trickled down and became part of children’s everyday life. The data consists of eight qualitative interviews with children. The interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Most prominent in the children’s main concerns about pandemic school life is change. The results show that although the children’s lived pandemic environment is mainly described in challenging terms, the pandemic also provided some opportunities for them – school becoming calmer, for example, or the disease restrictions providing opportunities to take a time-out.

**Keywords**: ADHD, ASD, children’s experiences, COVID-19, everyday life, ID

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## Resumo

O artigo investiga como crianças suecas (com idades entre 8 e 12 anos) com deficiência intelectual, transtorno do espectro autista e/ou transtorno de déficit de atenção e hiperatividade descrevem a sua situação escolar durante a pandemia da COVID-19. Uma perspetiva socioecológica é usada para compreender como a pandemia se propagou e se tornou parte da vida quotidiana das crianças. Os dados consistem em oito entrevistas qualitativas com crianças. As entrevistas foram analisadas usando uma abordagem de teoria fundamentada. O que mais se destaca nas principais preocupações das crianças sobre a vida escolar durante a pandemia é a mudança. Os resultados mostram que, embora o ambiente pandémico vivido pelas crianças seja descrito principalmente em termos desafiadores, a pandemia também lhes proporcionou algumas oportunidades — a escola ficou mais calma, por exemplo, ou as restrições da doença proporcionaram oportunidades para fazer uma pausa.

**Palavras-chave:** TDAH, TEA, experiências das crianças, COVID-19, vida quotidiana, ID

## Introduction

The focus in this study is on how Swedish children with intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) experienced changes in everyday school life during the COVID-19 pandemic. A socio-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is used to understand how an extreme global event, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic, trickles down and becomes part of children’s everyday life.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that comprehensive measures were taken in society to protect people from the disease and prevent the spread of the virus. The Swedish way of dealing with the pandemic differed from many other countries in not implementing national school closures and in the open-society approach taken by government and authorities. Despite this, society was subject to a series of major changes in the way it was organized and how people were expected to behave (Kuhlmann et al., 2021), leading to changes in day-to-day routines. For example, children had to deal with playground closures and stay-at-home measures (Graber et al, 2023; Koller, 2022). When it comes to the impact of crises like the pandemic, children overall are viewed as a vulnerable group (Bagattini, 2019).

Children with disabilities are often identified as a particularly vulnerable group as they are more dependent on the kind of social support that was interrupted during the pandemic (Zahng et al., 2022) and because they are often more dependent on adults (Bagattini, 2019). In the case of COVID-19, risk is also related to actual mortality as some children with disabilities belonged to risk groups for whom the disease could have serious health consequences. This can be added to the fact that children with disabilities can already be seen as a vulnerable group in school as they are more likely than other pupils to experience school failure (Lönnfjord et al., 2023), for example, and more at risk of being bullied (Rose et al., 2009) or socially isolated (Mundhenke et al., 2010).

However, there is a danger of this general focus on risk being reproduced in research. Even if vulnerability is central to understanding the situation for children with disabilities, it is also important that research broadens and nuances the understanding of what it means to live with a disability (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014). It is therefore important to gain knowledge about how children with disabilities themselves experience extraordinary situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, both from their position as children and specifically as children with disabilities, to understand all the ups and downs of their day-to-day lives. This article aims to understand children’s experiences of change in everyday life in school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research questions asked are:

- What changes during the COVID-19 pandemic do children describe?
- How can change be understood in relation to pandemic/non-pandemic conditions?

### *Disability, COVID-19 and the Swedish Context*

In this study, disability is understood in the intersection between the child’s impairment and the environment and is seen as ‘the result of a relationship between the person and the environment’ (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.20). This means that children’s experiences must be understood both in terms of norms about disability and the disability itself. In the study we use the term *children with disability*. This is in line with ideals advocated to use language rooted in the context(s) of the participants (cf. Morgan et al., 2022). In the Swedish context, this kind of language is used both within the disability movement and by authorities (cf. The Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, 2023; Tiefenbacher, 2023).

The participating children attended primary or middle school during the pandemic. Children with intellectual disabilities can attend either compulsory school or compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities, while children with ADHD or ASD are taught within compulsory school (SFS 2010:800). These prerequisites are important to understand as a background to the children’s stories as the children have encountered different school situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck hard all over the world in 2020, but how it was delt with differed between national and local contexts. To understand the results in this study, the Swedish context is of importance. As already mentioned in the introduction, Sweden, in contrast to many other countries, did not enforce strict lockdown measures. Rather, its pandemic measures were built on voluntary behavioural changes. There were no national closures of compulsory schools (Björkman et al., 2023) as the public health agency of Sweden strongly identified children’s ability to attend school with their best interests and as an important health factor (ECDC, 2023). This does not mean that there were no disruptions in how school was carried out. Schools did enforce new routines such as social distancing, not allowing outsiders (typically parents) to enter the school premises, the cancelling of certain activities such as field-trips or community days. Local school closures were also implemented for limited periods when the spread of the virus was high. In relation to children with disabilities, the message from the authorities was that they, more than other children, needed to be in school and should be prioritized, for example that they should be allowed to come to school even during school closures. There are thus indications that some children with disability had high individual absenteeism due to illness or because they belonged to risk groups (SNAE, 2022).

### *Everyday Life and a Socio-Ecological Perspective*

To understand the children's lived experiences, we use the concept of everyday life. Everyday life can be understood in many ways as the everydayness (*sic*!) of the word itself often makes it a taken-for-granted phenomenon. In this article, everyday life is understood as something constructed and in constant process (Adelswärd et al., 2009). Framing the children's understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic as everyday life means that the study can contribute to understanding the entire palette that pandemic life entailed, both the extraordinary and the ordinary.

In line with this understanding of everyday life, it is also important to consider how events at different levels, from the pandemic as a global phenomenon to how Swedish schools dealt with it nationally and locally, trickled down and became part of children's lived experience. To analyse how children experienced changes in school during the COVID-19 pandemic, a socio-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is used. A socio-ecological perspective focuses the interaction between the environment and the individual and between individuals themselves. This relation between an individual, other individuals and the environment is understood as consisting of different layers (micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono) that are intertwined in a socio-ecological system. Bronfenbrenner's theory has been used to investigate barriers and facilitators for disabled children's education (e.g., Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024). In this article, the perspective is used to understand how these different layers interconnected and affected children's everyday lives in school and how the relations between the different layers in the system contributed to experiences of change.

Translated to this article, the micro-level in the model focuses on the relations between children, and between children and teachers, but also on family interactions. A child is thus considered to be part of multiple micro-systems and can experience these differently. The meso-level highlights the relations between different micro-systems that the child is part of, such as peer-groups in different arenas or interconnections between school and home or school. For example, research indicates that strong and supportive links between micro-systems is positive for pupils’ development (Brigandi, 2022). The exo-level is where the interactions between the environment and the individual are considered. The relations at this level are more distant in nature but affect children’s everyday life. One example of this could be how various COVID-19 restrictions were interpreted in the specific school and how this affected the local organization, thus having consequences for children’s everyday school life. The macro-level concerns societal beliefs and could in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic be about national decision-making about measures. The chrono-level ‘represents a time-based dimension that influences the operation of all levels of the ecological systems’ (Johnson, 2008, p. 3). In relation to children’s experience of change during the COVID-19 pandemic, this level can be used to understand how the children talk about the pandemic and its duration in time.

### *Previous Research*

Research that focuses on children with disabilities’ perspectives and experiences related to different areas is scarce (Runswick-Cole et al., 2017). Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a limited body of research that explores children’s experiences, and even less that includes the experiences of children with disabilities. For this reason, we include both studies of children in general and studies of children with disabilities in this overview. Overall, it is important to highlight that children or child with disabilities are not one homogenous group. Instead, the education experiences of children during COVID-19 were not uniform and research demonstrates extensive inequalities, for example in relation to class and disability (Fish, et al, 2023).

One area where the perspectives of children have been researched is health literacy, where children’s knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic is one aspect. These studies highlight the importance of paying attention to children in these issues as they too were affected by the pandemic (Thompson et al., 2021; Koller, 2023). In a study across six countries, children aged 7–12 participated in a web-survey and made drawings (Bray et al., 2021a, 2021b). The study aimed to understand the information children received about the pandemic and its sources. Results indicated that children were generally well-informed about the disease and protective measures (Koller, 2023). Children were also willing to make sacrifices in their own lives to prevent spreading the disease. Bray et al. (2021a, 2021b) show that information was often filtered by adults and not directed to the children. In this sense, Sweden, which was one of the participating countries, was an exception as schools were not closed and thus constituted a direct channel of information to children. Schools thus had a significant role in how Swedish children accessed and perceived information (see also Rydström et al, 2022).

Other studies have focused on children’s experiences of home-schooling. A Danish questionnaire study (Wistoft et al., 2020) of how pupils experienced school lockdowns focused on the quality of pupils' relationships with adults and peers. Younger pupils (year 3) reported more difficulties with home schooling than older pupils. Specifically, they found it hard to manage themselves and expressed a need for support from both parents and teachers. Home-schooling brought both positive and negative experiences. Koller et al. (2023) describe the pandemic impact on children's daily lives in terms of losses, challenges, new learning environments and limited social contacts. On the positive side, children describe having more free time and seeing parents and siblings more (Larivière-Bastien, 2022), and having more freedom with daily life not as structured as before. They also created new ways of hanging out with friends, e.g. using digital technology (Thompson et al., 2021). On the negative side, many children greatly missed their friends, a loss that could not be replaced (Koller et al., 2023; Larivière-Bastien, 2022). Besides their friends, children also missed their schoolmates, teachers and leisure activities during lockdowns (Wistoft & Qvortrup, 2024). Thompson et al. (2021) show how children experienced difficulties in organizing themselves during home-schooling.

In a Swedish context, Sarkadi et al. (2021) conducted a survey of children aged 4–18 about their experiences of pandemic life. The participants expressed both existential and concrete worries – e.g., for elderly relatives or about a parent becoming ill. However, the children also described positive experiences as the pandemic could slow down daily life and lower demands. Another positive experience was that they could spend more time with their parents.

One study that specifically explores the experiences of children with disabilities in Sweden is Fäldt et al. (2022). They conducted interviews with six children aged 5–13. As all children had communication difficulties, different tools were used to support their participation. The pandemic affected different aspects of their lives and they described it as strange and boring. The children's pandemic experiences included both worries about others and feeling lonely themselves. In this study, none of the children highlighted any benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. A Swedish report highlights that life changed less for children with disabilities because they already did not participate in leisure activities. The pandemic's impact on their daily lives was therefore not as significant (Barnrättskonsulterna, 2023).

Overall, previous research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic brought changes to children's lives. At the same time, studies of children's pandemic lives, and of children's own experiences in particular, can be considered fragmentary. When it comes to children with disabilities, knowledge is even more limited. This article thus provides an important contribution to understanding the specific pandemic experiences of this group of children.

## Material and Methods

Data in this article consist of individual interviews with eight children aged 8–12, four boys and four girls (see table, 1). The children had either intellectual disability, ASD and/or ADHD. They were recruited to participate in the interviews through their parents. That is, we first recruited parents for interviews using social media (specifically parent-initiated groups for parents of children with disabilities). During the interviews with the parents, we asked if they thought that their child/children might be interested/able to participate in an interview. In those cases where the parents said yes, we sent the child adapted written information about the project that the parent could use when informing the child about it, and asked if they wanted to participate. We also made attempts to recruit children through schools; however, no informants were recruited this way despite contact with several schools. The fact that the consent process had to go through parents may have influenced who came to participate in the study as the selection builds on parents’ self-identification and engagement in social media groups.

Table 1.
Participating children

| Child | Gender, fictitious names and age | Disability |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Boy, Adrian, age 8 | ID, ADHD |
| 2 | Boy, Felix, age 10 | ID, ADHD |
| 3 | Girl, Ronja, age 11 | ASD, ADHD |
| 4 | Girl, Alma, age 11 | ID |
| 5 | Girl, Maja, age 10 | ADHD |
| 6 | Girl, Jenny, age 11 | ADHD |
| 7 | Boy, Kalle, age 12 | ADHD |
| 8 | Boy, Max, age 12 | ASD |

The children had an opportunity to state how they preferred to be interviewed – in school, at home or online. All but one chose online interviews. One child explained this by saying, “*I’m used to talking online with friends, so I feel good doing that.*” The children could also decide if they wanted to have someone with them during the interview. In most interviews (in five out of eight), the mother participated in some way, sometimes just by helping the child start the online meeting and introducing the child and researcher (as the parents had previously met the researcher). In other interviews (in three out of eight), the mother sat behind the child and helped them to interpret some of the questions and/or the child’s answer. None of the children showed reluctance to talk to the researcher, but we could see that all children were keen on providing ‘right answers’ in the interviews. That meant in some cases that they turned to the adults for help to describe things in relation the pandemic, e.g. timing, in a correct way. One example was a child asking their mother, “I couldn’t celebrate my birthday, but what year was that?” All interviews were based on the same loosely structured interview guide, where some areas and possible questions were identified (i.e. tell me about school; what do you do when you are at home/school; do you remember the COVID-19 pandemic; was anything different then). In relation to the interview guide, we asked follow-up questions that were adapted to the individual child's answers. In addition, the children had ample opportunity during the interview to raise aspects that were important to them.

As we first interviewed the parents, we were also able to ask adapted questions to each child, which has been highlighted as especially important in interviews with children with disabilities (Bailey et al., 2015).

The interviews were conducted during the spring of 2023, which means that time had passed since the COVID-19 pandemic had its biggest impact on society. All the children had experience of schooling during the pandemic, but for the youngest (who was 8 when the interviews were conducted in 2022), it had started during their first school year. On the one hand, this gave children possibilities to reflect and look back. On the other hand, it was difficult for some to remember specific details such as time.

The interviews lasted between 12 and 30 minutes, which can be related to the limited ability of several of the participating children to concentrate and participate in longer conversations. However, we would like to emphasize that the shorter interviews also contributed valuable knowledge. All interviews were recorded with a digital device. They were transcribed and then analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). We followed three different coding phases: initial, focused and theoretical (Charmaz, 2014). In the initial coding, all transcripts were coded individually word for word, with a mind-map of each interview constructed to explore the main concerns (Glaser, 1978) of the individual child. In other words, the issues about the pandemic that emerged as the most important experiences for children were highlighted. In this initial coding, we strove to be open and close to the data. We found that change was a central aspect, both the kind of changes the children had experienced and what those changes meant to them. We then explored experiences of change more thoroughly in the focused coding. In the last phase of theoretical coding, we used the socio-ecological perspective as a lens through which to construct the meaning of the data. The analysis as a whole was an iterative process through literature, data production and coding (Thornberg, 2012). The analyses resulted in a core category related to change (i.e., change and how to handle change).

### Ethics

The project is reviewed by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (registration number 2022-02130-0). The study follows the Swedish regulations for ethics in research (the Swedish Research Council, 2024). As the participants are under 15, their guardians were informed of the overall purpose of the project and gave consent for their child to participate. We also provided adapted information to the children, and they gave their consent to participate. Due to their age and disability, it was in some cases difficult for children to understand what participation entailed. In some cases, we had to work with the guardians to ensure that the children understood what participation in the project meant. In these cases, we reflected on whether the child's consent had been influenced by their guardian. We cannot be entirely sure that this is not the case, but have tried throughout the research process to be sensitive to the child's willingness – or otherwise – to participate.

As not all children were aware of or wanted to talk about their disability as such, this was not something they were asked about in the interviews. Rather we talked about their experience of school and the COVID-19 pandemic. Since disability was, after all, the sampling basis, the data can be considered as sensitive personal data (children's health) according to Swedish law (SFS 2003:460). For this reason, it has been managed with particular care to protect the information. In the presentation of results, the children have been given fictitious names and we have chosen not to include information such as the child's disability or age as that might lead to their identification.

## Results

This section first describes how the children talk about their school situation in general, then how they narrate changes in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally how their lived experiences can be understood from a socio-ecological perspective.

### *Children's General Experiences of Non-Pandemic School Life*

In the interviews the focus was on children's experiences of school. The interviews started with a question about what they thought of school in general. As the aim of this article is to understand change, the non-pandemic experiences are an important backdrop: change occurs in relation to something. For this reason, we started out with the children's general description of school. Some talked about school in a positive way and pointed out that they liked to be there. The main reason for this Max expressed as follows: "*I like to be with my friends.*" The positive factors about school highlighted by the children are friends and being able to play or hang out with them during breaks. Others expressed the view that school is boring and especially highlighted different subjects such as maths or reading. Tedium is also linked to the demands placed on them. As Jenny said, it is boring to sit still and do 'school-like' things:

> "I get tired after so many years. It's the same things that come back, it's just repetition. It was fun when I was a kid."

In Jenny's description the experience of doing the same things and being expected to behave in the same way year after year is an important factor in why school is boring. Although Jenny expressed that it was “fun when she was a kid”, it is not fun anymore.

In the same way that friends make school a positive experience, the lack of friends can contribute to negative experiences. Ronja, for instance, reported that she often feels lonely in school and stays indoors during breaks listening to music. In relation to this, she described school as boring and when asked *why*, she answered:

> Because it is. I think there are loud noises. A lot of noise and fuss around...

Several of the children stressed, in line with Ronja, that school is tiring for them because of noise and rowdiness. They also refer to the situation of being together with other children in large groups the whole day as tiring. Both aspects can be seen as needs that can be related to their disability, with the school unable to meet those specific needs.

As mentioned, none of the children explicitly talked about their disability. However, several children mentioned needs or behaviours that can be understood as related to their disability. One such thing that the children talked about is the organization of schooling. One of the participating children attends a special school, while the others attend regular schools, but all have experience of special teaching arrangements. They described situations where they work outside the classroom, sometimes alone and sometimes together with other pupils. Felix described how he experienced this:

> It was boring because I was not allowed to be in the classroom or eating in the canteen.

For Felix, the experiences of working outside the classroom and not eating in the canteen are associated with loneliness and not being a part of the peer-group. For other children, these special arrangements are not associated with exclusion from the peer-group. Max explained how his and others’ needs and behaviours require a special organization of teaching. Max described his school situation in the following way:

> Max It is not the whole class [who need this arrangement], it’s more some who are specials, some who have some things happening, those who don't want it so loud.
>
> Interviewer No, do you like to sit there then?
>
> Max Yes, that is almost the only thing I have done, the whole, whole all days there [in school].

In Max’s case, this kind of special arrangement is highlighted as the ‘only’ aspect of teaching making his school experience a mainly divergent one. Also linked to the children’s disabilities and needs is the issue of support. Organization is part of this, but it can also involve extra support. Jenny, however, has experienced that the opportunities for her to get the support that she needs are limited:

> I would like specialized help. There are not enough people who can help. Other things for those who speak different languages you can't afford. The school is poor. [I] would need things but they keep saying, we can’t afford it.

Overall, all the children describe a school situation where they are used to some kind of struggle, either to fit in with the demands of school, to find motivation or to cope with noise. This paints a general picture of daily life in school as something that can be experienced and interpreted in different ways, and which ultimately also affects how the pandemic itself is experienced by the participating children.

### *Children’ School Experience Related to the Pandemic*

In this section the children’s experiences of the pandemic period are presented with the focus on how everyday life in school changed. This is described from four different aspects.

#### *The Phases of COVID 19: From Something New to Something That Became Ordinary Life*

When the children talk about life during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recurrently described in terms of different phases. The children reported that in the beginning there was a feeling of uncertainty because nobody knew how to manage the situation or what would happen. Worry was a central aspect that could occupy them a lot and also affect their concentration in school. Felix said that in the beginning of the pandemic he was afraid that he would become ill and not be able to take care of himself. He also mentioned a fear of becoming sick and vomit when he was in school and that nobody would be able to help him. This kind of uncertainty about the consequences and impact of the disease is mainly present when children talk about the beginning of the pandemic.

Even if some of the children described worries of becoming ill themselves, they more commonly addressed concerns for family members becoming ill or even dying. Max said:

> So, when I heard that they got like the ‘middle Covid’, I thought it was the extreme Covid, I was about to start crying. I thought they were going to die.

In the excerpt above, Max refers to worries he had when his parent got ill. Another group of the children, for example Alma and Maja, expressed concern for their elderly relatives, especially grandparents. Those children who had contact with elderly relatives on a regular basis pre-pandemic reported that this changed dramatically after its outbreak. Being occupied with this kind of worry made it harder to focus on school.

> Apart from the uncertainty, the children also described the constant presence of the disease in everyday life at the beginning of the pandemic. Max for instance said:
>
> Yes, it was everywhere – on the internet, the news and even the streets.” After this first phase of uncertainty and constant presence, COVID-19 became a part of ordinary life.

Kalle explained:

> After a while, it became a normal thing, and the vaccine came, and they actually managed to fix it.

These phases are evident in Kalle’s and Max’s stories. Kalle describes how the initial anxiety was replaced by a less disruptive phase due to the vaccine (“they fixed it”). In addition to changes such as vaccines and children gaining more experience of what the disease meant, it is also possible to understand the phase change in relation to time. Because of the extension in time of the COVID-19, the disease and the restrictions that followed it can be described as becoming the ‘new normal’ as the children simply got used to it, something that is also addressed by Kalle. This is also reflected in how the children were able to manage school.

### *New Routines and Rules in School*

Even if the children talked about how their daily life was affected by the pandemic in different ways, it is also evident that the fact of the schools staying mostly open contributed to a feeling of less drastic change. When asked about COVID-change, Maja answered “No, it was the same in school, but the teachers were more absent. And so were the children, there could be like four of us there.” The school was thus perceived as a place that was simultaneously the same and changing.

The change was, however, hard to describe as some of the changes became normalized over time and remained after the pandemic. Something that recurred in the children’s stories was descriptions of changed routines. The children described how new routines were established in school when the pandemic hit. The changes are closely connected to the requirement to socially distance and avoid infections. One specific place where new routines were implemented was the canteen, where the children were no longer allowed take food themselves and where they had to sit in designated areas or seats. Several children described how they had to queue and never share water-cups with friends. The routines were also described in terms of things that *had to be done*, i.e., a joint effort to keep the disease in check. Prominently highlighted in the stories are the use of hand sanitisers and repeatedly having to wash your hands. Handwashing is mentioned by all the children. Moa illustrated this by sharing her experiences of how often they had to wash their hands:

> You kind of had to wash your hands when you got there [school], after the lesson, before the break, after the break, before lunch, after lunch and before the break and when we came in again.

These descriptions of washing hands show how routinized the school days became during the pandemic as much of the school day was about following hygiene requirements and avoiding being too close to others. Apart from this, changes in routines were mainly about things that could *not* be done, described by the children as a lack of certain elements in their everyday school life such as activity days or certain events such as Christmas celebrations being cancelled.

Home Became School

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the relationship between school and home changed as some schools closed temporarily or because the children were expected to follow lessons when they were home sick. To begin with, following schoolwork from home was a new situation, described by Jenny as follows:

> Jenny: It was kind of nice because then you could sit in your pyjamas and have school and take care of yourself. You could sit there and listen and chill, but it was a bit difficult too because yes...
>
> InterviewerDo you remember what was difficult?
>
> Jenny When you were supposed to do some text. It was difficult to know how to do the text, difficult to start.

Jenny's answers point to a duality in this new situation. On the one hand, home schooling felt more relaxed and 'chilled'; on the other, it was more difficult as she did not have the same sense of structure and support from the teachers. Both these aspects recur in other children's stories as well.

One of the children, Kalle, experienced school closure, with his class having to follow online teaching during this period. He said "In the second part of winter, we had to work from home. It was the most stressful time." When asked why, he replied:

> It was really difficult, you had to share your screen and then show the tasks that you needed help with. And it was really difficult because the teacher had to do the same thing when explaining [...] it like bugs a lot because you have to consider that you are connected to 20 people from lots of different places, and it was very difficult with the internet because it could just crash sometimes.

In homeschooling the children were supposed to take part of their lessons online. Kalle's description shows the difficulties for both the children and teachers in organizing this type of teaching. Kalle further explained that it was especially challenging to organize your time when doing schoolwork from home:

> Yes, but it was very chaotic because sometimes you didn't know which teachers you should have, you had to make your own appointments so

> you had to keep track of which teachers and what time, and then it wasn’t like you had a set time for lunch, so sometimes you might have lunch in the middle of a lesson. So, it was pretty loose with that.

Jenny highlighted similar difficulties organizing schoolwork on her own. She also pointed out that it was difficult to get help from the teachers when working from home:

> It was bad to be at home when others [in the family] were at home and sick. Now you have to do this and this. They [teachers] didn’t always explain and it was difficult when you got materials home. It was better to be at school if I wasn’t ill. Better to be at school because then you get help in a different way.

### *Everyday Life Slowed Down*

The COVID-19 pandemic was described not solely in negative terms as it also gave opportunities to slow down, according to the children. For some of them, school in general is pressing and the fact that they had to stay at home when experiencing symptoms helped them to cope with its demands. The pandemic meant that it was easier to stay home as nobody reacted as it had become more of an expected practice to stay home for minor illnesses or symptoms. Jenny also admitted that “*I wanted to get sick so I could stay at home.”* This could be interpreted as her gaining some control over her situation by using the pandemic restrictions to her advantage. In addition, the pandemic school situation with fewer pupils present due to illness and restrictions could sometimes make school attendance easier to cope with for the children as it was perceived as calmer. Something that Maja emphasized as a positive aspect of the pandemic was that they did not have to change for PE lessons and shower afterwards. It was one of the things that she usually found stressful and that created anxiety as it could be rowdy at times. In all, the children described a variety of experiences that contributed to reduced pressure in their everyday life.

### *A Socio-Ecological Understanding of Children’s Everyday Pandemic Life*

To understand the changes of everyday life, we use Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological model. When the children talk, their lived experiences first and foremost take place at the micro- and meso-level. Their descriptions of change are related to what happens close to them, and it is at these levels that they can experience change. In addition to describing change in specific micro-systems, it is also clear that they link changes in different micro-systems to each other, making the meso-level important for their lived experience. For example, norms of the home and the school intersect when dealing with homeschooling, changing the relationship between home and school as a direct consequence of pandemic measures. At the same time, we can see explicit references to exo- and macro-levels when the children describe their experiences as a consequence of the global pandemic and how restrictions and guidelines are implemented on national level and how this seeps down and is interpreted on the school level.

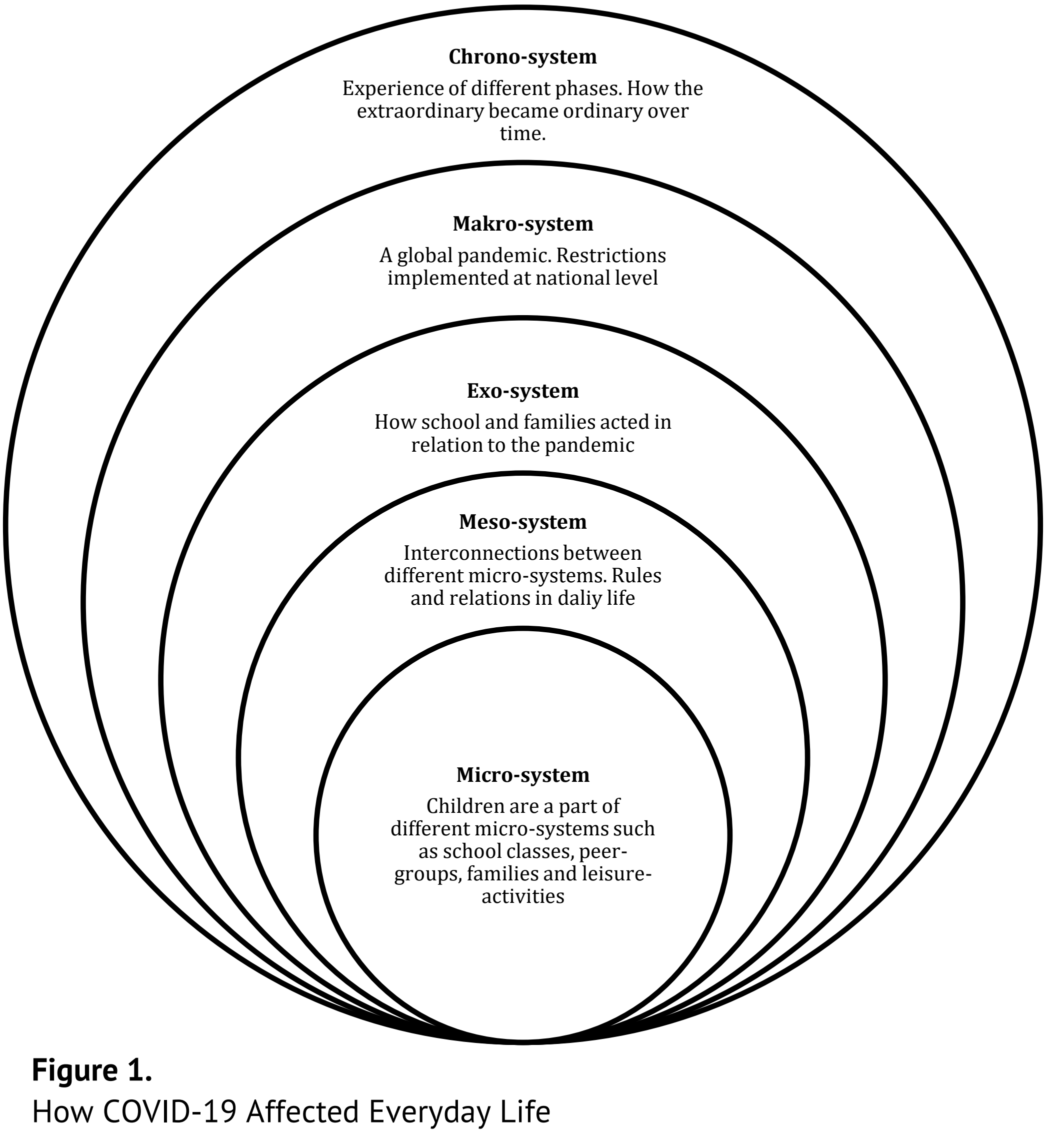

**Figure 1.**
How COVID-19 Affected Everyday Life

When Kalle talk about how "*they fixed it*" or Moa about how you "*kind of had to wash your hands*", this can be interpreted as connections between their lived experiences and what happens on the macro- and exo-levels. To fully understand the children's lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the socio-ecological model can thus provide a tool to understand how events on different levels seep into the children's everyday lives, but also how the children connect their lived experiences to what happens on different levels. To understand the role the pandemic played in children's lives, the chrono-level is also central. As shown, the pandemic period was not a singular or cohesive period for children but was understood as

> how children experienced it, while over time it became 'a normal thing'. It can therefore be assumed that *when* things happened is important, but also that events are given meaning in retrospect.

### Discussion

The article contributes to our understanding of how children with disabilities experienced everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the interpretation of the participating children's main concerns about pandemic school life, the descriptions of change are most prominent. In school, the changes meant that routines were implemented regarding, for instance, where they could sit in the canteen or that special activities such as Christmas celebrations were cancelled. Overall, this can be interpreted as challenging and a more boring everyday life as 'special' activities and close relationships were removed. The results show that although the children's lived pandemic environment is mainly described in challenging terms, the pandemic also provided some opportunities for the children, with school becoming calmer, for example, or the disease restrictions providing opportunities to take a time-out. Several children reported in positive terms that it was more acceptable to stay at home for a few days during the pandemic when the school day was under pressure. Some also experienced increased pupil absence during the pandemic as positive as they felt that they were getting help and that things were calmer. To understand this as a positive change, it needs to be contrasted with the fact that school is not normally perceived as calm, the support perceived as insufficient. Another example of this is that several children had already experienced exclusion at school before the pandemic, so it was something that did not change but rather simply continued.

The lived experience expressed by the children in this study is in many ways in line with how children (often without disabilities) in previous studies have described the pandemic years. Several of the changes are similar to what children around the world (Graber et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2021) and in Sweden (Sarkadi et al., 2021) have described, such as a sense of insecurity and a lack of social relationships. At the same time, the results indicate that the children's disabilities contributed to some changes being experienced as more difficult. Organizing their school day during home-schooling or coping with unclear routines during home-schooling are example of experiences where pandemic conditions and disabilities intersect. The children who had experienced working a lot from home, either because their school was temporarily closed or because they or their family members were ill, described this as difficult. Other studies show that self-organization was experienced as difficult by younger children in general (Wistoft et al., 2020), but for children with disabilities self-organization might be even more difficult.

All children who participated in the study show an understanding of what the pandemic meant and can specifically identify how life changed for them. The older children in particular could clearly articulate this by talking about different phases of the pandemic or that they felt worried for people around them. This shows an awareness of the disease and its consequences (cf. Thompson et al., 2021; Bray et al., 2021a, 2021b). This also shows how the children’s lived experiences must be understood as temporally situated as everyday life was reconstructed in relation to the phases described by the children. The children also describe how the pandemic became part of everyday life, having initially been seen as something unsettling and threatening to it. Everyday life during the pandemic is thus not a uniform experience but something that changes, and it is also clear how changes at the societal level became part of the children’s lived experiences.

The article is based on a limited set of data and the results cannot therefore be generalized.

The study also reflects a specific national context – the Swedish one – which, in some respects, adopted a different strategy than many other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, as primary schools largely remained open. This makes the Swedish context particularly important to study due to its uniqueness, while also suggesting that the experiences of Swedish children may be difficult to generalise to other contexts.

Another limitation of the study is that the interviews were conducted retrospectively, at a time when the children had gained some distance from their experiences during the pandemic. This may have made it difficult for them to recall specific events accurately. At the same time, we found that the retrospective nature of the interviews also offered an advantage, as it allowed the participating children to look back and reflect, thereby placing their experiences within a broader context.

However, the results are an important contribution to overall knowledge of what the COVID-19 pandemic meant in children’s lives and how a pervasive event at the global level, through national decisions and local practices, became everyday life for children. It is also important to highlight that while things like staying home are described in positive terms by the children, research indicates that these could have been stressful for their parents (e.g. Canning & Robinson, 2021; Karnas, Alpaydın & Eker 2023). Despite its limitations, the study is an important contribution as children with disabilities are given a voice. Their experiences can contribute to knowledge of children’s everyday life in general and to specific knowledge about this group of children.

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