

**Co-production confusion: An  
exploration of parent and SENCO  
experiences of participatory decision-  
making in the management of  
Education, Health and Care plans**

**by**

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**Thesis submitted to Canterbury Christ Church University for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**2024**

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**Word Count:** 97,748

## Abstract

Partnership working with parents has a long history in Special Educational Needs and Inclusion policies and legislation, from Warnock (DES, 1978) through to the current proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). However, participatory decision-making, and practices fostering co-production, have failed to be consistently established and embedded within education across England (Boddison and Soan, 2021), resulting in persistent dissatisfaction and low parental confidence in the system (Sales and Vincent, 2018; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019). Critical reviews of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system have highlighted these inadequacies and have endorsed co-production as a way to address the challenges because 'the best performing SEND systems are those with a consistent focus on co-production' (DfE/DoHSC, 2022: 75). Therefore, this study sought to provide greater understanding of parents' and SENCOs' experiences of 'co-production' and their perspectives on participatory decision-making in applying for and managing Education, Health and Care plans.

An initial scoping questionnaire to parents (n.76) and SENCOs (n.84) was followed by seven semi-structured interviews analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. IPA was selected to foreground the individuals' experiences, including member-checking of the analytic process. Points of convergence and divergence gave insights on the wider challenges parents and SENCOs face understanding and enacting co-production as envisaged in the SEND reforms (2014) and the current political agenda.

Findings highlighted that there is much confusion related to co-production, and the foundations for collaborative practice needs to be evident before a move towards more participatory models, such as co-production, can be considered. Three fundamental areas were identified to build the foundations of co-production. Firstly, the conceptualisation of the SENCO as a caring educationalist to oppose the performative driven agenda because co-production will not happen without *care*. Secondly, the need for effective dialogue to improve working together, with appropriate training and frameworks to enable this to happen because co-production will not happen without *communication*. Thirdly, the need for a change in power differences and the systemic structures the SEND system sits within. How we support participatory decision-making is of primary importance because co-production will not happen without *choice*.

These findings not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge on partnership working, but also provide new knowledge relevant to the development of co-productive practices between parents and SENCOs. The findings are relevant to school leaders, local authorities, and policy makers in planning the current government agenda for wider implementation of co-production (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) because 'every year that passes without a well-functioning SEND system is another year of a child's education that is failing' (House of Lords, 2022: 92).

## Acknowledgements

Firstly and foremost I want to recognise the participants for my study. They have shared very personal accounts which have been emotionally significant. Throughout the time I have been working on the thesis, it has been the return to their accounts which has kept me motivated and driven to ensure that I complete the research and share their very important experiences. I have been empowered by their courage in sharing their accounts. I now hope that others who read the thesis can also be empowered by their voices, so collectively change for the better can be taken forward.

I have been privileged to work with such supportive supervisors who were continually encouraging me even at the most challenging points during my research journey. Their passion, and their willingness to share their professional and personal stories related to the subject area I have been researching, has been inspirational. Their critical questions posed at the right times has been invaluable to support my development as a researcher.

My family are my foundations. Each time I finished a course, I told them it would be the last time I would be undertaking study alongside work, family commitments and life, but then, in an instant I would be signed up for another course. They have been with me all the way, providing endless encouragement to continue on the journey and fulfil my dreams of studying for a PhD.



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## Glossary and list of acronyms

**Child** – the term child has been used to represent the child or young person.

**EHC needs assessment** – Education, Health and Care needs assessment. This is the legal process that local authorities must apply according to the *Children and Families Act (2014)*.

**EHC needs assessment and planning process** – Is the phrase used to refer to the application process for an EHC plan, as well as reference to management of the EHC plan which happens after it has been issued.

**EHCP or EHC plan** - Education Health and Care plan

**High needs funding** - High needs funding is specific funding schools can apply to their local authority for when children in their schools who have more significant needs requiring higher levels of financial support beyond the notional SEN budget (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2023).

**IPA** – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**LA** – Local Authority

**LEA** – Local Education Authority

**Parent/s** – the term parent/s refers to both parents and carers of children with SEN/SEND (this includes formal and informal arrangements where there are caring responsibilities in place).

**Professionals** – The term professionals is used to represent the wider professions beyond the SENCOs role which children and families might be working with as part of the EHC needs assessment and resultant management of the plan.

**SEN** – Special Educational Needs

**SENCO** – Special Educational Needs Coordinator

**SEND** – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. This term has been more commonly used in recent practice and since the SEND reforms in 2014. I have used the term SEN unless there is a reason for using SEND, such as referring to the SEND reforms in 2014, or referring to more recent developments.

**SEND Code of Practice** – *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015)*

**SENDIASS** – SEND Information, Advice and Support Services. This service has not been anonymised in the data because it is a national service and so the location, or any individuals involved, cannot be identified.

**Statutory Assessment** – is referred to in relation to the legal process that local authorities must apply during the period prior to the legislative change, effected through the *Children and Families Act (2014)*. Post this period, the term 'EHC needs assessment' is used.

# 1. Chapter 1 - Introduction

## 1.1 Research outline

This chapter will provide the rationale, aims and approach to this study in order to answer the question: **‘What are parents’ and SENCOs’ experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?’**

The phrase ‘EHC needs assessment and planning process’ has been used to refer to the application process for an EHC plan, as well as reference to management of the EHC plan which happens after it has been issued. This terminology has been used to align to the current legislation (*Children and Families Act, 2014*), which endorses participatory decision-making as part of the EHC needs assessment process and ongoing planning and management of the EHC plan for children with more significant needs.

Parents are key to the educational success of their children (EEF, 2018; Axford *et al.*, 2019). Co-production is a relatively new term in education (Soan and Monsen, 2023), but an important shift culturally and aligned to the increased rights for parents and participatory decision-making advanced as part of the SEND reforms (2014). A key focus of these changes in 2014 was on improving parental confidence in the system and, as a result, reducing the requests for EHC needs assessment (DfE, 2011). However, since the reforms, the requests for EHC needs assessment, the numbers of EHC plans being issued, dissatisfaction in the SEND system and costly tribunals have increased (Local Government Association, 2022; DfE/DoHSC, 2023; Jemal and Kenley, 2023; Marsh, 2023). It is proposed that participatory decision-making is not clearly evident in current practice despite being a legal requirement (*Children and Families Act, 2014*) and this is resulting in inequalities in the experiences of families and ultimately leading to poor outcomes for children. It is important to understand why there is a lack of opportunities for participatory decision-making to ensure that the voices of both parents and SENCOs are not being marginalised or disempowered. Therefore, this aspect of education is researched in this study to gain a better awareness of what is happening in practice and what is contributing to the challenges parents and SENCOs continue to face.

The system does not currently sufficiently meet the needs of all children and their families (DfE/DoHSC, 2022). Unfortunately, the reality is that ‘parents know that their children are entitled to something, but they have to work too hard to access this entitlement and are left exhausted in the pursuit of it’ (HoCEC, 2019: 19). It is hoped that through exploring parents’ and SENCOs’ experiences of co-production, the information gained could be used to support policy and developments in relation to participatory decision-making and provide guidance on the direction for the EHC needs assessment process and management of EHC plans.

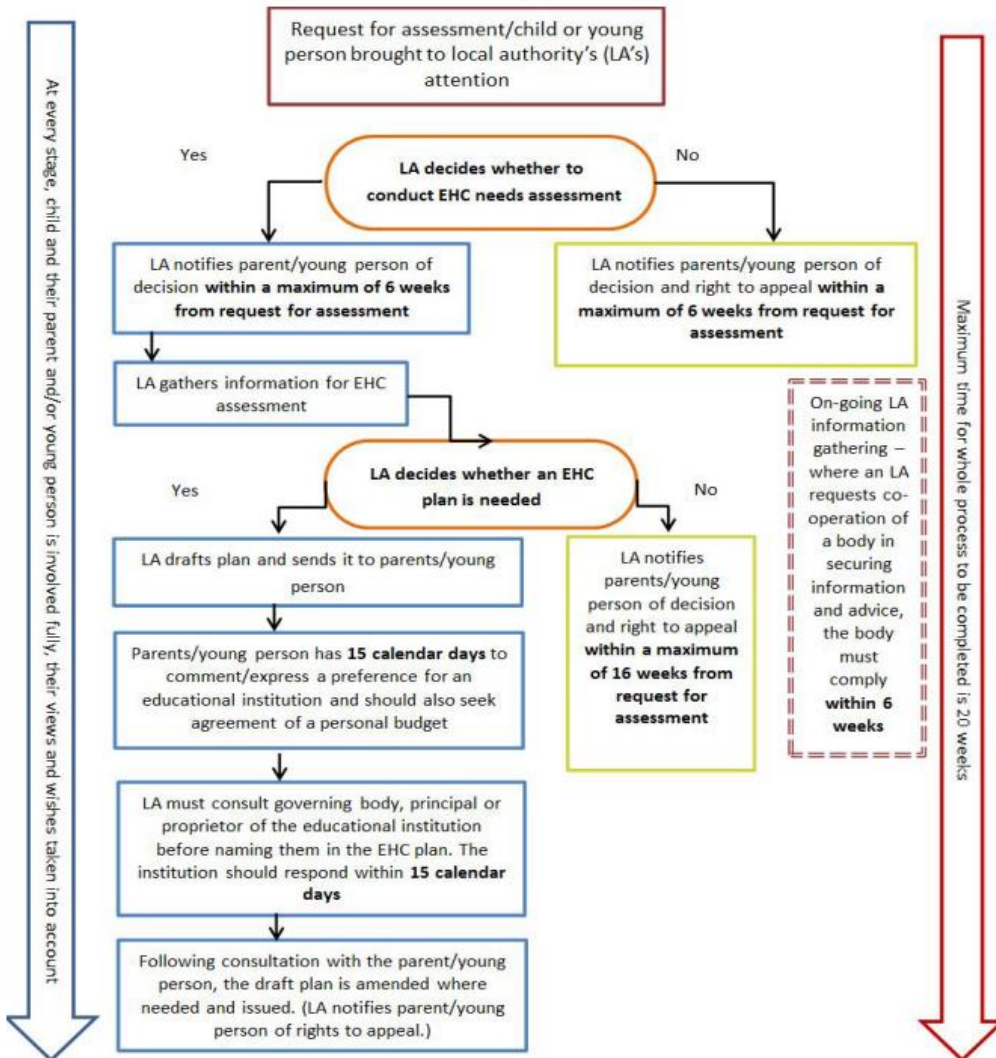
## 1.2 Context for the research

The current national context for SEND has been subject to continued criticisms (HoCEC, 2019; National Audit Office, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). These criticisms of the reformed system serve to highlight the importance of understanding parental perceptions of the SEND system and the use of co-production as a way professionals (specifically SENCOs) can support improved confidence levels. The ‘principles in practice’ (DfE/DoH, 2015: 19) in the *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice* (hereafter referred to as the SEND Code of Practice), detail the local authorities' duty to involve children or young people and their parents in discussions and decision making, and the requirement that they are provided with information, advice and support to enable them to do so. Additionally, schools should ensure ‘parents are actively supported in contributing to needs assessments, developing and reviewing Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans’ (DfE/DoH, 2015: 19).

Although there is only one explicit reference to ‘co-production’ in the SEND Code of Practice and this is related to local authorities’ duties (DfE/DoH, 2015 :61), the principles foster a collaborative position on shared decision making and conceivably ‘envisages co-production particularly with regard to the EHC plan’ (Hellawell, 2019: 133). The guidance in the SEND Code of Practice includes reference to contributions during every stage of the 20 week EHC needs assessment process with children and parents ‘involved fully, their views and wishes taken into account’ (DfE/DoH, 2015: 154). These stages of the process outline a number of points of decision-making, illustrating how it is key for professionals to be working closely with parents throughout the process (see **Figure 1**). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge participation beyond the period of time attributed to the EHC needs assessment process to include the development of and review of the EHC plan, which is an ongoing process. Therefore, effective ways of eliciting the conditions for shared decision making, such as co-production, need to be embedded in practice as opposed to the position that parents and children’s views and wishes are only applicable at a particular stage or or a fixed period of time.

Challenges in adopting, effective approaches for the mandatory requirements to embed shared decision making have been acknowledged (Hellawell, 2019; HoCEC, 2019). During the EHC needs assessment and planning process ‘schools should enable parents to share their knowledge about their child and give them confidence that their views and contributions are valued and will be acted upon’ (DfE/DoH, 2015: 21). However, in reality, ‘[i]n some cases, parental empowerment has not happened. Children and parents are not ‘in the know’ and for some the law may not even appear to exist’ (HoCEC, 2019: 19). The evident inequalities and inadequacies of the system are important to address to ensure that we are providing fair and equitable education to all children, including those who have more complex SEND.

**Statutory timescales for EHC needs assessment and EHC plan development**



**Figure 1: Overview of the timescales and development when a request for EHC needs assessment is made (DfE/DoH, 2015: 154).**

The SEND reforms (2014) were heralded as the biggest change in 30 years (DfE and Teather, 2012) and ‘promised greater and more co-ordinated support’ (HoCEC, 2019: 19). Utilising pathfinder (pilot) approaches to trial the new procedures as evidence of improvements before then implementing the SEND reforms, the ‘Department expected that the benefits and savings would significantly outweigh the costs of moving to the new system’ (National Audit Office, 2019: 8). The proposals were that collaborative working and greater family engagement would lead to reduced costs, however the government ‘did not quantify these or validate its assumptions before implementing the changes’

(National Audit Office, 2019: 8). The evidence from the pathfinders was not sufficiently evaluated or disseminated (Hellowell, 2019) which then hampered the implementation of the changes to practice (HoCEC, 2019). The intention was that there would be fewer challenges to the local authority decisions regarding the EHC needs assessment process, and if there were challenges these could be resolved through mediation. However, the number of appeals to tribunal over SEND disagreements more than doubled, with an increase of 111 % from 2013/14 to 2020/21 (Local Government Association, 2022). So, with high expectations of improved systems and processes, but with the evidence that this is still not in place, it is important to evaluate the current situation as 10 years have now passed since the introduction of the SEND reforms of 2014.

### 1.3 Motivation and position of self

As a researcher it is important to acknowledge that personal and professional experiences will influence the study (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). My personal and professional interests lie in my role as a SENCO when the SEND reforms were consulted upon (DfE, 2011) and the subsequently introduced legislation (*Children and Families Act, 2014*). I remember feeling a sense of great hope for a reformed system which would meet needs and address the persistent issues and challenges that had been present in the system for a number of years (HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009; DfE, 2011).

A central consideration with conducting qualitative research, is that the 'researcher's identity, values and beliefs play a role in the production and analysis of qualitative data' (Denscombe, 2017: 329). The advice is to be conscious of this and to try to create distance in relation to everyday beliefs as well as suspending judgements on social issues. This is of course challenging. In my current role as lecturer for the National Award for SEN Coordination, I work closely with SENCOs and have an awareness of the increased challenges they face. I have therefore been very conscious of my personal feelings and frustration that the systems appear to, in some respects, have worsened since the reforms in 2014.

Denscombe (2017: 329) suggests that one way to address the researcher as inextricably bound to positionality is to 'come clean about the way their research agenda has been shaped by personal experiences and social backgrounds'. This is the approach I have adopted, because despite attempts to address potential biases and to 'bracket' identified assumptions, I do not believe the researcher can always successfully identify this when they are close (personally or professionally) to the study, as I am. Denscombe (2017: 329) uses the phrase 'the self is intertwined with the research process' which is the position I adopt. However, rather than see this as a constraint, it can be enabling to draw on experiences and expertise or to have an insider's view. This could be perceived as a privileged position providing an insight into social issues, and the 'researcher's self should not be regarded as a limitation to the research but as a crucial resource' (Denscombe, 2017: 329).



## 1.4 Research rationale

Despite the Government 'seeking to effect cultural and systematic change within the area of SEND' (Curran *et al.*, 2017: 46), there appears to be more parental dissatisfaction and conflict evident since the introduction of the *Children and Families Act* (2014). Some tensions have not been resolvable at a school or local authority level and have progressed to result in increased statutory assessment and tribunals (Local Government Association, 2022; Jemal and Kenley, 2023; Marsh, 2023). SEND partnership working with parents and multi-agency or inter-professional working could be perceived as 'policy solutions to identified social problems' (Hellawell, 2019: 95). The increased rights for parents to facilitate partnership working was the policy decision taken by the government in implementing the SEND reforms. Parents being involved in decision making can provide benefits (EEF, 2018; Hart, 2011; Hellawell, 2019; Lamb, 2022) yet it is not a process that can be simply applied because without the conditions for this change to take place (e.g. appropriate and relevant training and support, sufficient resources for change to take place, fostering cultural change and improved systemic processes) it will not provide the 'solution' to the 'social problems' (*ibid.*, 2019: 95) and in the current context may have caused more dissatisfaction, disillusionment and frustration. Carpenter (2000: 142) highlighted this tension: 'The challenge is to enable and empower families but are we ready to align professional practice with family need?'. The professionals working directly with families and the ways in which professional practice is taken forward is therefore central to the success of partnership working and whether this can serve to empower and enable families.

SENCOs are key people in schools, and typically the first point of contact for parents of children with special educational needs or EHC plans. In the SEND Code of Practice, the principle of 'keeping the child's parent or young person informed through a single point of contact wherever possible' is advantageous to working together (DfE/DoH, 2015: 149). The SENCOs' levels of training and understanding of co-production and shared decision-making in practice will be fundamental to parents' experiences of collaborative ways of working. It is important to recognise that ultimately the ways in which parents and SENCOs work together will influence the educational success for the children, as noted in the SEND Code of Practice:

'At times, parents, teachers and others may have differing expectations of how a child's needs are best met. Sometimes these discussions can be challenging but it is in the child's best interests for a positive dialogue between parents, teachers and others to be maintained, to work through points of difference and establish what action is to be taken.'

(DfE/DoH, 2015: 21)



Initially, it was the unexpected increase in statutory assessments which piqued my interest for this piece of research. However, my interests moved to consider confidence in the SEND system and the working relationship between parents and SENCOs during the EHC needs assessment and planning process. Lamb (2009: 79) identified that 'parental confidence in the SEN system, and in schools and Local Authorities in particular, is significantly coloured by the quality of communication and working relationships. This can also affect parents' decisions about whether or not to appeal to the Tribunal'. Relationships influence parental confidence and the ability for them to participate in making decisions about their children's education. In some cases, positive relationships lead to really successful outcomes and in some cases, this is less positive and even detrimental to outcomes for learners. The relationships between the parents and SENCOs and how this can facilitate collaborative, participatory decision-making in practice therefore is a focus of the study in order to understand the process better.

There is a gap in the knowledge related to the impact of the SEND reforms (2014) as identified by Sales and Vincent (2018: 64) who noted 'information on the success or otherwise of the reforms remains limited. The small number of evaluative studies that have been undertaken provide a mixed picture and firm conclusions cannot yet be drawn.' There is very limited research on co-production between parents and SENCOs which is important to address because it takes a central focus in the current policy and political direction (DfE, 2023a; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Essentially, the promised improvements to the SEND system have not been realised and so this is an important area of exploration for this specific research. Through use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022), this study highlights the personal lived experiences of parents and SENCOs as they navigate the EHC needs assessment and planning process with a specific focus on participatory decision-making and evidence of co-production.

### 1.5 Benefits of the research

Research into the statutory assessment process and parental engagement is not new. Wolfendale (1997) explored parental engagement in statutory assessment through analysis of the documents created by Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and Armstrong (1995) explored the relationship between the parent and the SENCO in the statutory assessment process. Yet, despite increasing interest in research on the relationships between parents and SENCOs, there is little specifically related to co-production.

Although parental views have been the focus of earlier studies, Boseley and Crane (2018: 44) claim there is a limited body of literature in this field, acknowledging their study as 'the first to examine the perspectives of a broad sample of SENCOs on the process of applying for or transferring an EHC plan.' They highlight this is an area which calls for further exploration, noting that '[t]o date, no research has

explored SENCOs' experiences of the EHC system specifically' (*ibid.*, 2018: 37). Whilst there have been studies into the views of parents in relation to the effectiveness of EHC plans, the limited research on the perspective of SENCOs is noted and so this study will seek to include views of both stakeholders. Research into the collaborative decision-making process for both parents and SENCOs is limited, often research is focused on the perspectives of just one group (e.g. just parents or just the SENCOs). This research examines both parents and SENCOs perspectives and is an important, new approach because of the focus on how they work together collaboratively.

The purpose of this study is to provide knowledge of the parents' and SENCOs experiences, in relation to a relatively new area of research, to increase awareness and understanding of the conditions for, and challenges surrounding enacting co-production in practice. Examining discourses in policy and interrelationships between parents and SENCOs will provide opportunities to explore effective approaches and could possibly lead to a number of benefits, which might include:

- development of frameworks or tools to support parents and SENCOs in effective co-production;
- how models for co-production could lead to reduced costs to public funds with fewer requests for statutory assessment and fewer tribunals;
- improved understanding of parents' experiences of the SEND system;
- greater understanding of how working relationships between parents and SENCOs can influence educational outcomes;
- improved understanding of the conditions and requirements for SENCOs to be able to support families and children;
- recommendations for policymakers / local authorities in relation to monitoring their practice generally and as required for Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) SEND monitoring visits (Ofsted and CQC, 2024).

## 1.6 Research aims and question

This study aims to provide an in depth understanding of the experiences of parents and their relationships with professionals (specifically SENCOs) when taking forward a request for an EHC needs assessment and then the relationship working together as they navigate the management of the EHC plan.

There is one overarching question for the study, which is:

**'What are parents' and SENCOs' experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?'**

Some of the areas I am interested in exploring in relation to this question include:

- the personal experiences of parents and SENCOs as co-producers in navigating the EHC needs assessment and planning process;
- the ways parents and SENCOs are equipped (e.g. access to information / training / support) in effecting co-production in practice;
- the ways in which the introduction of the *Children and Families Act* (2014) may have impacted on the balance of influence between parents and SENCOs.

There is currently much critique of SEN policy and practices (National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022; DfE/DoHSC, 2023) yet this often generalises the experiences of parents and professionals and can provide a homogeneous reflection of the system. My aim is to foreground marginalised voices to justly understand their experiences and ensure this is closely examined in relation to the current context. The aim of this research is to understand the lived experience of both parents and SENCOs.

## 1.7 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is summarised here and provides a clear rationale for the purpose of each chapter. Within the chapters of the thesis, I have included reflexive boxes which represent the reflective process throughout the stages of the research. Typically, the reflexive boxes feature when the contents are particular to that chapter or point in the study. This approach is explained more fully in the methodology chapter, with a rationale for adopting this way to present the reflections on the study and research process.

### 1.7.1 Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter includes a context for the study including the position of the researcher and motivations behind conducting the research on the experiences of parents' and SENCOs' participatory decision-making in the EHC needs assessment and management of EHC plans. The rationale and relevance for this study is outlined as well as the possible benefits of the research. The research aims and the research question are outlined, followed by a short summary of each chapter in the thesis.

### 1.7.2 Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Chapter 2 provides a context and background to the developments in policy and practice evident in the literature related to parents' opportunities for participatory decision-making and the SENCOs role in the process. The approach to reviewing literature is discussed. Overall themes identified in the literature include: the educational climate and tensions impacting on parents and SENCOs; the

influence of power in partnership working; models for working together including co-production and an exploration of participatory decision-making.

### 1.7.3 Chapter 3 – Methodology

Chapter 3 outlines the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher and why specific methodological approaches were selected for this study. The overall research design is depicted with a rationale for the selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the main approach for the study alongside other methods selected to compliment this approach. Ethical considerations are discussed, as well as some consideration of the limitations for IPA and how this can be mitigated.

### 1.7.4 Chapter 4 – Findings and analysis

This chapter includes different sections for different stages of the research process. The stages were linear in the ways in which they were applied in the study because each stage is dependent on the preceding stage as outline below:

- Stage One – Scoping questionnaire to parents and SENCOs
- Stage Two – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: The participants for Stage Two were identified from respondents to the questionnaire in Stage One
- Stage Three – The Hermeneutic Process: A return to all the data as a final stage of analysis

Key findings from each stage of the research are shared sequentially, which then informs the discussion in Chapter 5.

### 1.7.5 Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter is framed around the re-conceptualisation of the original research question into three more specific research questions which have been identified from the findings and analysis of data in the preceding chapter. The discussion is presented in response to these three research questions drawing on policy, literature and theory to support exploration of the findings.

### 1.7.6 Chapter 6 – Conclusions

This final chapter summarises the response to the original research question for the study and outlines the new contributions to knowledge based on the findings of the research. Implications for future policy and practice are identified along with recommendations. A final reflection is included which refers to the position of the researcher and the research journey. Finally, the limitations of the study are identified followed by consideration of possible future research in the field.

## 2. Chapter 2 - Literature Review

### 2.1 Aims and search methods

This chapter reviews the past and current policy and practice in the literature related to parents opportunities for participatory decision-making, the SENCOs role in the process and different models for working together, including co-production. Initially I define key terms and explore the context and developments in policy and legislation related to parental rights alongside the developing role of the SENCO in working with parents. Core themes are then explored, such as the neoliberalist positioning of SEN and power differentials impacting upon working in partnership. Lastly, models of partnership working are explored to consider how this enables participatory decision-making.

#### 2.1.1 Search methods

Literature for the thesis was originally sought using a systematic search method with selection and deselection of key terms and dates using the following data sources:

- Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC)
- British Education Index
- Child Development and Adolescent Studies

However, this approach led to very limited results and limited the ability to draw on ‘grey literature’ (Sage Research Methods, 2017: np) such as the wider sources including legislation, reports and governmental policy documents (**Appendix A**). The approach was therefore adapted to include wider relevant sources. This meant utilising the internet to locate relevant sources in the public domain such as legislation, government guidance and relevant reports or independent reviews. Additionally, the publications identified from the systematic search method formed the bases for citation reference searches: “Citation pearl searching’ or ‘citation pearl growing’ means taking the few results that you do have and using them to identify more relevant papers’ (De Brún and Pearce-Smith, 2013: 98). The reference lists of these papers helped to widen the scope of literature to inform this literature review.

### 2.2 Background to SEN and the statutory assessment process

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms in 2014 in England introduced Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. This replaced Statements of Special Educational Needs when statutory assessment is agreed for children and young people with the most complex and significant needs. The term ‘statutory assessment’ is referred to in relation to the period prior to the legislative change, effected through the *Children and Families Act (2014)*. Post this period, the term ‘EHC needs assessment’ is used.

### 2.2.1 Definition of SEN and SEND

The term Special Educational Needs (SEN) was introduced by the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) with the intention of moving away from historic labelling and categorisation of children to a broader and more positive approach. Prior to this report, legally subscribed terms, such as ‘handicapped’ or ‘maladjusted’, represented the educational difficulty as being within the child. This was challenged by the position that a wider range of children (who may not necessarily have a diagnosis) may also need special educational provisions at some point during their education. The focus was on the improvement in educational experience and viewing children with differences in the same way as any other child might be viewed. This approach meant the needs of a learner could be identified on a continuum rather than with a ‘fixed’ point by which services may or may not be allocated.

The *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (2001) brought together regulations related to SEN and disabilities. Subsequently, the overall acronym ‘SEND’ has been used and is evident in the current legislation (*Children and Families Act*, 2014). However, SEN and Disability are not the same, and it is important to recognise the difference in these definitions (**Appendix B**). In the EHC needs assessment process, some children may have both SEN and disabilities; however, it is also the case that children may have one without the other. Therefore, the term SEN will be used in this study unless there is a specific reason for using SEND, such as reference to the SEND reforms of 2014, more recent policy and practice (where this term is more appropriate), or if an individual may have a disability that should be acknowledged.

### 2.2.2 History of SEN legislation in relation to statutory assessment and associated parental rights

Rights are a social construct and could be considered as ‘systematically derived ethical principles or social values’ (Dean, 2004: 7). With this in mind, they will be interpretable and changeable overtime, and may encompass a broad range of aspects, including civil, social, economic, cultural or legal rights. This section of the chapter will explore societal changes and legislative changes that may have impacted upon human and disability rights, but specifically focusing on parental rights in the statutory assessment process.

#### 2.2.2.1 Pre-Warnock

Prior to the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) children who found education more challenging were medically categorised and segregated in specialist provision rather than being afforded the same rights as their peers who were deemed to be ‘educable’ and able to access State schools. This medical

model<sup>1</sup> of categorisation with medical professionals positioned as the authority in determining which children would have access to specialist provisions could be seen as historically disempowering parents in this system (Armstrong, 1995). Internationally, there were societal developments to address such practices. In America, in the 1960s the Kennedy and Johnson administration saw changes to the mental health and disability policy which led to alignment with disability rights movements. Activists were more keenly aware of the inequalities, politicised and better educated than past generations and these ‘diverse array of groups questioned America’s attitudes towards its “hidden minority”’ (Erkulwater, 2006: 48).

The societal movements at international level heightened the awareness of the lack of voice for parents with regards to education for children with additional needs and disabilities. The resultant rise of disability rights groups in the 1960s and 1970s began to challenge decisions taken by authorities which may be perceived as unfair and prejudicial, such as children with more complex needs being placed in residential care, sometimes at great distances from their families (Hodkinson, 2019). It was not until the introduction of the *Education (Handicapped Children) Act* (1970) that all children classified as ‘handicapped’ were afforded the right to be educated in schools. This led to the responsibility for these children being transferred from health services to Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Synchronously, politically driven activists were supporting the development of a political ideology on disability that summoned rights of equal citizenship. The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) were prominent, and Shakespeare (2014:11) claims central, in foregrounding the ‘strong social model’<sup>2</sup> in England at this time. This mobilisation in societal attitudes and the greater demands on the LEAs placed further pressures on the government to review the provisions for children with additional needs, which gave rise to a committee, led by Mary Warnock, being established in 1973.

#### *2.2.2.2 The inception of the statutory assessment process*

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) heralded a move toward the social model with a view to integrating children with SEN in ‘ordinary’ (mainstream) schools. The report proposed Statements of Special Educational Needs, which were brought into effect with the introduction of the *Education Act* (1981). This included the principle of safeguarding resources and provisions for those children with the most complex SEN when attending mainstream schools through the statutory assessment of their needs. If this process was deemed necessary, the issuing of a statement (statementing) would detail the specific

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<sup>1</sup> The medical model of disability tends to consider barriers as emanating from an impairment within the individual and considers what can be done to ‘fix’ or ‘cure’ the individual.

<sup>2</sup> The social model of disability tends to attribute barriers as emanating from society e.g. infrastructures, the physical built environment, policies and attitudes etc.

educational requirements for that individual. Therefore, the statementing of children became necessary in place of the categorisation of the past, to aid the transition from the separate specialist provisions into mainstream schools.

Alongside the commitment to educating children with SEN with their peers whenever possible, the principles of effective relationships with parents were evident throughout the report (DES, 1978). The inclusion of Chapter 9, 'Parents as Partners', from the onset, illustrates the commitment to valuing parents as equal partners by calling for 'full involvement' in their child's education (DES, 1978: 150). There is also recognition that parents are not a homogeneous group and they may 'differ widely in their attitudes, temperament, insight, knowledge, ability and other personal qualities' (DES, 1978: 151). Consideration of this diversity is acknowledged as powerfully influencing 'the extent and nature of the help that they require' (DES, 1978: 151) and so highlights how critical it is for professionals to accommodate parents' needs or differences as carefully as they would plan for the child's needs or differences. With the new focus on principles of multi-agency working to provide holistic support for children, the professionals involved are central in supporting and building effective relationships with parents. This way of working makes demands on the professionals' time and requires genuine opportunity for dialogue with parents, all of which was acknowledged in the report. Although the principles and framework for effective parental engagement were laid out, the implementation in practice has given rise to issues which will be explored in this section. Warnock warned against this danger, noting that unless effective parental engagement was realised in practice the 'purpose of our report will be frustrated' (DES, 1978: 150).

The 1981 *Education Act* secured rights for parents which had not previously been in place, such as: the right to be part of the statutory assessment process within a multi-agency team; access to the information produced by professionals and the opportunity to appeal decisions taken through local appeals committees. However, under this statutory assessment process, parental rights were not necessarily implemented as originally envisaged in the Warnock Report (DES, 1978). The LEA had the autonomy over which children would be assessed. If a parental request was made for statutory assessment the LEA did not need to pursue this if an assessment had taken place within the last 6 months, or if it was 'in their opinion unreasonable' (*Education Act*, 1981: 8). The LEA would determine statutory assessment of needs and inform parents by 'serving notice' (*ibid.*, 1981: 8). Parents had the right to provide information but could only contribute through a written response, which could immediately limit which parents were able to be meaningfully involved in the process. Furthermore, although there was an appeal process in place, the local appeals committees were not able to overrule LEA decisions. So, although there were greater rights for parents, the decision making was still firmly



in the control of those operating the system and holding the resources. This could be argued as undermining the principles of the Warnock Report (1978: 150) in not enabling the legal structures for parents to be 'equal partners in the educational process'. Not only does this illustrate the inequality within the partnership, it also highlights a potential conflict of interest if the authority determining assessment is the authority controlling the resources.

A key development introduced with the *Education Act (1993)* was an independent tribunal process owing to the number of disputes between LEAs and parents being raised with the Secretary of State. Yet, despite this change, the LEA still maintained the autonomy over decision making in proceeding with statutory assessment. For example, the *Education Act (1993)* stated the LEA would comply with parental requests where it is necessary to take forward statutory assessment under section 167. However, this section reinforced the autonomy of the LEA, because the assessment would only take place if they were 'of the opinion' it was required (*Education Act, 1993: 106*). Parents were therefore at risk of facing the same barriers they faced with the earlier *Education Act (1981)*. The newly introduced tribunal system may have provided safeguards against possible corruption, but instead of providing equitable measures and impartiality, this could have been perceived as another 'bureaucratic gateway' to accessing additional resources (Armstrong, 1995: 20).

Although the LEA, could be seen as dominant in the statutory assessment process (*Education Act, 1981; Education Act, 1993*) wider developments at school level meant that the LEAs were 'visibly withering away' (Warnock, Norwich and Terzi, 2010: 28). Funding and resources were devolved to schools and governing bodies took on greater responsibilities (*Education Reform Act, 1988; Education Act, 1996*), yet the LEA still maintained statutory duties with regards to the statutory assessment process. This included overall responsibility for monitoring and ensuring what was outlined on the statement was in place and effective. This caused tensions due to the LEA having responsibility for the provision but less control over the budget and resources. Previously resources could be shared across schools, but now the organisational change devolving funding into the schools meant this was no longer an option (Warnock, Norwich and Terzi, 2010). Arguably, parents' relationships with schools became more important in effecting the provisions outlined in a Statement of Special Educational Needs. Guidance for schools was introduced, with the first *Code of Practice for Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (DfE, 1994) which also led to the inception of the role of the SENCO.

In 2001, the *Special Education Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)* strengthened the regulations on providing advice and information for parents including a duty on governing bodies in schools to inform parents when SEN provision was being made for their children. In addition, there was a duty on LEAs

to appoint an independent person to try and avoid or resolve disputes between the LEA and parents before progressing to the tribunal service. The *SEN (information) Act (2008)* amended the *Education Act (1996)* to include further consideration of information for parents in relation to SEN by including communication through an annual publication. Yet, despite the seemingly improved communication *for parents* during this period of change, it did not seem to be fostering improvements in communication *with parents*.

The statutory assessment process was not operating as originally envisioned even with developments and changes in legislation to address the emerging issues. What was originally intended as a safeguard for the children with most complex needs in mainstream schools (DES, 1978) had conversely, possibly evolved into a ticket to access the specialist provisions of specialist placement (Warnock, Norwich and Terzi, 2010). The House of Commons Select Committee (2006: 6) stated the system was 'no longer fit for purpose' and called for a new approach.

### 2.2.3 The challenges and necessity for a new system

By 2010, persistent issues with the SEN system had been highlighted (Armstrong, 1995; Warnock, 2005; HoC, 2006; Lamb 2009; Ofsted, 2010) which included the following challenges regarding the statutory assessment process:

- children and families were not central to the process
- it was overly bureaucratic
- access was inequitable and to some parents the process may even be inaccessible
- the system was overly complex
- there was inconsistency in the allocation of resources
- there was a lack of collaborative practices
- there was a lack of information or in some cases misinformation
- the process was costly and lacked evidence for effective outcomes for learners

In response, the labour government commissioned a review of SEN, which was honoured by the coalition government when they came to power in 2010, and the proposed changes were consulted upon in the Green Paper *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability – consultation* (DfE, 2011). There was recognition that the statutory assessment process needed to have a greater focus on the voice of the child and parents and that this would provide a more effective process, which would hopefully lead to improved outcomes. The proposal was to include an Education Health and Care Plan (EHC plan) in place of the Statement of SEN which was welcomed by those who contributed to the consultation. Of those who responded, 42 % felt that the

new system would be favourable to parents because they would not need to repeat information to different professionals and almost a third felt it would reduce costs (DfE, 2012).

### *2.2.3.1 Children and Families Act (2014) and parental rights*

The new EHC plans (and transition to plans for those who held a Statement) came into effect from September 2014. The new EHC plans differed from Statements in a number of ways including:

- the increased age range from 0 to 25 years for EHC needs assessment
- greater emphasis on aspirations and outcomes rather than objectives
- greater focus on the participation of children and parents in decision making (e.g. co-producers)
- close co-operation<sup>3</sup> between education, health and social care and a co-ordinated<sup>4</sup> assessment process
- clearer focus on support for a successful transition to adulthood

Two key areas the *Children and Families Act (2014)* introduced which are relevant for this research were improved parental engagement and a greater duty on co-production of the EHC plan. This included increased duties on wider professionals as part of this process. The *Children and Families Act (2014)* increased parental rights to support collaborative practice. The requirement to educate a child in a mainstream school now included the caveat unless it was ‘incompatible with— (a) the wishes of the child’s parent or the young person’ (*ibid.*, 2014: 28). This was not evident in earlier legislation but was now listed as the first criteria. In addition, requests for EHC needs assessment could be made by ‘the child’s parent, the young person or a person acting on behalf of a school or post-16 institution’ (2014: 30) as well as the local authority, indicating that the decision making was not so firmly within the hands of the professionals.

The change in language in the Act omits the term ‘served notice’ on parents when referring to the assessment of need. Under section 36, the local authority must ‘consult the child’s parent or the young person’ (2014: 30) which illustrates the shift in language in the legal system towards a more collaborative approach for decision making. In addition, parents can now have the right to contribute to the assessment in writing or orally which may reduce barriers in earlier legislation which specifically stated the views had to be expressed in writing. Despite these changes and greater rights for parents,

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<sup>3</sup> Co-operate or co-operation is terminology used in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) 39 times in relation to sharing of information. Defining such terms can be challenging due to nuances of meaning, therefore, **Appendix C** provides further clarification.

<sup>4</sup> Co-ordinated is terminology used in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) 19 times and 5 times specifically related to the co-ordinated assessment. Defining such terms can be challenging due to nuances of meaning, therefore **Appendix C** provides further clarification.

Section 36 still specifies ‘the authority must determine whether it may be necessary for special educational provision to be made for the child or young person in accordance with an EHC plan’ (2014: 30). So, despite empowering parents in the decision-making, this still illustrates the power of the authority in the process. As identified by Hellowell (2019: 7) some referred to the SEND reforms as ‘the most comprehensive overhaul of the SEND system in over 30 years’, yet another perspective is that little has changed and there have been missed opportunities for addressing persistent issues in the system (Norwich, 2014; Ekins; 2015; Hellowell, 2019; Soan and Monsen, 2023).

### *2.2.3.2 The SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan*

The SEND reforms in 2014 were presented as the ‘answer’ to the issues in the system (DfE, 2011). However, ten years since the introduction of these reforms, it has become clear this approach did not effectively address the persistent issues. Reviews of the SEND system (National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022) identified challenges such as lack of accountability, bureaucratic processes, issues over available provisions and the need for culture change. The House of Commons Education Committee (2019: 3) report referred to the reforms as ‘the right ones’ but noted that the implementation had been ‘badly hampered by poor administration and a challenging funding environment in which local authorities and schools have lacked the ability to make transformative change’ (*ibid.*, 2019: 3). They critiqued the Department for Education as providing an approach which was ‘piecemeal, creating reactive, sticking-plaster policies, when what is needed is serious effort to ensure that issues are fully grappled with, and the 2014 Act works properly, as was intended’ (HoCEC, 2019: 4). In addition to these critical reports of the SEND system, the significant increases in statutory assessment requests (91% from 2012 to 2022) and appeals to the SEND first tier Tribunal (250% from 2015 to 2022) provide evidence for a call for change (Marsh, 2023).

The quality of the assessment process is a concern which is reflected in national inspections of SEND at local authority level. The Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (2016) Framework was originally established as a short-term process to monitor the implementation of the SEND reforms. However, it became clear there were failings in the system, leading to a longer process. Not all local authorities were inspected within the planned timeframe, and based on the routine inspections that took place up to when they were suspended in March 2020 due to Covid-19, 34 areas were still awaiting inspection. Of the 116 inspections that had taken place 51% resulted in ‘significant concerns about how effectively the local area was meeting its duties or securing better outcomes for children and young people who have SEND’ (Ofsted, 2021a, np). Local areas had to produce written statements of action when weaknesses were identified, but after 21 re-visits only nine local areas ‘were making sufficient progress in addressing all the significant weaknesses identified during their initial inspection’

(Ofsted, 2021a: np). This resulted in a new framework for SEND inspections, which was due to commence in January 2023 (Ofsted, 2022), but the guidance did not come into force until 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024 (Ofsted and CQC, 2024). The vision was to establish an ongoing cycle of inspection to strengthen accountability and support continuous improvement.

The plans for governmental review of the SEND system were delayed due to the pandemic (Ofsted, 2021b), but in 2022 the green paper *SEND review: right support, right place, right time* (DfE/DoHSC, 2022) was issued, and consultation ran from 29<sup>th</sup> March 2022 to 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2022. Over this period just under 6,000 formal responses were received with 53.4% from parents/carers (Sinclair *et al.*, 2023). The resultant proposals were published in March 2023 with the press release from government entitled: *Transformational reform begins for children and young people with SEND: Plan for better, fairer access to high quality special educational needs and disabilities support* (DfE, DoHSC and Coutinho, 2023: np).

The new proposals acknowledged the system as failing our children with SEND and the ‘vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence and inefficient resource allocation that drives these challenges across the system’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 15) and set out ‘proposals to deliver a generational change for a more inclusive system’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 3). It is essential that any reforms for 2023 onwards truly address the perpetual cycle of inadequate educational opportunities for the most vulnerable children in our society. Yet, already there have been responses to the proposals in terms of whether they present more of the same, as opposed to addressing fundamental issues with the system (Soan and Monsen, 2023).

Implementation of the new policy outlined in the SEND proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) will rely on the individuals directly involved, from central government to local authority and then to schools. Curran, *et al.* (2018) argued that the SENCO was a key figure in the implementation of the SEND reforms of 2014. They note that ‘at a school level, there has been a central actor navigating, mitigating and narrating the changes in policy; the SENCO’ (*ibid.*, 2018: 10). It is likely the SENCO will be similarly positioned as a ‘central actor’ for the changes ahead.

## 2.3 Role of the SENCO working with parents

### 2.3.1 Prior to the inception of the SENCO role

With the introduction of the Warnock report (DES, 1978) and the *Education Act* (1981) children with more complex needs would be issued with a Statement of Special Educational Needs and were being educated in mainstream schools. The legislation outlined that a ‘responsible person’ would be designated to ensure that the child’s ‘needs are made known to all who are likely to teach him [or

her]’ (*Education Act*, 1981). Warnock (DES, 1978: 109-10) had outlined that the head teacher would hold responsibility for the oversight of arrangements for children with SEN, but they should ‘delegate day-to-day responsibility for making arrangements for children with special needs to a designated specialist teacher or head of department.’ However, in reality, there was little guidance as to how this would be implemented or information on what the role might entail.

Armstrong (1995: 20) identified that parents had ‘become increasingly disillusioned with the procedures for assessing children’s special educational needs introduced by the 1981 Education Act.’ Dale (1996) also highlighted a number of challenges at this time for parents in engaging with the process for statutory assessment, in particular the inadequate or unclear information on assessment procedures and range of provision available for children with SEN. The House of Commons Select Committee report (1987) resulted in recommendations to address the local and national variations in implementation of the *Education Act* 1981, the lack of clarity on SEN and the responsibilities of LEAs and schools which led to changes with the 1993 *Education Act*. Dale (1996: 254) notes the role of the school as being ‘greatly enforced’ with this act through ‘the broadened brief of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator.’

### 2.3.2 The inception and initial role

The need for clearer guidance on school responsibilities and the role of the responsible person led to the *Education Act* (1993) and the inception of the role of the SENCO. This was accompanied with guidance on how to interpret this new role with the introduction of the first Code of Practice (DfE, 1994). All maintained schools must have a SENCO to oversee and be responsible for implementing the duties outlined in the Code of Practice for the newly specified role (**Appendix D**). The role was focused on coordination and procedural aspects of managing provisions for children with more complex SEN but there was the assumption this role would be taken on by a ‘designated teacher’ (DfE, 1994: 9). The Code included a section on ‘Partnership with parents’ (DfE, 1994) and noted that: ‘[p]rofessional help can seldom be wholly effective unless it builds upon a parents’ capacity to be involved and unless parents consider that professionals take account of what they say and treat their views and anxieties as intrinsically important’ (DfE, 1994: 13). There was emphasis on ‘the full involvement of parents throughout the five stages of assessment, and parental rights are strengthened through a clearer definition of ‘partnership’’ (Dale, 1996: 254). Yet, Armstrong (1995: 47), highlights the difference between ‘rights’ and ‘power’, noting these are two different concepts and poses the notion that partnership can operate as a disempowering force because ‘the multi-disciplinary process is used by the LEAs to maintain their control over the allocation of resources.’

The Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) provided guidance as opposed to being statutory (Dale, 1996; Hallett and Hallett, 2010) and as such, there was no recognition of the diverse and demanding nature of the role and that it would require ‘a high level of training to ensure ... the skills experience and knowledge to support the children effectively’ (Petersen, 2010: 12). Implementation was therefore hampered and did not sufficiently address issues such as variability. As a result, further guidance was issued for SENCOs, (DfEE, 1997; DfEE, 1998) as well as *The National standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators* (TTA, 1998) to offer a framework and structure for planning in schools. Despite the increased emphasis on partnership working with parents and clearer standards for the SENCO role, this was still guidance and so adoption and implementation were not necessarily viewed as a priority and so not always consistently applied in practice. A revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) was introduced, which included a distinct chapter and more detailed guidance on working with parents. Arguably, this foregrounded the central importance of the SENCO working with parents, yet challenges persisted.

### 2.3.3. Developments in role

The challenges of the SENCO role as not being given sufficient priority and attention were highlighted in the criticisms emerging throughout the 2000s (Audit Commission, 2002a and 2002b; HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009). The House of Commons Select Committee Report (2006) identified schools were not giving sufficient power to the role and the staff conducting the role were not always best placed or sufficiently trained:

‘They were at the beginning senior teachers, but [...] there is now a very large number of schools where the SENCO is actually a teaching assistant and not a teacher at all, with no experience and they are no longer a member of the senior management team but someone with peripheral duties’ (HoC, 2006: 74)

Meeting the educational needs of children with SEN was therefore not necessarily being viewed as a priority in all schools because the SENCO role was not being viewed as a priority. Appointing teaching assistants, who would typically have very little influence in school systems and processes, would have undoubtedly seriously limited their ability to work in partnership with parents effectively. The recommendation of the report to ensure SENCOS ‘should in all cases be qualified teachers and in a senior management position in the school as recommended in the SEN Code of Practice’ (HoC, 2006: 74) was taken forward in legislation to result in *The Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations 2008* and *The Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2009*. These acts required SENCOs to be qualified teachers (2008) and complete the new, mandatory qualification: ‘The National Award for Special Educational Needs

Co-ordination’ (2009). However, a lesser approach was taken regarding the position on leadership noting, the ‘governing body of a relevant school must determine the role of the SENCO in relation to the leadership and management of the school’ (*The Education (Special Educational Needs Coordinators) (England) Regulations, 2008: np*). Arguably these changes have increased the status of the SENCO and the possibility for effecting change across a school, ensuring SENCOs are in a position to lead on inclusion rather than managing the needs of children on the periphery of the school mainstream. Recommendation 4 of the Lamb (2009) report noted where a proactive response to partnership working was taken, it promoted ‘a collaborative problem-solving approach’ and would ‘increase parents’ confidence that schools and services are responsive to difficulties that children encounter’ (Lamb, 2009: 27).

#### 2.3.4 Current demands

The introduction of the current SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) included revised responsibilities for the SENCO role which comprised of more strategic responsibilities, such as budget management (**Appendix E**) and a clear shift away from the role as a coordinator, which was the case previously (DfE, 1994). Rather than adopting a discrete chapter on working with parents, the current SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) provides guidance throughout the document thus adopting the position of an integrated approach to parental support. There is also much about the SENCO as the facilitator and support of teachers in working with parents reinforcing the strategic nature of the role as a leader in driving forward inclusive cultures and practices in schools. Working with parents has always been part of this journey and the requirement for the SENCO role, but Harwood and Stuart (2023) claim this ‘represented a huge cultural shift from the previous code (DfES, 2001)’. Interestingly, the current code states the same requirement for working with parents as it did in 1994, in ‘liaising with parents of pupils with SEN’ (DfE/DoH, 2015: 109). Yet, in contrast to simply ‘liaising’, the new SENCO qualification explicitly states the requirement for: ‘[e]stablishing and maintaining processes so that families experience high quality communication and meaningful co-production’ (DfE, 2023a: 14). This highlights greater demands on SENCOs in partnership working and the need for the new Code of Practice, when it is published, to align with, and represent more clearly, the cultural shift required for 2023 onwards in further empowering parents.

#### 2.4 Consumerism in special education

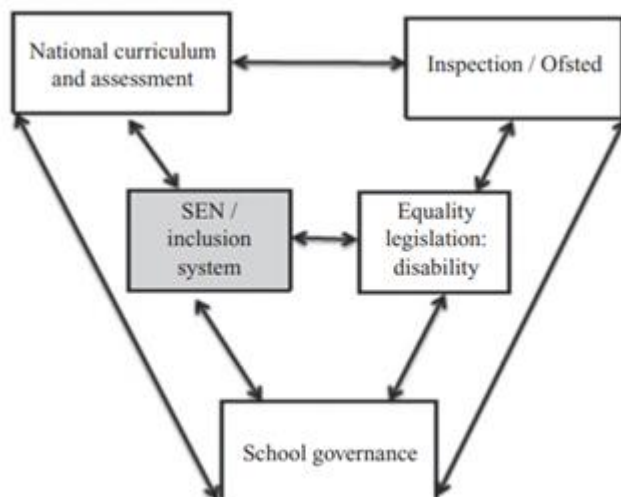
Since the Warnock report (DES, 1978) the education system for children with SEN has moved from a system which was regulated by the local authority to a system whereby power and resources are devolved to schools and increasingly the parents. This could be considered as a positive progression in empowering parents; however, the current system is driven by a neoliberal consumerist position



(Robertson, 2007; Hart, 2012) which, it could be argued, is in opposition to inclusive principles. Key aspects of this premise will be explored in more depth in this section, including: the impact on educational opportunities for children with more complex SEN; the impact on the relationship between the school and the parent and how specialist educational provision, in itself, could be viewed as a commodity.

#### 2.4.1 Neoliberalism in relation to inclusive principles

Although it is possible to look at policy development specifically in SEN, it is important to recognise the influence of the wider education system and the developments in the political and social policy context. Norwich (2014: 404) notes this interdependency as ‘connective specialism’ recognising that what might be specialist in a field is interdependent upon other related factors in education. The diagram (Figure 2) outlines educational aspects Norwich considers as impacting upon SEN and the inclusion system.



**Figure 2: The interdependence of the special educational needs system with other aspects of the school system (Norwich, 2014: 404)**

It is important, therefore, to consider the wider educational system, such as the National Curriculum, assessment, inspection and school governance in considering the move to a market-driven model and the impact this may have on SEN. The influence of neo-liberalism on Western post-industrial countries has led to individuals acting to secure ‘the best possible outcome for themselves or their family’ (Macleod *et al.*, 2013: 389), which could be viewed as beneficial to parents seeking the best educational opportunities for their children. With this market driven model, the competition between schools drives up the standards of education and results in improved educational standards, and in turn, improves outcomes for children. The schools that underperform will not attract learners, which

results in a reduction in funding and in the extreme cases, will force the least successful schools to close (Robertson, 2007; Hart, 2012). However, the challenge with this model is that there are casualties, including the children attending the failing schools (Gewirtz, 2000; Macleod *et al.*, 2013; Grimaldi, 2012; Beach, 2017). It could also be argued that the impact of this is more detrimental for children with SEN or disabilities and their families because they may already be at a social disadvantage. Sherry (2014: 16) highlights this paradox of contemporary neoliberalism for people with disabilities and argues that neoliberalism 'promises freedom and human rights, but leaves most disabled people in impoverished, socially isolated situations, with few safeguards and protections, struggling for the basic dignities of life'.

However, Education is not wholly driven by economic forces of capitalism and the model which has formed could be conceptualised as a 'quasi-market' (Adnett and Davies, 1999; Gewirtz, 2000; Norwich and Black, 2015) because there is intervention from the State and so the process cannot fully follow the market model. Adnett and Davies (1999: 223) refer to the 'captive market' as one constraining force on education because there is no real driving force to out-perform other schools. If there is the knowledge that the school serves a community and there is a vested interest from the State that they will continue to do so, this will lead to ineffectiveness in driving up the standards. This intervention from the State is particularly evident with the EHC needs assessment process because the local authority continues to hold the responsibility for issuing EHC plans, as well as monitoring and evaluating educational outcomes. The decision making and partnerships between schools, professionals and parents are therefore, to an extent, mediated by the State rather than being wholly driven by a consumerist model.

Another factor impacting on the market model is that theoretically the education of learners will ultimately contribute to benefit society as a whole. This moves away from individualistic motivation and in doing so, 'the market system cannot be relied upon to generate efficient outcomes' (Adnett and Davies 1999: 224). Education is often preoccupied with endorsing values such as human rights, democracy, social justice and cultural diversity, which also do not sit well within an individualistic framework. Tensions emerge due to a 'quasi -market' driven focus on 'competition' and achieving the highest academic standards as opposed to the egalitarian principles of inclusive education (UNICEF, 1989; UNESCO, 1994). This imposition of contradictory systems therefore must lead to tensions in professional practice. Done and Murphy (2018: 142) refer to this tension and the blurred boundaries when private sector and public sector merge causing the 'responsibilisation' of teachers. There is dependency on the good will of the teachers in navigating a system requiring values of human rights and social justice in opposition to a neoliberal, individualistic focus. The teachers in school, and

inevitably SENCOs, are conflicted by the contradictory system in which they must operate (Gore, 2016).

#### 2.4.2 The impact on educational opportunities for children with more complex SEN with the introduction of the National Curriculum

Towards the end of the 1980s, measures for accountability in the school system became more visible with the 1988 *Education Reform Act* which introduced the National Curriculum and the subsequent introduction of the regulatory body, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Together these provided a vehicle for monitoring the standards and desired improvements in the educational system – serving as the compliance model (Gewirtz, 2000). The falling standards in the 1960s and the economic downturn of the mid-1970s criticised schools ‘for the lack of balance in their curriculum and for their failure to develop sufficiently planned curricula that took account of the changing needs of industry and society’ (Parliament.uk, 2009: np). This led to the introduction of the prescribed curriculum and schools became more accountable. Schools were more aware of the information being shared with ‘consumers’ in the public domain, such as the league tables which were based on educational outcomes for the children attending the school. A cost of this market-driven education was that children with SEN may not have access to equitable educational opportunities. Schools with the highest performing children academically were the schools that were rewarded. The resources tended to be focused on those children able to achieve academically and historically the children with SEN were left behind (Soan and Monsen, 2023).

As has been the case in the past, schools are still currently disincentivised to be inclusive because if they provide good inclusive provisions, then more children with SEN may choose to attend their school. In the past there was a focus on children achieving 5 A\* to C GCSE grades as a measure of school performance. More recently there have been improvements with current measures focused on Progress 8<sup>5</sup> which measures the progress children make from their starting point. Statistics show that children with SEN perform less well on academic measures than their peers who do not have SEN and therefore this may still adversely affect the school’s performance data. The onus on progress measures, and the present school inspection framework serve to present schools with challenges if they are not able to meet the criteria of ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ based on the performance data (Norwich, 2014; Ekins, 2015). Under the Ofsted inspection framework (DfE, 2019), there is a requirement to provide an inclusive learning environment that meets the needs of diverse learners. There is also a greater emphasis on the curriculum compared to earlier iterations, including ensuring

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<sup>5</sup> Progress 8 is a progress measure in secondary schools that records students’ academic progress across 8 selected subjects. This is a value-added measure whereby progress is recorded against the actual achievement of peers with a comparable measure of prior attainment.

that learners with SEN should not be offered a reduced curriculum. This foregrounds the egalitarian position of equality and social justice. However, this position is contrasted by inspectors not using school internal data as evidence, and only considering the national published data and 'what pupils have learned' (DfE, 2019: 46). Again, this links judgements to academic progress and could conceivably limit the educational opportunities available to more vulnerable learners. Schools, in some cases, will contravene their legal duty to accept children with SEN and disabilities because they recognise the detrimental impact should their school potentially underperform.

A further potential issue related to the school's performance on league tables is that the children themselves become commodities when 'schools and teachers are being encouraged to value students according to what these children can offer the school financially and in terms of image and examination performance' (Gewirtz, 2000: 601-2). Therefore, children that do not attract funding, and in some cases may be more costly to support, or children who will not perform academically, have less economic value to the school, ultimately disincentivising inclusion.

#### 2.4.3 Specialist educational provision as a commodity.

The demand for specialist provision has been identified as a growing industry, which could be viewed as contrary to the notion of inclusion (Tomlinson, 2012). There has been a move away from the principles of New Labour as endorsing inclusion for all, to the Coalition Government's position that they would remove the 'bias to inclusion' and provide more choice for parents (HM Government, 2010: 29). This change in political agenda, and also the change in legislation (*Children and Families Act, 2014*) means parents can select placements with more authority than in the past. Figures released show that '[b]etween January 2014 and January 2018, the number of pupils in special school and alternative provision rose by 20.2%' (National Audit Office, 2019: 8). This is possibly due to greater parental involvement in the decisions over placement and the funding pressures which are serving to limit what mainstream schools can provide for children with more significant needs. It is understandable that parents will choose a school that does have sufficient resources and provisions to meet the needs of their child. Yet, Soan and Monsen (2023: 29) refer to the way in which '[p]arents and carers morphed into being 'consumers' and 'purchasers'. This position could be seen as more aligned to neoliberalism and may illustrate SEN as a system of choice and commodity. The EHC plans could represent a commodity that consumers can seek, especially if they are keen to secure specialist placement for their children. Tomlinson (2012: 267) refers to the 'irresistible rise of the SEN Industry' which acknowledges the 'national and international government beliefs that higher levels of education and skill training for all young people, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, are needed for successful competition in a global economy' (Tomlinson, 2012: 269). She

argues that mass education is ‘now underpinned by an expanded and increasingly expensive ‘SEN Industry’’ (Tomlinson, 2012: 268).

The shift towards ‘competitive and individualised models’ (Macleod *et al.*, 2013: 389) will influence professional relationships because of the notion of the consumer purchasing a service and requiring satisfaction. Seeking the best outcomes for vulnerable learners by utilising the EHC needs assessment process to secure the correct provisions and access to education does not fit well with this model because it is not a simple transactional process. The process calls on collaboration and shared desires and values in order to secure positive outcomes for the child. If there is a conflict which emerges in the decision-making process, this is more difficult to resolve and can lead to breakdown in relationships, which is evident in the cases that progress through the tribunal system (Local Government Association, 2022; Jemal and Kenley, 2023) or in some cases individuals choosing to take themselves and their children out of the system entirely (Armstrong, 1995).

## 2.5 Power in partnership working within the EHC needs assessment process

Decision making and the power of someone over another, means there will always be a differential unless equality is achieved, and in reality, power is not fixed and so the balance of power may perpetually alter. Partnership working will ultimately require the stakeholders to reach a consensus to lead to a viable outcome, and there may be variations in power for each of the stakeholders throughout the EHC needs assessment and planning process. Looking at the working relationships between parents and SENCOs specifically, there may be a gap between the conceptual framework envisaged within policy for co-production and the implementation of this in practice when examining the EHC needs assessment and planning process. The SEN system has been built on a ‘needs’ basis with the principle that the ‘needs’ of the child will inform the process, which immediately presents a power differential of the dependant party reliant on support and the contributor holding the resources. Therefore, if we are already operating within a system where injustice is evident, implementing the principles of greater choice and voice for parents (DfE/DoH, 2015) may still result in inequitable outcomes.

### 2.5.1 Relationship between ‘power’ and ‘needs’

The notion of the powerful and the powerless when considering EHC needs assessment, is to a degree, illogical in that the focus should surely be on the humanitarian motivation of ensuring the rights of the child e.g. access to education. Warnock’s (DES, 1978) conception of SEN, and the ideology upon which the system is based, was aligned to a social welfare model and egalitarian principles. Yet, in reality, effecting these principles in a neoliberal context is imperfect and Armstrong (1995: 148) argues is ‘out of step’ with economic and social individualism. The current system is based upon a ‘needs’ or deficit

model, whereby the State provides the resources to facilitate the child's education which places the individual in a position of subservience to the body issuing the provision. The fact that 'needs' are identified, in itself, places the individual being assessed at a disadvantage. Furthermore, Armstrong (1995: 19-20) poses the questions 'Whose needs are defined?' and 'Who has the power to define the needs?' which illustrates it is not simply the 'need' that will be considered in an assessment. Decisions will be dependent upon the conception of that need as well as reliance on those who will be making the judgements.

#### 2.5.2 Factors influencing power relationships in EHC needs assessment

The disempowerment of parents of children with SEN has been an issue since before the introduction of the 1981 *Education Act* (Tomlinson, 1981; Armstrong, 1995; Armstrong, 2005; Bagley *et al.*, 2001; Macleod *et al.*, 2013; Boseley and Crane, 2018) and persists despite changes in legislation to address and increase parental involvement in the statutory assessment process (*Education Act*, 1981; *Education Act*, 1993; *Education Reform Act*, 1996; *SENDA*, 2001; *Children and Families Act*, 2014). The issues raised then are as relevant now, such as: the increasing number of requests for EHC needs assessments (or statutory assessments in the past), the costly process, and the parental mistrust in the system. EHC needs assessment should be a transparent process which ensures equitable outcomes for young people. Yet, inequitable power relationships appear inevitable based on the current system. Although, arguably based on identification of needs, it is not always the child's or young person's needs that are reflected in the EHC needs assessment but instead this can be influenced by many different factors, some which relate very little to the individual's needs. For example, in some cases, the agendas in EHC needs assessment may be clear such as schools seeking alternative placements for children or children regarded as higher profile<sup>6</sup>. In some cases, reasons for EHC needs assessment could be more implicit, for example economic factors of financial gain. Some stakeholders may not have an awareness of influencing factors, such as professionals' decisions being mediated by the economic and governmental structures they typically operate within, or parents or professionals seeking answers which may absolve them from feelings of blame for children presenting with challenges in education. Through unconscious bias, stakeholders may unintentionally exert power in decision-making, for example some parents and / or professionals are more able than others to navigate the system but may not be aware of their privileged position in relation to the power they hold. This makes it such a complex issue with regards to power differential between the stakeholders

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<sup>6</sup> This does not necessarily mean they have great needs than other children. They have been highlighted and foregrounded in the system by parents, professionals and /or the state. This relates to the subjective nature of identifying and then determining needs of an individual and the consideration as to who has power over this process.

during the process. Educational choices made by stakeholders are within a specific context, which may include a complex range of multifaceted factors that could be either enabling or restrictive.

Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010: 2) note that neo-liberal order will limit the choices of the democratic society because decisions will be based on 'deciding between competing brand names, retailers or political options circumscribed by market economy principles'. Therefore, this illustrates the market will determine the 'political options' available to the consumer. So, the options available for children and parents with regards to education may be limited according to what can be offered in the current climate. Factors such as the demographic, political climate, psychological impact of class or resources available can all influence choices made by parents. This is reinforced by Reay's (2012: 592) comment that '[e]ducational inequalities are inextricably bound up with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation from them.'

### 2.5.3 Perceptions of parents and professionals

It is often the case that the professionals and the parents demonstrate a great deal of good will and commitment in working together to secure the best outcomes for children, and they do place the child as centre to their planning and discussions, evident in examples cited by Armstrong (1995), Lamb (2009) and Curran *et al.* (2017). Yet, successful working relationships demands mutual trust and openness. How parents and professionals perceive each other can influence their interactions and the effectiveness of processes such as the EHC needs assessment.

Parents are not a homogeneous group and undoubtedly will encompass a full diversity across society including different classes, educational backgrounds, socio-economic status etc. Factors such as this will influence the level and type of interaction required as parents progress through the EHC needs assessment and planning process. Parents require different levels of support dependent upon their individual circumstances and this limits access to the system if it is not addressed adequately. Likewise, professionals will vary considerably. There may be a commonality in their shared roles and / or responsibilities, but their needs in relation to access to the EHC needs assessment system and the level of support they require will be diverse, as will their own backgrounds, values and beliefs. Essentially, balancing what might be different values within the decision-making process for EHC needs assessment could be challenging, especially without clear frameworks to support this.

Power can be subversive rather than overt and the ways in which parents are perceived by professionals can indicate a level of subversive power. For example, the categorisation of parents by professionals is evident in literature (Macleod *et al.*, 2013; Herring *et al.*, 2017). Macleod *et al.* (2013:

392) identified that parents are perceived as ‘customers, partners and problems’. From their research they presented a number of ‘types’ constructed by professionals which included the parent as:

- Root cause of the difficulties
- Contributor to the difficulties
- Well-intentioned but ill equipped
- Resistant and non-compliant
- Unreasonable and demanding
- Competent and supportive

Categorisation of the parents, in some ways, is not dissimilar to labelling of children with SEN. It seems that the ‘othering’ of the individual against the institution or organisation serves to distance, and reinforces the notion of the institution as holding the values and standards which are perceived as ‘correct’.

Equally professionals can be categorised in a similar way. In Bowers’ (1995) research, parents referred to the professionals working in the local authority as:

- The put-off specialists
- The excluders
- The frighteners
- The liars

The relationships described in this research were reflecting on negative experiences of the statutory assessment process and so this relates to these categories as foregrounding the notion of ‘them and us’. However, it does highlight how experiences can influence the perceptions of others and present challenges where there is a breakdown in partnership working. When the conception of relationships is oppositional rather than focused on recognising the common ground and acknowledging differences in position and values, it can be difficult to then repair the damage. Armstrong (1995:36) argues that by the time statutory assessment is reached the relationships can be so broken that the possibility of partnership in the assessment is ‘out of the question’. Furthermore, Sales and Vincent (2018) refer to professionals influencing parental input, illustrating how they can essentially limit choices based on professionals’ personal views. Their study identified that ‘[s]ome thought that while policy changes are helpful, attitudinal barriers are harder to address’ (*ibid.*, 2018: 71) which in some ways echoes the sentiments of Bowers (1995) and Macleod *et al.* (2013) where behavioural attributes assigned to the professionals or to the parents will cause barriers.



#### 2.5.4 Power of the professional

With a system which is susceptible to power dynamics, there will be inconsistency and inequality which has been evident in the past (Armstrong, 1995; Lamb, 2009) and is still evident today (Sales and Vincent, 2018; Hellowell, 2019; Soan and Monsen, 2023). Armstrong (1995:1) highlighted that the 'professionals have the power to select children whose needs will receive 'special' attention' and so decisions as to which requests will be successful lies in the hands of those who hold that power. Despite the introduction of the SEND reforms in 2014 there is still inequality in the EHC needs assessment process as to who gets at EHC plan (Sales and Vincent, 2018). This must be addressed to ensure that those who are most vulnerable are not disadvantaged by the system.

In their research on the outcomes of EHC Plans, Sales and Vincent (2018: 68) identified that professionals were of the opinion that when parents can advocate on behalf of their child and have a good understanding of the provisions available, they 'were more likely to receive greater support and increased adherence to the statutory guidance, and had a higher chance of resulting in an EHC plan.' This illustrates the professionals' views on inequitable outcomes dependent on the parents and the way the system is structured. Of course, there may be other factors that further influence outcomes such as socio-economic status, level of education or parental involvement generally in school. This illustrates the power dynamics operating at many levels, including the parent, the professionals, the local authority and the wider governmental powers controlling the resources and systems. This needs to be considered because it will influence outcomes for learners with SEN.

The decisions that SENCOs make over available resources will be, to some degree, driven by educational agendas, finances and priorities of the school in which they are working. They cannot offer impartial advice or guidance to parents because they must balance the reality of the system in which they are operating. Maher (2016) refers to SENCOs as having power over decision making regarding resources within their school. However, there is very little influence beyond the school and with issues over high-needs funding (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2023), this is becoming more restrictive. How this is perceived by parents, may be contentious and especially so when the resources available to the school are more limited. When referring to wider school relationships, Gewirtz (2000: 601) claims '[t]he market, combined with compliance-based quality controls, appears to have severely limited the scope for collaboration, participative forms of decision-making and autonomous teacher activity.' Therefore, if co-production is taking place, it may be more tokenistic approaches being adopted due to restrictions on parents and the school ultimately maintaining the power over decision making (Maher, 2016). Any reductions in resources and provisions could be seen as a decision taken by SENCOs rather than a systemic issue and may significantly impact on working relationships.

In order for mass education to operate efficiently it requires organisational compliance of all stakeholders: the children attending school, teachers and the parents. 'As long as parents are in agreement with the views of the teachers all is well. However, as soon as a parent expresses unhappiness or disagreement they are seen as a problem, and therefore as incapable of being in a genuine partnership with the school' (Macleod *et al.* 2013: 391). The onus then is on the parent as having to change and conform and accept the guidance from professionals in order for a solution and the relationship to continue. Gewirtz (2000: 367-8) notes how the marketized education system in which we are operating serves to 'treat children, parents and teachers as problems to be managed and reformed rather than as active participants in making decisions about the context and content of schooling' noting how all stakeholders can be disempowered if they do not comply to the 'accepted' system.

Therefore, it could be posited that not only parents, but the children and teachers are also restricted in the educational choices available to them. Gewirtz (2000: 354) used the term 'associational justice' to refer to the limited capacity parents, learners and teachers have in decision making. She argued that the quality control measures within the educational system formed patterns of association that are authoritarian. This restricts opportunities for learners, teachers or parents to have real influence through decision making in the school and would impact upon the process of decision making in taking forward EHC needs assessment. The system is highly bureaucratic and heavily controlled, highlighting the authoritarian influence over the process. According to Reay, (2012: 592) 'similarly to 'social justice' choice and diversity have been well and truly 'neoliberalised''.

#### 2.5.5 Power of the parent

Parental empowerment may be more feasible in the current system for EHC need assessment than it has been in the past (*Children and Families Act, 2014*), yet it could be argued there is significant variability in this being enacted, which could be dependent upon how 'high-profile'<sup>7</sup> a case is and the status of a family to influence the system (Sales and Vincent, 2018: 68). This then impacts upon professional practice and decision making. It could be argued that increased power with parents, and the legal rights outlined in the *Children and Families Act (2014)*, may have the effect of disempowering the professional; professional competence may be called into question. Cunningham and Davis (1985) referred to the expert, the transplant and the consumer models for professional interaction with parents. The consumer model recognises the parents' rights and expertise, and as the researchers

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<sup>7</sup> This does not necessarily mean they have great needs than other children. They have been highlighted and foregrounded in the system by parents, professionals and /or the state. This relates to the subjective nature of identifying and then determining needs of an individual and the consideration as to who has power over this process.

claim, provides the parents with a more equal position in the relationship. They claim the expertise of the professional illustrates 'effectiveness in establishing and negotiating processes and helping to find solutions. It follows that the professional in this model is more vulnerable' (Cunningham and Davis, 1985: 14). Therefore, expertise and status are possibly not valued as highly and are open to critique. Of course, it is possible that the system could be abused where there is imbalance of power, which was evident in the past where the authority and professionals have had greater power, and placed children in residential provisions without the support of the parents (Hodkinson, 2019). Yet, as acknowledged, well before the 2014 SEND reforms, by Armstrong (1995:49) it is possible that 'parents can try to manipulate the assessment procedures for their own ends' too.

#### 2.5.6 Parents' and professionals' ability to navigate the system

The system has been referred to as overly bureaucratic in the past (HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009; DfE, 2011) and despite changes with the 2014 SEND reforms to address this issue, the bureaucratic practices continue to prevail (DfE/DoHSC, 2022). One example of where the reforms did not address the levels of bureaucracy was in the guidance provided for schools. The Coalition Government (2010-2015) had planned to reduce the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) in comparison to the earlier version (DfES, 2001). Yet 'the new one (at 239 pages) is considerably longer than the previous one (at 142 pages)' (Norwich, 2014: 419). The system for issuing EHC plans was to be streamlined and less burdensome with a reduced timescale from 26 weeks to 20 weeks from the initial request through to issuing the plan. Yet, local authorities are not always meeting this requirement (National Audit Office, 2019), which may be an indication that the systems did not sufficiently improve in efficiency despite the change in legislation.

What the literature and policy have shown is that the choice parents have, even when there are changes to the legislation to effect more autonomy, is still limited by the system, the practices and the resources available. Findings from the National Audit Office (2019) could indicate that parental choice over school placement for their children with SEN may be subject to subversion by the local authority due to the limited availability of resources. Parents felt that 'school suggestions were inappropriate because they did not meet their child's specific needs and were concerned that the school choices were too far away from home' (HoCEC, 2019: 101). This questions if the choices being made are in the best interests of the children.

There are indications that parents do have more of a voice now than in the past. This could be evidenced with Bowers' (1995) research which refers to the attributes assigned to local authority workers by the parents of children with SEN. From his research, some of the reported behaviours by SEN workers in local authorities included frightening parents, excluding children and lying to parents.

An extreme example from the research included a parent recounting that she 'was told she'd be 'sectioned' under the 1983 Mental Health Act (Department of Health and Welsh Office 1990) unless she agreed to the provision offered' (*ibid.*, 1995 :142), illustrating the power that could be enacted to remove the parental voice and influence decision making. In contrast to this, from the multivariate analysis conducted by Shepherd *et al.* (2018) from July to November 2016, the benefits of parental voice and ensuring positive engagement are foregrounded. When parents felt part of the process, this resulted in reports that 'their experience of the EHC plan process was positive, that their EHC plan's outcomes would be achieved and that, overall, they were satisfied with the EHC plan process' (*ibid.*, 2018: 10). However, from another report only two thirds of parents stated they were satisfied with the EHC process (Adams *et al.*, 2018). This raises the question over if there is a differential in the parents who can and cannot navigate the systems and processes related to EHC needs assessment which may be attributed to the social and cultural capital and knowledge parents hold (Hart, 2012; MacLeod *et al.*, 2013). The example from Bowers was extreme, and of course could not be viewed as representative of the system as a whole, but the issue over the inequality of the system persists today (Boseley and Crane, 2018; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/ DoHSC, 2022). Hanley (2010 np) argues 'if there is one thing that makes inequality tangible, it is the presence of choice for some and its absence for others'. It is therefore questionable as to whether all parents really do have greater choice regarding the education for their child.

#### 2.5.7 A new approach

We are in a period of change for SEND statutory and regulatory guidance, with proposals in the *SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement plan* (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) seeking to improve on parental confidence and the EHC needs assessment process. The new approach is necessary because the 2014 SEND reforms have not worked (National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022).

The House of Commons Education Committee (2019) recognised that the implementation of the SEND reforms was limited in success because relying on change to legislation and guidance is not sufficient. In 2009, Lamb had identified the need for cultural and structural change by stating that 'changing the architecture of the system itself might reduce bureaucracy and promote parental confidence' (Lamb, 2009: 89). Structural and cultural changes are challenging and so it is crucial the new plans for SEND reform are carefully considered. Implementation will need careful planning and resources to avoid identified shortcomings where: 'Let down by failures of implementation, the 2014 reforms have resulted in confusion and at times unlawful practice, bureaucratic nightmares, buckpassing and a lack of accountability, strained resources and adversarial experiences, and ultimately dashed the hopes of many' (HoCEC, 2019: 3). Successful implementation of reform requires 'considerable investment' to

create the necessary culture and conditions (HoCEC, 2019: 30). Additionally, ‘unless we see a culture change, within schools and local authorities and the Government, any additional money will be wasted’ (HoCEC, 2019: 3). Funds cannot be ploughed into a system without appropriate structural and cultural change happening first, or we may be subject to another reform to SEND which does not deliver the desired outcomes.

The new approach aims to build confidence in the system as noted below:

‘This will give families and providers clarity, consistency and confidence in the support that is ordinarily available, in order to be responsive to children’s needs. With these expectations, and improved mainstream provision, more children and young people will receive the support they need through ordinarily available provision in their local setting. Fewer will therefore need to access support through an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).’

(DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 5–6)

Yet, this has striking parallels with the earlier DfE (2011: 4) rhetoric and proposed vision to provide ‘a radically different system to support better life outcomes for young people’ as outlined in the following:

‘Parents’ confidence that their child’s needs are being met is vital to making the system feel less adversarial. A central piece of this jigsaw is the capacity and commitment of the education system to give every child and young person the chance to succeed. Every child, whether in a mainstream or special setting, deserves a world-class education to ensure that they fulfil their potential.’

(DfE, 2011: 57)

It could be argued that a driver for the increasing momentum for adopting co-production in practice is the expected improved economic outcomes for the State. If undertaking co-production leads to increased trust and confidence in the SEND system, it is likely this will result in fewer requests for EHC needs assessment and fewer disputes or tribunals. However, based on the evidence of the poor implementation of the SEND reforms (HoCEC, 2019) without the initial investment to realise this in practice, it may lead to further pressures on the system.

In principle, the new proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) continue to align to a deficit model and provide a continued version of the ‘separate shadow special education system’ (Soan and Monsen, 2023: 25). This could be considered problematic because it does not represent a change to the ‘architecture of the system’ (Lamb, 2009: 89). Already there have been critiques of the new proposals as adopting the

same principles and approaches of the past, and not going far enough to address failings, because it is providing more of the same. Soan and Monsen (2023: 25) argue the 'revised SEND Green Paper can be seen to be offering a fine-tuning and refocusing of existing legislation and practice ... it does not represent a radical departure from previous legislation.'

The recommendation from the House of Commons Education Committee (2019) was to introduce a new impartial role within the local authority to support parents proceeding with the EHC needs assessment process, yet this is not evident in the current proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). The principle of assigning an impartial, independent advocate acknowledges the complexity when there are competing forces in place which may hinder the collaborative practices required to secure the best educational opportunities for learners. As the current political direction moves away from assigning an impartial role, the SENCO role takes on more prominence in implementing the impending changes, as identified with the earlier SEND reforms in 2014 (Curran *et al.*, 2018; Hellowell, 2019). This presents challenge because the SENCO's ability to build successful collaborative relationships with parents is undoubtedly conflicted by the restrictive authoritarian system in which they operate (see Section 2.5.4). A move to a values-based education system will be explored in the next section as one way to manage these tensions.

## 2.6 A values-based approach to education: effecting co-production

The successive changes to the SEND system and reforms in 2014 have not improved the statutory assessment process for children, parents and professionals (DfE/DoHSC, 2022). In contrast to a consumerist, marketisation model, a values-based approach is explored as a possible way forward for supporting person-centred, collaborative decision-making to effect co-production in practice. Models across disciplines, including health and social care, are drawn upon to consider what might be applicable to an educational setting (Carpenter, 1997; DfES, 2009a; Genuine Partnerships, 2019; Herring *et al.*, 2017, SCIE, 2022).

### 2.6.1 Implementing person-centred practice

Hellowell (2019: 134) claims '[o]ne approach that seeks to facilitate the co-production of provision is person-centred planning'. This is evident throughout the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/ DoH, 2015) and is noted in the principles underpinning the coordinated assessment noting 'professionals and local authorities can ensure that children, young people and parents are involved in all aspects of planning and decision-making' (DfE/DoH, 2015: 148). Yet how to implement this in practice is not clear. Recommendation 28 in the Lamb Inquiry (2009) referred to the DCSF as commissioning National

Strategies<sup>8</sup> to 'provide training to support the development of a partnership approach' (*ibid.*, 2009: 65). There was some development in this area supported by recommendations 5 to 8, which focused on improved training for all staff working with children. However, implementing the suggested standardised training for a partnership approach was not adopted. Currently there is no explicit guidance on how to work in person-centred ways in order to acknowledge the values of the individual and family, or how this can be mediated in more complex or challenging situations.

Person-centred practice is complex and rooted in adopting a values-based approach. In Rogers (1995: 115) work related to person-centred therapy, he referred to the three conditions that need to be present to create a climate that is growth-promoting. He noted that these conditions were applicable to any situation 'where the development of the person is a goal' e.g. parent and child, student and teacher etc. The first condition is called 'genuineness, realness or congruence' the more the interaction can include the person without 'professional front or personal façade' the more constructive the outcome. The second condition is 'acceptance, or caring, or prizing' what Rogers' has called 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1995: 116). This includes a willingness to accept whatever feeling is being experienced and Rogers' claims 'such caring on the part of the therapist is nonpossessive. The therapist prizes the client in total rather than a conditional way' (Rogers, 1995: 116). The third condition is 'empathetic understanding'. Roger's (1995: 116) posits that 'this kind of sensitive, active listening is exceedingly rare in our lives. We think we listen, but we rarely do listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.' These principles underpinning person-centred approaches illustrate the complexity of adopting a values-based approach in practice. Providing a person-centred atmosphere is embedded in culture and ethos of the environment and the professionals operating within the environment and not something that can be simply applied. There is a requirement for a wider skill-set from professionals due to the need for effective dialogue to facilitate person-centred practice. Cribb and Gewirtz (2012: 512) argue professionals 'must develop a wider repertoire of communicative skills, which require new kinds of ethical identity - those of facilitator, collaborator, communicator and navigator.' This indicates the need for investment in resources and support to implement and embed person-centred approaches, such as providing appropriate training and shared frameworks to support participatory decision-making.

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<sup>8</sup> The National Strategies were a series of educational initiatives and directives introduced under New Labour DfES from 1998 through to 2010 with the aim to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools in England

### 2.6.2 Participatory decision-making

The *Children and Families Act* (2014: 19), mandates 'the importance of the child and his or her parent, or the young person, participating as fully as possible in decisions'. Decision making is a way of effecting participation in systems and processes and involving citizens in the process of governance. Stewart (2009: 3) considers this from a policy-making perspective and argues that participation is linked to deliberative or discursive democracy, and this describes 'the theory and practice of implementing participation by generating direct 'conversations' between government and citizens'. It could therefore provide a level of empowerment to individuals engaging with the State such as in the EHC needs assessment process.

The ways in which parents, schools and the educational system interact can lead to more complex factors that could hinder the voice of the individual as being part of the process. For example, Vincent (2000: 7) refers to the relationship between the parent and the school as an 'exemplar of relations between citizens and state institutions' and claims that education reflects citizenship today as essentially being passive in nature. If this is the case, and there is an assumed position of passivity, then this could reinforce a lack of desire or opportunity for participatory decision-making. One ethical dilemma related to implementing a requirement for shared decision-making is that it can be burdensome. The individual is no longer the passive recipient, but now must be involved. This can be onerous and not necessarily liberating. Furthermore, it may not necessarily always lead to greater powers illustrated with the 'shift from welfare users being constrained or oppressed by one limited script - that of a compliant parent or patient - to their being constrained or oppressed by a different script - that of a compliant participant' (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012: 510).

In engaging stakeholders, ideally governments are 'not just listening to them, but being prepared to take notice of them' (Stewart, 2009: 8). If the system is not enabling the opportunities to take notice of stakeholders such as parents and key professionals, it becomes tokenistic and possibly further fuels the dissatisfaction in the process. Therefore, it is essential to include the mechanisms for 'participating as fully as possible' (*Children and Families Act*, 2014: 19). Fung (2006) claims that the State interests will differ from the majority of citizens, and so by providing structures to facilitate more participation from citizens, it will positively influence aspects such as accountability, facilitating coalitions for policy development and countering elite opinions. However, an argument against this position is that institutions are already sufficiently democratic. By providing further devolvement, it could lead to disintegration, meaning that 'institutions with additional, more far-reaching forms are either doomed to ineffectiveness or, worse, can actually hinder democracy' (Stewart, 2009: 13).



Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation has been used to conceptualise increasing involvement in decision-making from non-participatory through to tokenism and then citizen control at the top of the ladder. Yet, this is not a simple and transactional process as noted by Cribb and Gewirtz (2012: 509) who refer to the often 'one dimensional' perspective on partnership working, where power or control is perceived as simply transferring (either in whole or part) from the professional to the service user. This leads to a simplistic notion that 'users become empowered rather than disempowered, [and] are made independent rather than dependent', but this one-dimensional position ignores the 'ethical complexities embedded in welfare relationships' (*ibid.*, 2012: 510). A concern here is the neglect of the 'relational dimensions of welfare within partnership discourses' (*ibid.*, 2012: 514). Cribb and Gewirtz (2012: 514) challenge a simple conception of partnership working by acknowledging relationships as 'promoting independence and acknowledging dependence at one and the same time'. It is important to recognise these complexities in participatory decision-making, including how power differentials undoubtedly influence the implementation of co-production.

### 2.6.3 Co-production

From the review of literature, there is no clear and definitive definition of co-production in relation to education, and as supported by Soan and Monsen (2023: 120) co-production is 'a relatively new term being used in education policy'. This, to some degree, must contribute to challenges in adopting co-production within education. Indeed, Lamb (2022: 22) argues that '[d]isentangling some of the terminology and assumptions behind different types of engagement could be helpful in thinking through how to develop, manage and assess interventions aimed at securing greater engagement.' In order to address this challenge, it is important to consider the developments leading to co-production as a political driver evident in current policy (DfE/DoHSC, 2023).

#### 2.6.3.1 Developments leading to co-production

Ostrom (1996) is often referred to as the first to utilise the term co-production. In her seminal paper she presented co-production as 'a process through which inputs from individuals who are not "in" the same organisation are transformed into goods and services' (Ostrom, 1996: 1073). This was a broad definition which could encompass businesses, rather than specifically focusing on the public sector or governmental organisations. Although, Ostrom (1996) recognized the challenges in implementation when there is a centralised government and that attitudinal changes in public agencies would be required in order to work effectively over time. She also highlighted that implementation of co-production would be dependent upon the resources and the mutual benefits of both parties.

Social, cultural and historical factors will shape co-production, such as the changes in legislation, political movements and cultural and societal changes over time. In relation to SEN there is a long

history of partnership working, and a range of terms that have been used to describe working with parents, some of which include: 'partnership', 'informing', 'working with', 'cooperation', 'collaboration', 'co-production' and 'co-working'. Frost (2005: 12) identified the challenge of the 'diverse and confusing numbers of words and phrases' for professionals working together and presented a continuum for partnership working (**Appendix C**). This can be useful for considering nuances of meaning between the different terms, but we are still in a position where language is used without clear definitions (Lamb, 2022). This can present challenges in developing shared understandings for working together.

More recently there has been an impetus for 'co-production' to be adopted in the ways in which parents of children with SEND are engaged in education (DfE, 2023a, DfE/DoHSC, 2023). This may be following a movement in public services more widely as co-production seems to be more established in health and care services than it is within education. For example, the 'Care Act 2014 specifically includes the concept of co-production in its statutory guidance' (SCIE, 2022: np). Additionally, NHS England adhere to the statutory guidance on working in partnership with people and communities (NHS, 2023) which adheres to the *Health and Care Act* (2022: np), which includes a section on 'Collaborative working'. With increased accountability on wider sectors working more closely together and the holistic nature of supporting children with more complex SEND (Todd, 2011), education, health and social care will undoubtedly interface because children's development includes all these domains. Separating the domains forensically, doesn't acknowledge the integrated nature of a child's development. All professionals, therefore, arguably need to be well equipped to work together and with families in the most inclusive and effective way to meet needs holistically.

#### *2.6.3.2 Definitions of co-production*

There is no standard definition for co-production for working in education, although there are a range of definitions which could be drawn upon to conceptualise co-production to support the implementation of the new policy directives for SEND (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Cahn (2000) posits that a co-production framework serves to bridge the market and non-market and in doing so elevates the non-market system (families, communities etc.) to a level of parity with the market (professionals, organisations etc.) and argues the market economy needs a healthy non-market economy. He argues that co-production enables society to harness professional expertise in a way that empowers: 'The relationship between professional and non-professional shifts from one of subordination and dependency to parity, mutuality and reciprocity' (Cahn, 2000: 35). These positive claims could be related to embedding co-production into the statutory assessment process as a way to fully involve

citizens in decision making. Yet, in some cases, this will require shifting mindsets and changes in culture as the parents are placed more centrally in the process.

Roper, Grey and Cadogan (2018: 1) claim co-production goes ‘beyond traditional consumer participation models’ and define co-production as ‘consumers involved in, or leading, defining the problem, designing and delivering the solution, and evaluating the outcome, either with professionals or independently’ (*ibid.*, 2018: 2). This definition as involving a range of processes illustrates that co-production is a process and not something which can be enacted as a singular event. The definition from SCIE (2022: np) also illustrates co-production as an ongoing process:

‘Co-production is not just a word, it’s not just a concept, it is a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them.’ (SCIE, 2022: np)

These definitions draw attention to ‘co-production’ as comprising of: people, relationships, communication and sharing underlying values. All of which cannot be simply adopted in practice without building the conditions for it to happen.

#### *2.6.3.3 Different types of co-production*

Co-production requires significant investment from all stakeholders, it is not a simple transactional process and there may be different levels at which parents and professionals can or wish to participate. In the same ways that there can be different levels of engagement, there are different levels in which co-production can be enacted.

Roper, Grey and Cadogan (2018) identify a range of stages for co-production including co-planning, co-design, co-evaluation and co-delivery. This could be conceptualised as being towards the top of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder and representing ‘citizen control’. However, this also illustrates the higher level of commitment required by all parties – it is an ongoing and developmental activity in working together at different stages of a process. This also gives rise to the potential for complexity in enacting co-production in practice. For example, consideration of how individuals, communities and organisations ‘negotiate autonomy while participating in coproduction’ (Goodwin, 2019: 512). This can be strengthened in some cases, and undermined in other situations. For example, Smith (2022: 12) argues most parents are likely to want greater decision-making powers for their own child’s education and ‘it is likely only to be a minority of parents who have the cognitive, physical, mental and financial capacity needed – or indeed the inclination – to want to engage strategically.’ This is a really important consideration, because forcing parents to co-produce when they are not in a position to do

so completely undermines the principles of co-production as a values-based, person-centred endeavour.

Although the potential benefits of integrating co-production are clear (Ostrom, 1996; Cahn, 2000; Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012), it is vital to recognise that there needs to be choice and multiple mechanisms within the system to enable parents to engage and participate at the right level for them personally. One approach will not meet all stakeholders’ needs. It is good therefore to conceptualise co-production as consisting of differing levels. Cahn (2000) refers to multiple levels of co-production, which include the individual (valuing an individual’s contribution), societal (agencies, institutions and organisations) and a social justice perspective (human rights and civil rights movements). It is therefore important to recognise the multiple ways in which co-production can be enacted.

Lamb’s (2022) typology for parental engagement has informed the conceptualisation of different levels of co-production (**Table 1**). This includes examples of how co-production might be realised for the different levels as well as considerations on how this might impact on practice. Co-production can vary quite significantly in practice based on whether it is co-production at an individual level, a school level, a local authority level or at a national level. It is important therefore to recognise these differences and also to allow movement within frameworks so that co-production can be effected at the right level for the individual situation or circumstances.

<b>Levels of co-production</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Considerations for levels of co-production</b>	<b>Supporting literature</b>
Individual	Parents and professionals working together to support children e.g. co-planning and target setting at annual reviews etc.	‘The engagement should meet parents where they are and build on the relationship with them’ (Lamb, 2022: 23).	Ostrom, 1996; Cahn, 2000; Goodwin, 2019; Smith, 2022; Lamb, 2022
Strategic (school level)	School level involvement e.g. co-designing policies	‘Danger of professionalising parental input or restricting to those who are familiar with the norms and culture of professional practice’ (Lamb, 2022: 24).	Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012; Lamb, 2022
Strategic (local or national level)	Local or national level e.g. co-evaluation on the management of budgets, commissioning services etc.	‘Requires a significant level of commitment and the right context in terms of legislative rights and technical and resource support (Lamb, 2022: 24).	Joshi and Moore, 2004; Roper, Grey and Cadogan, 2018; Lamb, 2022; DfE/DoHSC, 2023

**Table 1: Different levels of working models for co-production**

#### 2.6.4 Frameworks for co-production

Frameworks may have different functions, but in general the ‘structure of most frameworks is the identification of a set of concepts and their general relationships’ with the purpose of organising these to represent the ‘basic ideas of theory or conceptual thinking’ (Partelow, 2023: 510-11). Currently there are no specified frameworks for supporting co-production in education (or person-centred planning which is necessary to enact co-production) despite the requirement to implement this (DfE, 2023a; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Boseley and Crane (2018: 37) questioned how change can be embedded effectively without frameworks and ‘explicit guidance within SEN reforms’ (*ibid.*, 2018: 37), an issue reinforced in the outcomes identified in the House of Commons Education Committee report (HoCEC, 2019).

Providing appropriate training and a common framework which can be applied across the different professions involved in EHC needs assessment may support consistency and confidence. Within the SEND Code of Practice it states that ‘[p]ractitioners in all services involved in the assessment and planning process need to be skilled in working with children, parents and young people to help them make informed decisions. All practitioners should have access to training so they can do this effectively’ (DfE/ DoH, 2015: 149). As there are no specified common frameworks in place, there is no standard response to working with families. This can lead to variability, and although there is some evidence of good practice (Lamb, 2009; Curran *et al.*, 2017; Adams *et al.*, 2018; Shepherd *et al.*, 2018), there is also the danger that family contributions could be treated with a tokenistic response.

There are examples of partnership principles, models and frameworks for effective collaboration which could be drawn upon to consider the principles or foundations for developing a standardised framework across the professions. For example, Carpenter (1997: 24) identified the following as markers of good practice in comparing three intervention programmes in New Zealand, Australia and the UK:

- Family-focused service delivery
- Parents and professionals mutually valued
- Shared agenda: shared goals
- Collaborative working
- Effective evaluation

Consideration of shared values to underpin a framework is important. Partelow (2023: 511) raises the question over why some concepts and relationships are chosen over others and claims that ‘choices are often the result of the positionality of the framework’s creators.’ This reinforces frameworks as

social constructs, influenced by political, social and cultural dimensions. As such, it is important to realise this aspect and the values base by which frameworks are established. Carpenter's (1997) principles of good practice align with values-based practice and a person-centred approach. The shared, collaborative approach could also support the development of a basis for co-production.

More recently, the National Strategies included an initiative for improving relationships and communication through use of the *Structured Conversation* (DfES, 2009a). This included a model for conversations following a four staged approach of Explore, Focus, Plan Review. This participatory model aimed to '[f]acilitate a relationship that develops around the shared purpose of improving the educational achievement of young people with SEND' and allowed 'the free exchange of information and views' (DfES, 2009a: 6). The *Structured Conversation* model was part of the *Achievement For All* (DfES, 2009b) initiative. Lamb (2009) called for making these materials available after the *Achievement For All* pilot, however this was not taken forward as a standard approach across all education settings.

Many local authorities have devised their own frameworks for co-production, which is possibly in response to the requirement to co-produce, but without the national guidance or common framework to support this in practice. Rotherham Charter created 'The Four Cornerstones Approach to Co-production' (Genuine Partnerships, 2019) which include the following principles:

1. welcome and care
2. value and include
3. communicate
4. work in partnership

This can lead to the development of really useful materials and resources to support co-production, for example the Cornerstone Tools. Some of these approaches, frameworks and resources have been adopted or adapted to be used more widely, however, this localised approach tends to reinforce the variability for service users. Without consistency across areas and support to implement co-production at a national level, there will continue to be pockets of good practice and variable access or engagement taking place.

Drawing on the discipline of health care, the Herring *et al.* (2017) framework for balanced decision-making, which results in 'autonomy-through-partnership', could be applied in schools. This framework may be suited for the EHC needs assessment and resultant management of the plans because it fosters collaborative conversations. The framework is 'balanced' because alongside acknowledging the importance of the individual's perspective or values (rather than what might be deemed in their best

interest), it notes the individual's decision cannot be absolute, and the conclusion should be agreed collaboratively. There are two aspects to consider:

1. What might be considered as reasonable for someone in a similar situation
2. What is the particular perspective of the person involved (their values)

Neither aspect takes precedence, but requires the balancing of one with the other. This is an important consideration because in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) there is recognition of possible conflict, but recognising that 'it is in the child's best interests for a positive dialogue between parents, teachers and others to be maintained, to work through points of difference and establish what action is to be taken' (DfE/DoH, 2015: 22). This highlights the importance of 'dialogue' and ensuring communication channels are open to work through possible differences in 'values' in order to reach a consensus. It is worth acknowledging that rather than effecting genuine power over decision making in the statutory assessment process, the involvement of the parents has been seen in the past as facilitating 'the smooth operation of the bureaucratic procedures themselves' (Armstrong, 1995: 145). The partnership model in this instance would serve to endorse the system as a method of control that elicits compliance from the parent. However, the balanced decision-making model acknowledges that the professional is 'not in a position to take the "right" decision' (Herring *et al.*, 2017: 590). The professional holds expertise of the educational context, and it is through consideration for the individual and the parents' underpinning values, that the decision making can be based on shared values and priorities.

#### 2.6.5. Decision making as dialogue

At the heart of any framework for participatory decision-making to take place will be dialogue. The quality of the dialogue and the range of skills required by the professional is essential, such as well-developed communication and conflict resolution. This focus on direct interaction as being fundamental was also foregrounded by Lamb (2009: 40) noting that 'no information system will be valued that does not make provision for face-to-face communication'.

The balancing approach proposed by Herring *et al.*, (2017: 593) is in 'direct contrast with a consumerist understanding of autonomy of patient choice' (Herring *et al.*, 2017: 593). As noted in the current systems, parents are limited on the choices and autonomy they really can affect because the provisions are driven by market forces. Parents have increased rights (*Children and Families Act, 2014*), but with the recognition that this should not overrule the decisions of the professionals, in the same way that professionals should not overrule parents. This dilemma is also acknowledged by Cribb and Gewirtz (2012: 513) who note the professionals have to balance 'how far to enable and/or allow

welfare users to make choices or decisions that professionals judge harmful to others and society at large'. Essentially, the principles in practice that are focused on decision making in relation to SEN confirm:

'Parents' views are important during the process of carrying out an EHC needs assessment and drawing up or reviewing an EHC plan in relation to a child. Local authorities, early years providers and schools should enable parents to share their knowledge about their child and give them confidence that their views and contributions are valued and will be acted upon. At times, parents, teachers and others may have differing expectations of how a child's needs are best met. Sometimes these discussions can be challenging but it is in the child's best interests for a positive dialogue between parents, teachers and others to be maintained, to work through points of difference and establish what action is to be taken.'

(DfE/DoH, 2015: 21)

## 2.7 Chapter summary

The review of literature in Chapter 2 provided context and background to developments in policy and practice related to parents' opportunities for participatory decision-making with SENCOs. Initially this included a historical overview of the developments of partnership working with parents, and in particular, in relation to the statutory assessment processes and management of Education, Health and Care plans.

It was clear from the literature there are a number of challenges that have persisted within the SEND system related to working with parents, which led to exploration of the following areas:

- The current wider educational climate impacting upon SEND
- Neoliberalism in education and the impact of consumerism within SEND
- The influence of power in partnership working and the resultant tensions for parents and SENCOs
- Values-based practice to support placing people as central
- Models for working together, including co-production
- Dialogue and participatory decision-making

There were some identified gaps in the literature which included studies which looked solely at the parents' or the SENCOs' perspectives as opposed to studies exploring perspectives of both groups simultaneously. There was also a gap in the literature specifically exploring co-production within SEND education. These identified gaps are aspects which have been addressed in the design of my study



which explores both parents' and the SENCOs' perspectives on working together as well as their understanding of co-production.

#### **Reflection on literature**

Initially I was quite concerned that I was unable to find relevant sources of literature related to parents and SENCOs working co-productively from the systematic approach adopted. I met with the university librarian who showed me how to use the databases for conducting searches and explain how these can be more suitable as they draw on a wider base of sources. This was useful in identifying specific articles (**Appendix A**) which then enabled me to broaden my search using citation pearl growing. I also realised that much of the literature that was relevant were reports and grey literature in the public domain and so adopting a more traditional systematic literature review as the sole approach would not serve to include all relevant sources.

Since conducting the initial search in March 2020 there have been a number of publications relevant to the area of this study and so keeping up to date has been important to ensure I am engaging with the most current ideas in the field. Since commencing the study there seems to have been a growing body of interest in this specific area.

### 3. Chapter 3 - Methodology

#### 3.1 Position of study and self

This chapter presents the methodology for this study to consider the overarching research question **‘What are parents’ and SENCOs’ experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?’** From this study, the aim is to gain an improved understanding of the relationship between the SENCO and the parent based on their collaboration during the EHC needs assessment and management of the resultant EHC plan. By gaining insights into another person’s thoughts and beliefs, this produces knowledge of what and how people think about this particular phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Essentially all researchers and research will be positioned according to ontological beliefs on ‘reality’<sup>10</sup> and epistemological beliefs relating to the creation of knowledge. This study was informed by the premise that experience<sup>11</sup> is constructed within the mind of the individual and therefore there is no single reality or truth, as reality is created by individuals. Essentially the ‘same set of events can be narrated in many different ways’ (Hammersley, 2013: 37). This leads to philosophical questions on existence itself and what makes the world meaningful. My ontological position in relation to fundamental understanding of the world and reality informed my approach and was based mainly on the phenomenological philosophical positions of Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1969), which encompasses an interpretivist phenomenological position.

This study was underpinned by a qualitative approach, with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) at the centre of the methods focusing on human experience of a specific process and how the individual makes sense of their situation. This moves away from transcendental and descriptive phenomenology of Husserl (1927), to mainly align to hermeneutics and existential phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Sartre, 1969). I am interested in how people make sense of their experience or situation rather than attempting to identify a specific ‘truth’ or facts regarding the situation. From this position, epistemologically, reality needs to be interpreted and these interpretations are used to discover underlying meaning regarding the events and the reality this is based upon for particular individuals. Meaning is brought to the material world by human understanding and interpretation. However, this will inevitably lead to many different *realities* rather

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<sup>9</sup> References to phenomenon / phenomena in this study relate to the Kantian notion of an object of experience ‘our concepts can only yield knowledge through “being related merely to appearances, i.e., objects of a possible experience,”’ (Guyer, 2014: 148)

<sup>10</sup> The term ‘reality’ can be questioned from an ontological position, for the purposes of this study, reality is argued as being relativist rather than realist in nature.

<sup>11</sup> The term experience is used as the conduit for exploring phenomena in this study and so ‘experience’ provides our representation of the object being explored (Guyer, 2014).

than one fixed position. With this position, there is no *one truth* or universal behaviour, but the individual experiences can aid and progress our understanding because we engage with, and relate to, the recounted experiences based on our own understanding.

From a personal perspective, I am conscious that my experiences will have influenced my reality and therefore my position in this study. My professional experiences and knowledge include holding the position of SENCO during the SEND reforms in 2014. I was directly involved in managing the transfer of Statements to Education Health and Care plans and so my experiences of supporting parents at that time will influence my position. I lecture on the National Award for SEN Coordination which is currently the mandatory qualification SENCOs must achieve to practice, although this is changing to the National Professional Qualification (DfE, 2023a). This informed my understanding of the context in which SENCOs were operating and the impact policy and legislative changes have had on their role and practice more generally. Creswell and Creswell (2023) present the constructivist world view on research as acknowledging we are influenced by our historical and social perspective from the culture in which we live. They note that 'qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also interpret what they find, an interpretation shaped by the researcher's own experiences and background' (Creswell and Creswell, 2023: 10). Therefore, through the research process, I was able to bring my own position to the interpretation of the data and influence the findings. However, it is important to acknowledge the lens by which I engaged with the data. My past experiences have led to a deep, ingrained interest in social justice and so this had to be addressed in my analysis due to the interpretive nature of this approach. Yet, rather than seeing this as a limitation in the study, this hermeneutic approach embraces the researcher as part of the process. Hermeneutics and phenomenology are not separate, but a dynamic process, because '[w]ithout the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin. 2022: 31).

There are two aspects of phenomenology that link closely to the aims of the research. First the interconnectedness of the self and the world or reality we inhabit. Second the essentially humanistic element present in phenomenology, which focuses closely upon the individual's lived experience and could be argued, to an extent, is person centred. These two aspects relate to my ontological position as a researcher and are now discussed further in relation to this study.

### 3.1.1 The interconnected aspect

In this study the primary focus is relationships and collaboration between stakeholders through the EHC needs assessment and management of the resultant EHC plan. Therefore, the interconnected

nature of the self within the world and how this interaction brings meaning, underpins this study, the methodological approach, and it is fundamental to the research question.

Heidegger (1962) questioned what is 'being' and related humans to the term 'Dasein' noting that 'Da' referred to there or here and 'sein' related to 'being' which then emphasised the notion of 'being there or here'. This represents the principle that humans are bound in time and the notion of temporality, and as such, we are able to look over our whole life and we are conscious of death. This enables the Dasein to position the self against the world in which we live and reinforces the interconnected nature. The Dasein and the world are not distinct entities. Heidegger argued that Dasein cannot exist separated from the world, it is intrinsic and interconnected and not just a collection of external objects. This phenomenological concept of *intersubjectivity* refers to the 'shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 13). Intersubjectivity, then is a key concept relating to our ability to communicate with each other and to also make sense of each other.

The theoretical perspective of interpretivism highlights the importance of others because reality is interpreted, 'dasein alone is incomplete' (Inwood, 1997: 40). This is a key aspect of Heidegger's philosophical position but also a principle of the collaborative practices required for the EHC needs assessment and planning process to be effective to lead to positive outcomes for learners. To consider other's values and positions is an essential part of the process. Choice is also key in relation to this study which is focused on the decision-making process. Heidegger's (1962) Dasein violates Aristotle's ontology because it is not a substance with an essential nature and with properties. There is an element of possibility, Dasein is not an actual thing but the possibility of various ways of being, which indicates a level of choice and autonomy. In the study, this was explored through the experiences of stakeholders' decision-making and how they collaborated in order to enact, as far as they were able, their choice in the process of EHC needs assessment.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) was informed by Heidegger's position in that he argues for a 'more contextualised phenomenology' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 13) and took this notion further to consider the embodied nature of our relationships with the world e.g., the body shapes the essential character of our knowing about the world. We are positioned as looking out at the world and so will see the *other* as different from ourselves because we are not subsumed within the world. Therefore, by always beginning with the position that the *other* is different, our observations will originate from a position of difference. We can observe or feel empathy for others, but no matter how close we may be to another individual, we will not be able to entirely share their experience, 'our situations cannot be superimposed on each other' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 356).

Therefore, we are interconnected in that our perceptions are informed by the world and our engagement with it, creating the position of difference. We are all interconnected and so we are unable to completely detach ourselves from the experiences of others we encounter or engage with.

### 3.1.2 The humanistic, person-centred aspect

As the literature review revealed in Chapter 2, there has been a move towards collaboration and person-centred approaches more recently in political and sociological domains. One theme from the literature review, and a central theme for this thesis, is that a values-based approach is required for effective EHC needs assessment and this can be facilitated with co-production between stakeholders. We have moved to a position where the EHC needs assessment process is more person centred in legislation, however, in practice this is not always effectively implemented (Adams *et al.*, 2018; Boseley and Crane, 2018; Sales and Vincent, 2018; HoCEC, 2019; National Audit Office, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Roper, Grey and Cadogan (2018) argue that traditional models of political and economic power will impact upon the implementation of co-production and that cultural shifts will need to take place to facilitate this type of working. They also note that in some instances co-production is not appropriate and that other levels of participation might be more appropriate. For example, when there are pre-determined targets that might be in conflict with stakeholders' priorities. They identify the importance of acknowledging the level of co-production that is possible and that 'the term co-production is not co-opted' so that participation is happening at a lower level than intended (*ibid.*, 2018: 11). Person-centred planning is a key aspect for consideration and at the core of the study. Therefore, this humanistic aspect of phenomenology facilitates the principle of a person-centred approach within the study itself.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 27) refer to the IPA research process as 'elementally a human one' highlighting that it is the lived experience which should be the focus and not the 'philosophical account of the lived experience' (*ibid.*, 2022: 27). This connects with an ontological position of placing the person at the centre. Parents and SENCOs share an important relationship in the EHC needs assessment and planning process. Any tensions or even possible break-down in their relationships could be costly for the child, further highlighting the need to adopt a methodological approach that will place due significance on the participants' voices. Phenomenology may be idiographic in nature, but this does serve to foreground the person's experience as central to the study.

With phenomenological research there are challenges with representing the lived experience of the participants as closely as possible. However, as already noted, the phenomenological researchers are interested in the experiential world of the participants rather than an ultimate reality or truth. Willig (2013: 16) provides an analogy for the researcher as resembling 'a person-centred counsellor who

listens to the client's account of their experience empathically, with an attitude of unconditional, positive regard and without questioning the external validity of what the client is saying.' Therefore, the participant is central and recognising what is, and is not, shared will form their reality of the experience. Bruner (2004: 694) notes that life stories are 'highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences' which will undoubtedly impact upon the way in which experiences are shared and recounted by participants. What people shared in the interviews may not be a *true representation*, but it will be *their representation* of the experience and how they chose to portray it, which reinforces the person-centred focus.

### 3.2 Why IPA?

IPA was selected as the core approach for this study, but it has been framed with other qualitative methods in order to provide further context for the study. IPA originated relatively recently (Smith, 1996), in response to the need for a qualitative approach that could capture the experiential, but that could 'still dialogue with mainstream psychology' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 4). Although originating within the discipline of psychology, this approach is suited to 'people concerned with the human predicament' (*ibid.*, 2022: 4) and has been adopted into wider disciplines including the social sciences.

Willig (2013: 17) notes that interpretative phenomenological research 'seeks to generate knowledge about the quality and texture of experience as well as about its meaning within a particular social and cultural context.' This aligns to the aims of the study to enable a close examination of a significant event which is personal to the individual, but not in isolation from the context as a pure description of the phenomenon. It is the interpretation to gain meaning within the context which provides opportunity to secure further critical and conceptual knowledge of the process. IPA was selected as the central methodological approach owing to this theoretical, underlying principle.

IPA also has the flexibility to be framed with other qualitative methods in order to provide further contextual details to support the main focus of the study. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 47) refer to 'bolder designs' whereby studies can include wider areas of foci within the methodology to enhance and provide new ways to explore the identified phenomena. I wanted to use other qualitative approaches to gather data pre and post conducting IPA to support a richer context for analysis (see Section 3.3). Therefore, because IPA is a method which is evolving, it 'is a new and developing approach that leaves more room for creativity and freedom to explore on the part of the researcher who uses it' (Willig, 2013: 99) and so this flexibility suited the design of my study.

There are three theoretical perspectives underpinning IPA, these are phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, which will be discussed in relation to this study.

### 3.2.1 Phenomenology

Although there are differing forms of phenomenology, there is a shared concern with understanding how a phenomenon becomes apparent and visible. Unlike, Husserl's (1927) transcendental phenomenology, IPA is more aligned to Heidegger's (1962) interpretative position which is underpinned by existential phenomenology. Heidegger's position differed from Husserl in that he acknowledged the researcher as integral to the process of phenomenology. Understanding comes from relating the experience to within a context rather than holding the belief that the researcher can transcend or separate themselves in the analysis. Larkin *et al.* (2006: 104) refers to the two levels of analysis in IPA, the first which aims to place the researcher as close as possible to the lived experience of the participant, and then the second level of analysis which 'positions the initial "description" in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context.' This study will therefore aim to position the analysis within a critical and conceptual frame based on the 'participants' personal "sense-making" activities' (*ibid.*, 2006:104)

### 3.2.2 Hermeneutics

Although originally founded as a method for interpreting complex and archaic texts, hermeneutics has developed as a philosophical position. The theory of interpretation (hermeneutics) has today become universal in that it can be applied across disciplines and in all contexts, 'interpretation comes into play whenever we try to understand spoken or written language or, indeed, any human acts' (Willig, 2017: 275).

Heidegger's (1962) interpretative phenomenology recognises that we will always bring our own perceptions to the analysis, and this 'fore-conception' will influence our interpretation (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 20). There is also the understanding that as we continue with data analysis as part of the study, our understanding develops and changes and is influenced by what we have read and engaged with, therefore demanding reflection on the ways in which our own position may evolve over the process. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018: 13) address this when they note 'method cannot be disentangled from theory and other elements of preunderstanding, since assumptions and notions in some sense determine interpretations and representations of the object of study. Hermeneutics is thus an important form of reflection.' The process is therefore reflective in nature and demands reflexivity of the researcher. Etherington (2004: 21) defined reflexivity as 'a difference in how we view the 'self': as a 'real' entity to be 'discovered' and 'actualized' or as a constantly changing sense of our selves within the context of our changing world.' This study included not only epistemological

reflexivity related to the research question and data, but also personal reflexivity related to the position of the researcher during the process. In order to address my fore-conceptions, I kept a reflective journal (Smith and Nizza, 2022) and drew on this to include some of the key reflections as I have progressed through the research. I have included reflexive boxes throughout the study to represent how these reflections signify 'a constantly changing sense' of self within the context of the research (Etherington, 2004: 21). This approach is outlined in more detail in section 3.4.

### 3.2.3 Idiography

Idiography relates to the focus on exploring particular instances to gain a unique insight on an individual's involvement in a specific phenomenon. IPA is not concerned with larger nomothetic approaches in order to identify claims which may be representative of the population.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022 :24) align to Larkin *et al.* (2006) in explaining the 'commitment to the particular' in IPA as operating at two levels. Level one is the commitment to the sense of detail and depth of analysis, which is thorough and systematic. Level two is how phenomena has been understood from the perspective of particular people in a particular context. Therefore, this study consists of a small purposive sample of participants. This could be considered as limiting because the data will be for specific experiences rather than considering what might be typical across a population. However, because Dasein is 'thoroughly immersed and embedded in a world of things and relationships' (*ibid.*, 2022: 24) it is in relation to a phenomenon and not necessarily solely owned by that individual, there is a wider connectedness that could say something of every person's experience. Consequently, it could be argued that '[d]elving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 31).

### 3.2.4 What are the potential limitations of IPA?

Language is used as a tool to convey the participants' experiences to the researcher, it 'is simply a mode of communication, reflective of reality (objective or subjective)' (Terry *et al.*, 2017: 34). Experience is therefore presented through a medium and there is a reliance on the 'representational validity of language' (Willig, 2013: 94) which could be called into question. I am keen to gain an understanding which is as close as possible to the participant's experience, yet it is impossible to have direct access to another person's experience or another person's perspective of that experience. This will always be mediated by the way in which it has been conveyed (through the language) and so the transcript presents how someone perceives and speaks about an experience rather than the experience itself.

The participants' ability to sufficiently convey their experience through language could be questioned. I am reliant on a participant to be able to confidently and competently engage with the process to



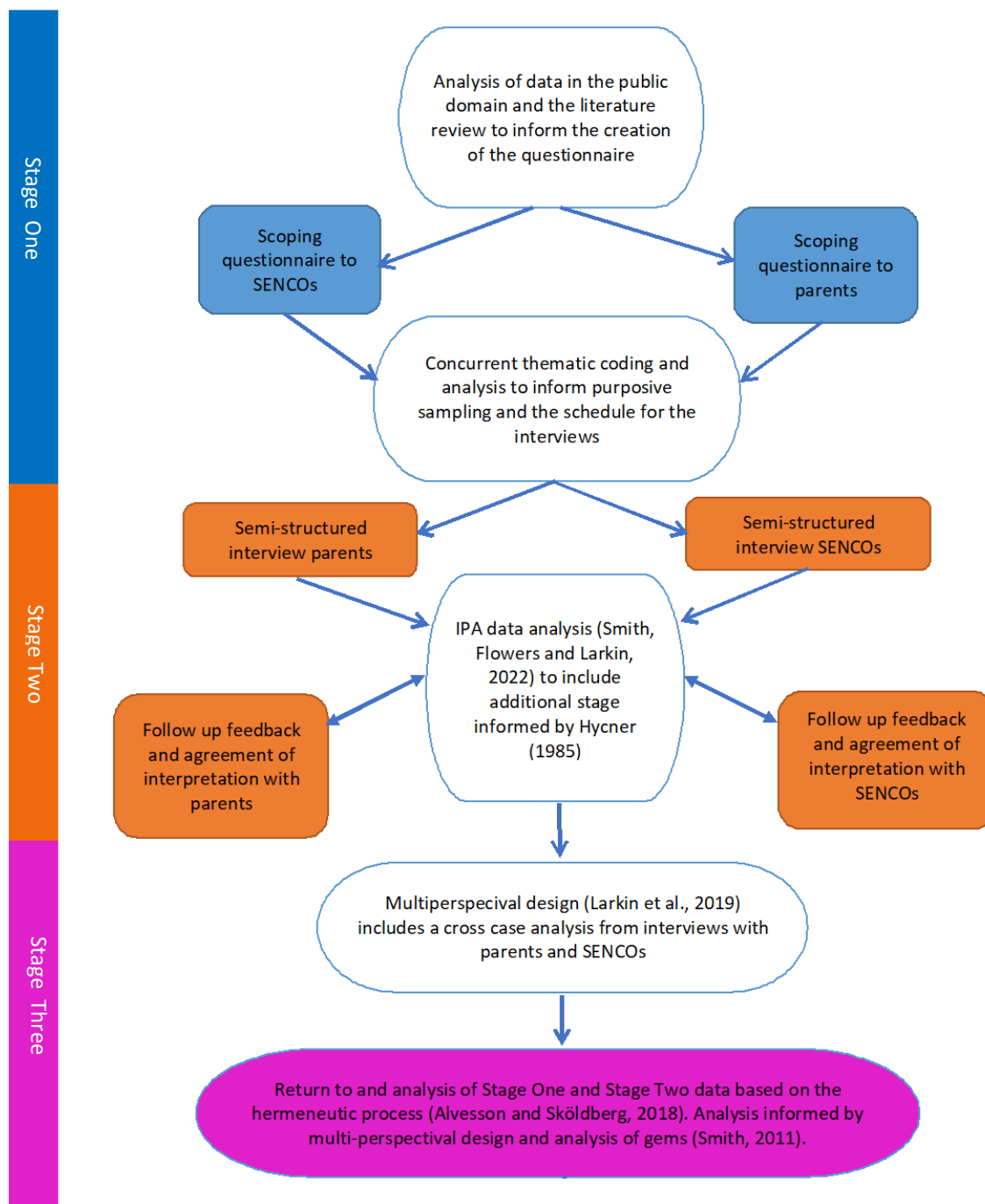
convey their experience, and whether they can ‘capture subtleties and nuances of their physical and emotional experiences’ (Willig, 2013: 95). This could be more challenging for a participant with learning differences or if the discussion touches on something which is more challenging for them to recall emotionally. Cultural aspects could also influence communication as Chodorow (1999: 166) argues that ‘thoughts and feelings are entangled and that thoughts are thought in culturally specific languages’. It was therefore particularly important in this study to ensure that the interview schedule (**Appendix F**) was planned carefully to move from an initial focus on concrete and descriptive ideas, to the more demanding abstract ideas, which deal with more complex notions and potentially elicit emotional responses. It was also important to include appropriate prompts to support engagement, which is outlined in section 3.3.2.

Another critique of IPA is that it documents and describes a phenomenon but does not necessarily explain it. Phenomenological research is ‘concerned with how the world presents itself to people as they engage with it in particular contexts and with particular intentions. It does not make claims about the nature of the world itself’ (Willig, 2013: 95). This enables the researcher to gain rich and detailed understanding of a person’s experience but does not always provide opportunities to understand why such events or processes have taken place. That is why the design of this research had stages pre and post the IPA study, in order to further contextualise the participants’ experiences and to acknowledge possible causes and origins alongside the individuals’ representations of their experience. Therefore, to some degree, this approach mitigated this critique of solely describing a phenomenon.

IPA was selected as opposed to other approaches because it is the most suited for the research question. Willig (2013) refers to the similarities between IPA and Grounded Theory in that they are both methods interested in gaining insight into participants’ world perceptions. Unlike grounded theory, IPA focuses on the main experiential features and is concerned with the detailed nuanced experiences. This suits the research question which focuses on the experiences of the individuals rather than generating theory regarding which factors may have influenced the phenomenon. Similarly, case studies could have been selected as a methodological approach for this study, however it could be argued that IPA goes further in placing the voice of the participants as central to the study as argued in 3.1.2.

### 3.3 Overall design and research stages

A three-stage approach was adopted in this study. The diagram (**Figure 3**) illustrates how the study set out to address the research question: **‘What are parents’ and SENCOs’ experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?’**



**Figure 3: Diagram to illustrate the design of the study**

### 3.3.1 Stage One: Scoping Questionnaire

A scoping questionnaire was selected as the first stage for the study to provide an opportunity to determine if dominant themes emerged from SENCOs' and parents' responses to the EHC needs assessment and planning process. This stage also informed the selection of the sample of participants for Stage Two of the research.

### 3.3.1.1 Questionnaire design

The 'staged sequence for planning a questionnaire' was followed (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 472). This addressed factors such as ensuring the content was appropriate and aligned with the concepts being explored, as well as ensuring accessibility for the respondents (**Appendix G**). The design also included comparable questions for parents and SENCOs to enable analysis of the same concepts across both groups of participants. For example, each had questions on the sense of control over decision making during the process.

The language used in the questionnaire was carefully considered to ensure that this was clear and accessible to the layperson. Difficult terms such as 'statutory assessment' was substituted with 'EHC plan' to ensure consistency and avoid language which may be less transparent. Ensuring the language is clear and familiar (Lee, 1993) can also reassure participants' who might experience sensitivities over engaging with the questionnaire. An introduction to the research and participant information was made available in both video and written format to aid accessibility. Respondents may come from a wide range of social, cultural and educational backgrounds and so this approach may have assisted in overcoming barriers to participating in the research.

- **Types of question**

The questions included closed, nominal, multiple-choice questions, ordinal, rating scale questions and open-ended, word-based questions. The closed questions maximised accessibility and enabled ease of comparison between responses. This was useful in considering the parental and SENCO responses on comparable questions and in identifying emerging themes within the data from these two groups of participants. However, respondents may interpret the same questions differently, so anchor statements were provided throughout for the rating scales, for example *Not in control* and *Completely in control*. This provided a degree of common discernibility and therefore possibly greater reliability in responses (Krosnick and Presser, 2010).

Including some open questions was essential because as Sudman and Bradburn (1982) note, providing respondents with an opportunity to use their own words enables them to address sensitive topics. The 'respondents are not passive data providers' (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 471). There will have been some form of intrusion upon their lives with this survey because it addressed sensitive issues. There is the consideration that some parents and SENCOs may have felt strongly about contributing to the study depending upon their experiences of the EHC needs assessment process and management of the resultant EHC plans. However, due to the methodological approach of IPA, only a limited number of

participants were invited to participate in Stage Two. Therefore, it was important to include the option for all participants to have their voices heard with an open question at the end of the questionnaire.

- **Structure of questionnaire**

The final version of the questionnaire included a sequence which related to the chronological process of EHC needs assessment, including sections on the application for an EHC plan through to completion. Initial questions were simple, factual and non-threatening, followed by closed questions, then some open questions and finally the potentially more sensitive demographic questions. It was hoped that the move from factual to abstract over the course of the questionnaire supported engagement and completion of the questionnaire.

### *3.3.1.2 Pilot*

A pilot of this questionnaire was conducted to increase ‘reliability, validity and practicability’ (Cohen *et al.* 2018: 496). Five experts in the field were invited to critique the first version of the questionnaire (**Appendix H**) to ensure this was accessible and clear for the participants and relevant content was included. Cohen *et al.* (2018: 496) state ‘the wording of questionnaires is of paramount importance and that pretesting is crucial to their success’, the pilot aimed to address any misleading language or language that is unduly negative or positive. However, the feedback enabled the questionnaire to be developed in a number of ways, which is outlined below:

- **Accessibility**

The pilot questionnaire only included a video format providing details of the research. It was suggested that providing information about the project in written form as well as video form, would be more inclusive of respondents who might be neurodiverse or to meet individual preferences. There were also adjustments to the video to create a less formal feel, improve on the quality of the recording and address the phraseology of some sections to ensure clarity.

The opening and close of the questionnaire were adjusted to improve accessibility. The opening of the questionnaire was less official by including a message of thanks to respondents for their interest in the research. The final page of the questionnaire was adjusted to include a reminder of the right to withdraw and provided contact details again, providing another opportunity for respondents to record this information.

- **Structure of the questionnaire**

Some of the initial information on the pilot version included personal demographic questions, such as current occupation alongside the information for creating an identifier (initials and the first part of a

post code). This raised two issues that could be concerning to parents and may lead to them disengaging. One issue was that it was unclear which questions related directly to the identifier. Participants could feel more vulnerable and identifiable by sharing personal demographic information alongside the information that means their questionnaire can be identified should they decide to withdraw from the study.

The second issue related to the content of the questionnaire and the expectation that the initial questions should be focused on the experiences of the EHC needs assessment process, assuring the initial questions and content are 'meaningful and interesting' (Cohen *et al*, 2018: 341). Furthermore, details of age, income and educational background could be considered as private and possibly sensitive (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982). This section was therefore included as an optional section and placed at the end of the questionnaire. This change aimed to reduce the likelihood of unreliable responses or increased bias due to encountering questions at the earliest stage which could make the respondents feel vulnerable.

- **Omissions**

It was raised that the questionnaire did not include a question on the child's broad area of need. This omission was addressed to include a question on the child's primary needs identified on the Education, Health and Care plan. Another omission was that some parents may have more than one child with an EHC plan. I therefore included a message to address this in the final version of the questionnaire.

Feedback on the pilot raised omissions in the multiple-choice categories for the question: *How did you find out about applying for an Education, Health and Care plan?* It is important to ensure that for any multiple-choice questions, it avoids 'missing choices', so the category *internet search* was added (Champagne, 2014: 41). It was suggested that *Can't remember* should also be added as a choice, however this question was created to determine the avenues of information being accessed by parents, so rather than providing an exhaustive list, only certain relevant elements would feature. The category *other* was provided, should an alternative response be required.

- **Sensitive questions**

The question: *Did the Education, Health and Care plan lead to the outcomes you hoped for your child?* was raised as more difficult to answer because it may take some time before progress and outcomes become evident for children and young people. This question was changed from a dichotomous question to a rating scale in order to account for the possible nuances in the responses. In addition, an open question was created to help to qualify this response by asking: *What was the main outcome*

*you hoped for your child by gaining the Education, Health and Care plan?* Making this much more specific for parents and SENCOs because there may have been a range of outcomes hoped for when the request for EHC needs assessment was made. With the question: *How in control of the process did you feel?* Two further open questions were added to ask what made respondents feel in control or out of control in order to gain a better picture of this aspect.

### *3.3.1.3 Administering questionnaire and sample*

The final version of the scoping questionnaire was launched in October 2020 and was open for responses until January 2021 (**Appendix I**). The original approach to recruitment for the scoping questionnaire included a targeted and direct method, contacting parents through parent advisory groups and forums and SENCOs through professional networks, contacts and alumni to the National Award for SEN Coordination.

However, in addition to this approach, the use of social media was utilised to facilitate reaching a wider demographic across England for the scoping questionnaire. Private groups on Facebook were identified as the most appropriate form of social media because the groups are managed to ensure only relevant content is shared and only suitable members are allowed to join (e.g. only parents, professionals or SENCOs). Consent to share the questionnaire was sought from the administrator/s for these groups. This ensured the process was agreed and conducted within the guidelines of their Facebook Group Rules. All professional networks and the Facebook groups were documented alongside information on engagement with the research (**Appendix J**).

Social media provided the ‘ability to transcend boundaries – social, geographical, [and] methodological’ (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017: 59). The approach not only reduced geographical boundaries, but also social boundaries and may have provided more diverse responses because it included participants who might not attend formal professional groups and forums. This could have provided data relative to a wider national context in taking forward the study. Furthermore, this research was conducted during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, owing to this it became necessary to adapt the approach, so this was in line with regulations on social distancing as well as the University requirements in relation to conducting research during this period (CCCU, 2021).

In some cases, when using social media there can be questions over the principles of gaining informed consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, especially if data was collected from public sources. However, ‘informed consent becomes necessary to obtain when data is collected from private or closed online platforms or websites’ (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017: 58). The only data collected was from the questionnaire after informed consent was gained. Any other data provided on

the social media site by the participants was not used in this research and therefore did not present further ethical issues regarding informed consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017: 63) note that when participants actively complete research online, such as in forums or focus groups etc. there is less concern over the legitimacy of the researchers because 'they interact with the researcher rather than being a passive bystander to the research.' The research was conducted in this way with clear information on how to contact the researcher, how data is managed and information on how to withdraw from the research if the participants decided they no longer wanted to participate.

The sample for Stage One of the research included a non-probability approach because it 'avoids representing the wider population; it seeks only to represent a particular group (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 214). Other sampling approaches such as a probability or random samples were not considered as suitable because there was no intention to draw statistical data from the questionnaire, the aim was to undertake a scoping questionnaire to 'explore the particular group under study, not to generalize' (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 223). In qualitative research the sample sizes are not determined by clear rules, it is 'informed by 'fitness for purpose', and sample size, therefore, might vary from one to many' (Cohen *et al.* 2018: 224). The expectation was for a minimum of 20-30 responses from SENCOs and parents through non-probability convenience sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2017: 218) based on access to the participants that met the criteria for the study. The sample size for both groups was larger than anticipated with 76 parents and 84 SENCOs contributing, but this served to provide a larger data set from which to gain 'rich and relevant information' (Flick, 2009: 123). Only parents who had completed the EHC needs assessment process were invited to be part of the study. This reduced the risk of distress or discomfort in discussing personal experiences which were still being experienced by the parent. Furthermore, it was important to ensure there was no interference in the EHC needs assessment process itself, and so the participation criteria meant only parents who had gained an EHC plan between the period of September 2014 to August 2019 could participate. This meant there was no possibility the research could affect outcomes of the procedure.

Information on the research was provided by email to alumni and existing SENCOs through professional networks. It was important existing students were not invited to participate because it could lead to the false belief that not participating may hinder their ability to complete the course successfully. All participants were made aware their involvement was voluntary, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage during the process.

### 3.3.1.4 Analysis of the questionnaires

Moser and Kalton (1977) refer to editing the responses as the first stage to identify any errors in responses. This consists of three central tasks which include checking for the completeness (all answers responded to), the accuracy of the responses (checking for any obvious mistakes) and the uniformity of the responses based on the understanding of the instructions in the questionnaire. One response from the SENCO data set was not included due to refusal to consent to participate in the research in the initial questions.

The data from the closed questions were presented in a useable format for analysis based on using an online survey. The parents and SENCOs were provided with identical questions in the questionnaires, these comparable open text questions are outlined in **Table 2**.

Comparable open text-based questions	Parents Question numbers	SENCOs Question numbers
Did you feel supported during the process and if so by whom?	12	13
How were you kept informed during the process?	13	14
Please explain anything you experienced that made you feel in control during the process?	14a	15a
Please explain anything you experienced that made you feel out of control during the process?	14b	15b
What was the main outcome you hoped for by gaining the Education, Health and Care plan?	15	16
What was the most useful or positive aspect of the process in applying for and gaining an Education, Health and Care plan?	18	19
Please provide any further information you would like to share about gaining a plan that you have not had an opportunity to do so.	32	29

**Table 2: Overview of comparable open text-based questions on the Parent and SENCO Questionnaires**

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 248) was used to analyse the data from the open text-based questions in the questionnaires because it enabled an ‘open and iterative analytical process’ and provided a framework for an inductive approach to analysis. It was important that *posteriori* coding was adopted rather than *priori* (pre-ordinate) codes, so the next stage of the research was determined by the data and not preconceptions of the issues that had been identified from the literature and current political context. Organising the data with a pre-ordinate framework limits the opportunity for additional factors to emerge. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was therefore an appropriate method because the coding of data ‘is an organic and evolving process of potentially relevant meaning in the dataset’ from familiarisation through to theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 236). It was important to select an approach that is *emic* and driven by the individuals



and emergent issues, because a central priority of this study is to foreground the individuals involved in the process (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Furthermore, this method of analysis, which is driven by the emergent themes, aligns to the underpinning qualitative framework in valuing ‘a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher’ (*ibid.*, 2022: 5) a resource to be utilised rather than a limitation.

### 3.3.2 Stage Two: Implementation of IPA

From this first stage, parents and SENCOs were identified and invited for Stage Two based on purposive sampling.

#### 3.3.2.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling may offer less breadth than probability sampling, but participants have an ‘in-depth knowledge about particular issues’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 219). This may not be generalisable or representative across a group, but it is suitable to this study where the aim is to gain greater depth of understanding. IPA requires ‘purposive homogeneous sampling’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 44), which is not to say that the expectation is to seek correspondences in the data in order to discount differences of experience. The participants from Stage One of the research form homogeneous groups in that they are either parents or SENCOs who have had direct involvement in the EHC needs assessment and planning process since the SEND reforms (2014). However, there is opportunity to look at variability within these groups to analyse ‘the patterns of convergence and divergence within the data’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 44).

Teddlie and Yu (2007) present a typography of purposive sampling where they note confirming and disconfirming cases. So, including those that do and do not confirm to typical patterns and trends in order to study reasons for their conformity or disconformity. In the literature review there was much categorisation of parents and professionals (Bowers, 1995; Macleod *et al.*, 2013; Herring *et al.*, 2017). I therefore wanted to ensure ‘maximum variation sampling’ (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998: 124) was utilised for the selection of participants for Stage Two of the research. This enabled the selection of cases to be as varied as possible on the issue in question within the homogeneous groups of parents and SENCOs. From this process, three participants from each group completed an interview and there was one written response submitted from a parent at their request.

In a study such as this, whereby there are a small number of participants, a homogeneous sample may support anonymity. Maximum variation sampling may require more consideration to ensure that participants are not identifiable based on their differing positions. However, this was not an issue with this study because all data was anonymised and when single cases were analysed no personal data or references could lead to participants being identified.

### 3.3.2.2 Interviews

Effective communication in school is key to successful working relationships (Lamb, 2009) and so it is important to negate the risk of any possible challenges that may adversely affect the working relationships between the parents and SENCOs. Therefore, parents and SENCOs who had not been involved in working together on the EHC needs assessment process were selected for interview.

SENCOs and parents were invited to attend the interview alone so there was no pressure that other parties would be present, and they were assured that no information would be shared with other parties. Information provided for the research was held in the strictest confidence following data protection regulations (*Data Protection Act, 2018*); participants were informed that the only exception to this would be if a safeguarding issue should arise, but none did.

In addition, it was important that the research did not advantage or was 'perceived to advantage one group of participants over others' (BERA, 2018: 20) because it was exploring relationships between the parents, the school, SENCOs (and possibly other professionals). Some individuals may have had specific agendas or strong political viewpoints and so the research design of conducting separate interviews and adopting the same methods for data collection and analysis ensured that individual voices did not dominate.

### 3.3.2.3 Rationale for semi-structured interviews

Interviews are one of the most common tools to gather data for an IPA study because they provide an opportunity to gather rich data. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable tool for this study because of the specific information required on the decision-making process for EHC needs assessment, but also the need for an approach which would allow flexibility and for further issues to emerge should this be evident during the interview.

An interview schedule (**Appendix F**) was created which addressed the different stages of the EHC needs assessment and planning process and focused upon the decision-making and autonomy each participant felt during these stages. This schedule was informed by the structure outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 56-58) in that this moved from less abstract and generally descriptive questions initially through to the more complex questions relating to feelings as the interview progressed. The decision was made to show the participants the interview schedule in advance of the interview. This was to ensure that the participants were comfortable with the topics being covered prior to commencing the interview, it enabled them time to reflect on their experience and consider what they may like to share in the interview. It was also important to include appropriate prompts to support engagement, however this was for the researcher's use during the interview and not shared with the participants. Sharing the interview schedule in advance may have improved accessibility

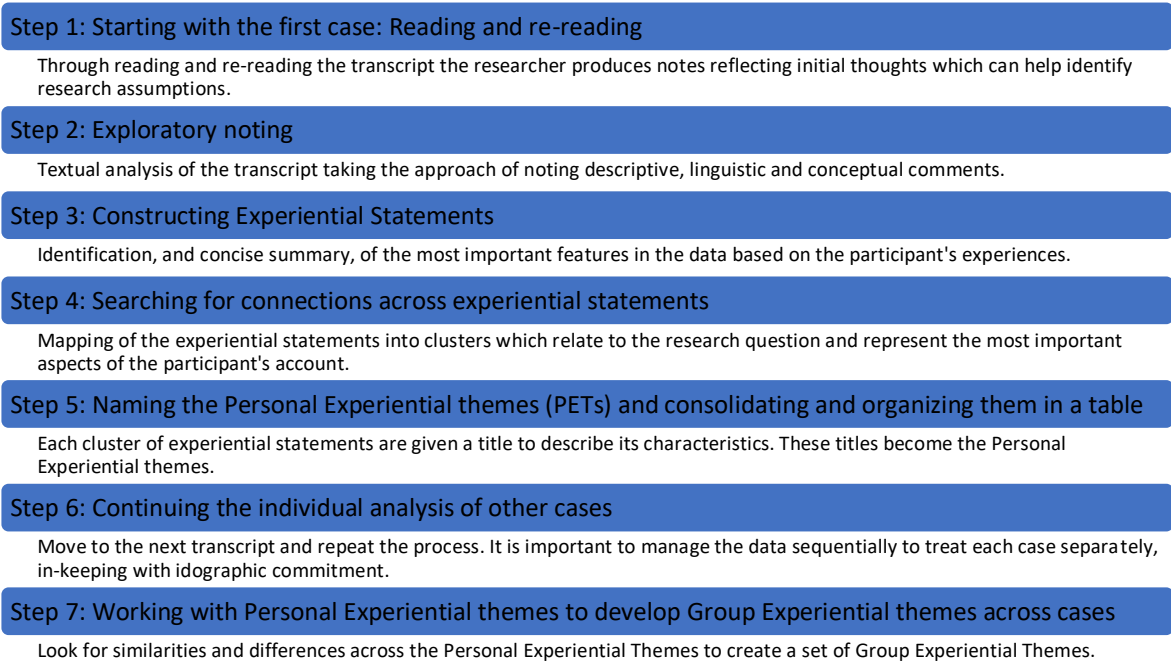
because it gave the participants opportunity to ask questions in advance of the interview should they require any clarification. To an extent, this mitigated the risk of misunderstandings during the interview if the participants engaged at some level with the interview schedule beforehand. A limitation to this is that participants may not look at the schedule prior to interview so there could be some variability in the responses, but from an ethical position, and to align to placing the person as central to the study, this was the approach taken.

Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, face to face interviews were not an option. However, all participants were offered the option of meeting online with or without video, or the option to select a telephone interview, which may be less intrusive (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). The interview schedule and information on services the participants could contact for support was provided prior to the interview should they find the content of the interview in anyway challenging in relation to their emotional well-being. By ensuring that all the details were available in advance this serves to reduce or remove barriers to participation and facilitate 'freedom from prejudice' (BERA, 2018: 6).

#### *3.3.2.4 Analysis of the Interviews*

The interviews were recorded using university supported Microsoft Teams which was then transcribed. I then reviewed the script to ensure the transcripts were accurate recordings of the interview. The seven steps of IPA analysis were followed, see **Figure 4**. As part of Step 1 'Reading and re-reading' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 78) all verbal utterances and interjections were recorded in the transcription in order to capture relevant detail for the purposes of IPA analysis. However, specific details on aspects of prosody, such as the length of time there are pauses, were not included due to being more suited to other types of analysis, such as discourse analysis.

In addition to the seven steps of IPA, Step 11 from Hycner (1985) was included as an additional 'eighth step' for this study. This final step was a return to the participants, which is sometimes referred to as member-checking or participant validation. This was facilitated through follow-up meetings which included discussion on my interpretations of the data from the first interviews. The participants could freely edit, retract comments, make adjustments or clarify their position ensuring interpretations more realistically reflected their position (Hycner, 1985). This may have helped to avoid misinterpretations and provided another opportunity for participants to consider their contributions to the study prior to completion of the research. Hycner (1985: 291) also refers to this as an 'excellent experiential "validity check"'. However, my primary reason for including this eighth step to the process was to enable the participants to retain control of their voice and position in the process and to ensure the research remained person-centred.



**Figure 4: Seven steps of IPA analysis adapted from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022)**

### 3.3.3 Stage Three: The Hermeneutic Process

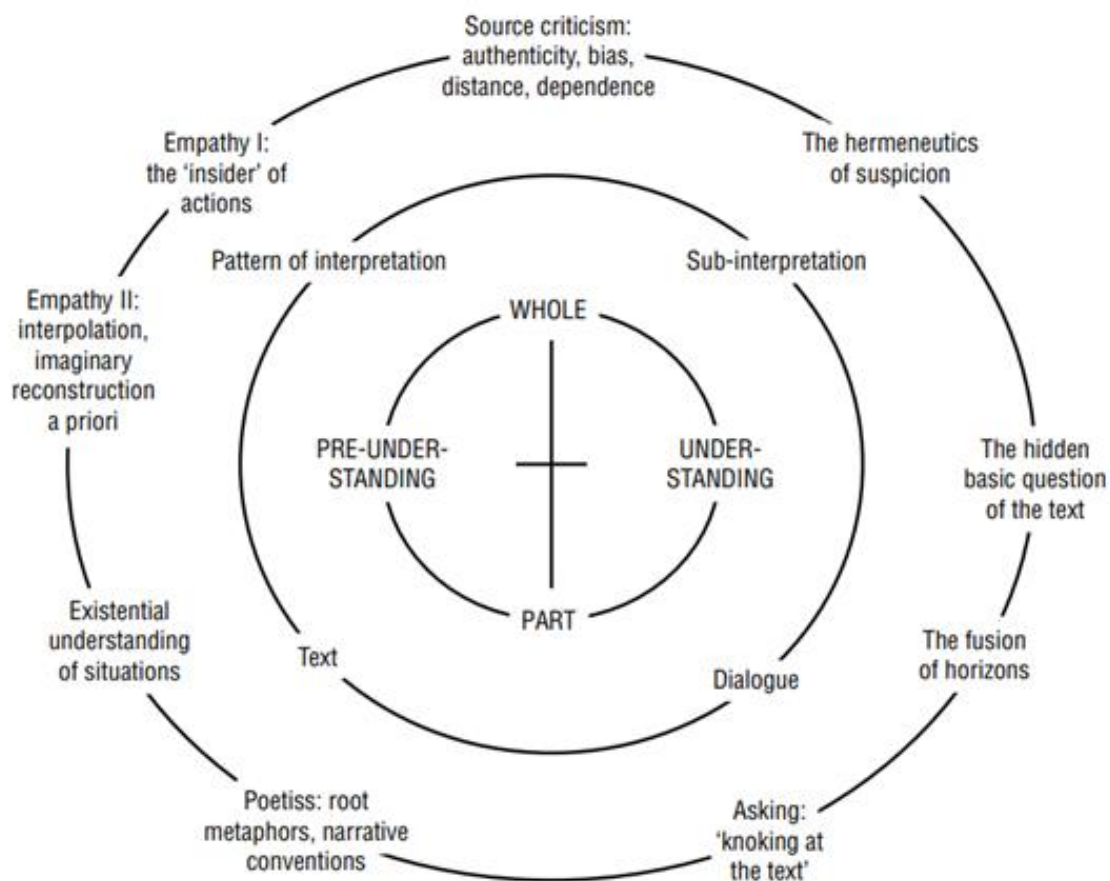
Stage Three was included as the final stage of data analysis. In phenomenological studies there is an iterative process to the analysis of data as opposed to a linear process. This final stage enabled a return to all the stages and data through the hermeneutic process (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018) in order to draw together overall conclusions.

Hermeneutic interpretation is dynamic in that the research moves from considering the relationship between the part and the whole at different levels. This is referred to as the hermeneutic circle and provides a method in order to analyse data. This is illustrated by **Table 3** which shows how analysis could move between a process of close analysis of constituent parts at different levels, and then adjusting the perspective to consider the whole.

The part	The whole
The single word	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete oeuvre
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life

**Table 3: The Hermeneutic Circle from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 23).**

The analysis for Stage Three, draws upon elements of Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s (2018) hermeneutic process (**Figure 5**). This illustrates a model for the different stages of interpretation and the dynamic and iterative nature of hermeneutics. Each stage is interconnected and may provide opportunity to engage with the data at different levels to gain different perspectives rather than completing one independent part and then moving on to the next in a procedural way.



**Figure 5: The Hermeneutic Process (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018: 166)**

Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s (2018) hermeneutic process places the part and the whole as central to the analysis, which is fundamental to be able to appreciate the relativity of Stage One and Stage Two data when returning to the entire dataset. It then moves out to the intermediate circle, which represents alternation between different positions on interpretation such as the text, dialogue and sub-interpretation. The final circle relates to choices over different themes which can inform the interpretation. For example, a suspicious interpretation would assume the position that the phenomena we are examining are simply the ‘surface level manifestations of usually hidden or at least

invisible underlying processes and structures which generate them' (Willig, 2013: 42). Another approach to interpretation is the emphatic, in this instance the researcher will 'get as close to the research participant's experience as possible and to try to understand it 'from within'', therefore focusing on what is there rather than potentially hidden underlying structures (Willig: 2013: 43). Alvesson and Sköldbberg's (2018) hermeneutic process represents how these different aspects can be connected and dynamic rather than seeing them as separate and polarised when interpreting phenomena.

A limitation of using the hermeneutic process to analyse the data from both Stage One and Stage Two is that the 'commitment to an idiographic perspective' (Smith, 2011: 6) might be lost. To ensure the individuals were kept central to Stage Three of the data analysis, the use of gems (Smith, 2011) were adopted. One way to understand a gem is 'to see it as one illustration of Husserl's call 'to go back to the things themselves'. 'The thing' in this case is experience in consciousness, stripped or pared of the extraneous and the gem can offer one entree to that experience' (*ibid.*, 2011: 7). This approach served as a good starting point for the return to data and analysis which was representative of an individual's experience but also enabled analysis triggered by 'things they said elsewhere in the interview and then in addition sometimes by things other participants in the same study said' (Smith, 2011: 15). Essentially, this gave a frame to apply the hermeneutic process (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018), and to make links to the phenomenon being explored for 'more distal theoretical ideas to further the illumination' (Smith, 2011: 15).

Interpretation is not only multi-faceted in relation to the process, but it is also multi-layered in the number of interpretations that may take place. The participants will be interpreting their experience for the researcher, who then goes on to interpret meaning from this account. This is referred to by Smith and Osborn (2003: 53) as the 'double hermeneutic', but the layers of interpretation do not necessarily stop with the final thesis. There could be a triple hermeneutic external to the research. For example, any reader of the study will again bring their own meaning and interpretation to what they have read. This multi-layered hermeneutic process was extended further in this study due to incorporating member checking (sometimes referred to as participant validation) as part of the final stage of the methodology. By returning to the participants to discuss the developing interpretations, it could be argued this was consistent with the hermeneutic cycle, by representing a constant movement between the text (or indeed the participant) and interpretation (Doyle, 2007).

#### *3.3.3.1 Rationale for member-checking within IPA*

From my search of the literature (**Table 4**) there are limited studies which utilise member-checking within IPA and am not aware of any studies which include a process or approach for member-checking

that is specific to IPA. The process I outline here presents new knowledge related to how member-checking can be adopted in IPA studies where this might be appropriate to the field and subject being researched.

Member checking has been used as an approach to ‘validate, verify, or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results’ (Birt *et al.*, 2016: 1802) and therefore is used as a justification for providing further validation and rigour in the study. However, this was not the main aim for selecting member checking as part of the methodology for this study. Member checking was primarily adopted as a participatory approach to the research to empower those who had contributed to the study as opposed to a process to enhance rigor and validate accuracy of data analysis. The participants were central to my study, so I was keen to ensure that the data analysis I conducted was respectful and representative of their experiences and continued to be person-centred allowing the participant to maintain a level of control over their voice in the research. This is aligned to the argument that the ‘participatory member check is a requirement of certain types of research studies, particularly those that seek to pursue notions of social justice, empowerment, and equity’ (Doyle, 2007: 906).

Database	Description	Number of results	Date Range applied 1996 to 2024
PsycINFO	PsycINFO covers the professional and academic literature in psychology and the behavioural and social sciences.	142	1997-2024
MEDLINE®	MEDLINE® is the United States National Library of Medicine’s (NLM®) premier bibliographic database providing information from the fields of medicine, nursing and allied health.	19	2001-2023
Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC)	ERIC is a database which covers education at all levels from early childhood to adult education. This database has a global focus.	3	2004-2022
Scopus	Scopus is a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, abstract and citation database.	61	2013-2024

**Table 4: Results of the database search for the inclusion terms ‘IPA’ AND ‘member-checking’ OR ‘participant validation’**

The limited studies representing member checking could be because this has been viewed as an area of contention for IPA studies due to ‘its juxtaposition with the interpretative stance of qualitative research’ (Birt *et al.*, 2016: 1802). For example, Giorgi (1997: 243) argues that participants cannot confirm the meaning of their experiences, nor do they have the relevant skills to adequately judge the phenomenological analysis due to being in the naive ‘natural attitude’ as opposed to the ‘phenomenological attitude’. Yet, Giorgi’s qualitative method is based on philosophical foundations

from Husserlian phenomenology (1927). 'For Husserl, phenomenology was about identifying and suspending our assumptions ('bracketing' off culture, context, history, etc.) in order to get at the universal essence of a given phenomenon' (Larkin and Thompson, 2012: 102). My study was very much a situated enterprise which did not aim for transcendent knowledge, it was in line with the IPA principles which draw upon the later phenomenology developed by Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962). They 'suggest that we can never make Husserl's 'reduction' to the abstract, because our observations are always made from somewhere.' (Larkin and Thompson, 2012: 102). Therefore, Giorgi's arguments do not stand when adopting the philosophical foundations of hermeneutic phenomenology, because 'while phenomenology might be descriptive in its inclination, it can only ever be interpretative in its implementation' (Larkin and Thompson, 2012: 102). We are unavoidably part of the world in which we live and the relationships we have with others. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 132) recognise the benefits of some IPA studies fostering additional layers of dialogue or collaboration, and 'expect that this would offer an enriching extra dimension to the work.' This position could strengthen the case for member-checking for certain studies within IPA, indeed, Willig (2017: 282) argues 'we are not so much concerned with an interpretation's validity but with its consequences. Having access to an interpretation can change the way in which people frame their experiences and position themselves in relation to them. They can become tools for action because they mediate people's relation to the world'.

It could be argued that another method might have been more suited to participatory approaches, such as action research, but as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 47) acknowledge, IPA moves beyond simply 'giving voice' to a particular group and situates the lived experience and resultant 'analytic insights in the context of the theoretical and applied context of the topic'. This contextual aspect is key to this study and therefore recognises the 'particular merits of the IPA approach within participatory research' (MacLeod, 2019: 61). Participatory approaches can be beneficial in IPA research in the following ways:

- Contests the researcher as the expert (Doyle, 2007)
- Can bring benefits to a community (Malpert *et al.*, 2017; MacLeod, 2019)
- Can address social problems and empower individuals (Willig, 2017)
- Can reduce the risks of reproducing existing inequalities and misrepresentations (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022)

These are all aspects that my study aimed to incorporate and as such provides justification for participatory member-checking as another way to further embed the underpinning notions of 'social



justice, empowerment, and equity' within the study (Doyle, 2007: 906). I would therefore argue the approach I have devised may be suitable to adopt for IPA studies with a similar philosophical underpinning and participatory focus.

### 3.3.3.2 Member-checking approach for IPA research

There is no published member-checking model or approach aligned to IPA specifically, based on my review of the literature (**Table 4**). Therefore, I did not follow one existing model, but drew upon two different existing approaches for member-checking in qualitative studies to ensure my approach was specifically aligned to IPA, appropriate for my study and also suitable for my participants. The two approaches I drew upon included Doyle (2007) and Birt *et al.* (2016).

Doyle (2007) informed the underpinning philosophical approach for the new model. She refers to a process of member checking informed by Heidegger's (1962) interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology. Her paper was published at a time when IPA was emerging and so there is no direct reference to IPA, but the underlying foundations are closely aligned to the principles of hermeneutics, ideography and phenomenology. For example, Doyle (2007: 895) argues that the act of member-checking is 'consistent with the hermeneutic cycle, which requires the constant movement between interpretation and the text, or in the case of the member check, a return to interaction with the participants themselves.' My adoption of member-checking for this study aligned to the principles of IPA as foregrounding the individual's experience and voice throughout. Similarly, in her study, Doyle (2007: 888) uses member-checking 'consistent with participatory approaches and the active negotiation of meaning inherent in this paradigm.' She sees member-checking as providing an opportunity for individuals to be 'empowered to participate meaningfully in the research process' (Doyle, 2007: 893).

Birt *et al.* (2016: 1803) have differing underpinning principles to Doyle (2007), for example they refer to gaining 'accurate descriptions or interpretations of phenomena'. However, multiple truths and / or realities are recognised in IPA and so this principle of an 'accurate description' was not an aim of IPA or the member-checking process in this study. If the data changes as a result of returning to the participants, it leads to another 'truth' being presented, which is a fundamental part of the hermeneutic process. Therefore, Birt *et al.*'s (2016) approach informed this study but not their underpinning principles or position on research more generally. I mainly drew on their model for 'Synthesised Member Checking' (Birt *et al.*, 2016) with adaptations for a smaller sample size and also to suit the difference in the discipline because Birt *et al.* (2016) conducted a study specific to research in health. The 'Interview' model presented by Birt *et al.* (2016) also required adaption to account for the emotional aspect of the data I was managing – not all participants would want to be interviewed

again, and if circumstances had changed this might have caused distress. Often IPA studies deal with sensitive, emotionally charged issues, therefore this needed to be considered carefully in adopting an approach which may have placed further demands on the participants.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) include consideration of user-led approaches and co-production in IPA studies, and acknowledge the strength of adopting a flexible approach to meet the requirements of the specific research focus and discipline. They note that the 'most important feature of these is coherence with the underlying principles of an IPA approach' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 132). Therefore, the relevance to IPA for the new model for member-checking within IPA studies is presented in **Table 5**

I would claim the approach I devised, which drew mainly on the works of Doyle (2007) and Birt *et al.* (2016), could be used as a suitable model which is aligned to the central principles of IPA as a participatory approach to empower participants. Yet, this very much depends on the IPA research being conducted. The philosophical positioning and the type of study being adopted would need consideration as to whether a participatory approach is suitable.

Process	Rationale	Relevance to IPA
<b>Stage 1</b> Make participants aware prior to, and in the interview, of the follow up conversation after the data analysis stage of the research.	<b>Participants are central to the study:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enables empowerment</li> <li>keep the participant's voice as central</li> <li>participants are assured there will be a level of control over their data.</li> </ul>	<b>Phenomenology:</b> 'it is not just the researcher who is interpretative but also the participant' (Smith and Nizza, 2022: 8) 'the researcher, as the "expert" is challenged' (Doyle, 2007: 905)
<b>Stage 2</b> Complete data analysis to draw out Group Experiential Themes. Provide participants with the group and individual summaries accompanied by illustrative quotations (Appendices P and Q and Tables 8 and 12)	<b>Relevant information shared:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>accessible summaries of personal data</li> <li>contextualised within broader themes</li> <li>Shared data needs to be purposeful and support engagement (full scripts at this stage could be overwhelming)</li> </ul>	<b>Idiographic:</b> Participants are able to recognise their own experiences within the broader themes, developed from the approach adopted by Birt <i>et al.</i> (2016) in their model for synthesized member-checking.
<b>Stage 3</b> Ask participants if they would like to attend a follow up conversation and review the full transcript.	<b>Reducing risk in member-checking:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reduces potential risks for participants such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>when personal circumstances have changed</li> <li>embarrassment or distress over the way they speak (in verbatim scripts)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>Ethics:</b> IPA involves studies focused on the lived experience of individuals, which needs sensitivity over how this this is managed throughout the research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022; Smith and Nizza, 2022).
<b>Stage 4</b> Arrange follow up conversation at a suitable time and send the full transcript in advance.	<b>Hermeneutic return to the data:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open / transparent by sharing the full transcript 'both interview data and interpreted data are returned to participants' (Birt <i>et al.</i>, 2016: 1806)</li> <li>the hermeneutic process can include the participants as they return to the data</li> </ul>	<b>Hermeneutics:</b> 'the analysis includes working closely with a transcript, often reviewing it word by word, and multiple times allowing for reflection and iteration, and sometimes discussing its content with others' (Smith and Nizza, 2022) 'The act of returning to the participant to discuss my developing interpretations also is consistent with the hermeneutic cycle' (Doyle, 2027: 895)
<b>Stage 6</b> Conduct the follow up conversation noting any converging or diverging information.	<b>Participants are central to the study:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants retain level of control over their data</li> <li>Participant involvement provides another opportunity to see the phenomenon (through confirming or disconfirming information (Birt <i>et al.</i> 2016)</li> </ul>	<b>Phenomenology</b> How the phenomenon is 'seen' is fundamental, but also relies on hermeneutics to be able to interpret (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Involving participants provides opportunity for a an 'empathic interpretation' (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008: 29) MacLeod (2019: 51) claims IPA 'regards individuals as the expert of their own experience' and so is suited to participatory approaches

**Table 5: Model for member-checking in IPA studies**

**Please note: The term 'interview' refers to the IPA interview conducted and analysed prior to undertaking the member-checking process and the member-checking process is referred to a 'follow up conversation'.**

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

Cohen *et al.* (2018: 109) notes that research is an 'inescapable ethical enterprise' and so consideration of ethical issues will be as integral to the planning process as other aspects of the methodology. Ethical considerations are contextual and distinct to the study, there is not one simplistic formula for certain studies. Cohen *et al.* (2018: 112) notes that ethical judgements lie on a continuum and cannot be viewed in a dichotomous way. It will be dependent upon the context and cannot be determined in a fixed way or with a pre-determined pattern.

Ethical considerations require judgements to be made. This aspect is noted by Hammersley and Traianou (2012: 19) who acknowledge 'ethical judgements are just one sort of evaluation. Making evaluations is central to all forms of human life – we are continually engaged in judging things, including ourselves and other people.' These judgements will be influenced by the values and beliefs of the researcher. Therefore, consideration of interpretative and subjective nature of ethical judgements, and where I am positioned in relation to this, formed part of the ethical process as 'we can never fully escape being shaped by institutional practices that exercise subtle, and not so subtle, power over us' (*ibid.*, 2012: 33).

It is therefore important to have a mechanism to ensure these judgements are monitored and reflected upon. Keeping a reflective journal for the duration of an IPA research serves to provide a place for researcher reflections and to record preconceived ideas often referred to as fore-conceptions in IPA studies. It is essential this is ongoing because the researcher's 'awareness of these "fore-conceptions" may not come to light until work has started in the interview or analysis' (Cassidy *et al.*, 2011: 265-6). In addition, due to the sensitive nature of many IPA studies, the reflective journal can be a way to monitor the researcher's well-being, which can often be overlooked (Smith and Nizza, 2022). This study illustrated how educational research is 'deliberative' and 'reflexive' (Cohen *et al.* 2018: 109) by capturing key moments from the reflective journal in 'reflexive boxes' throughout the thesis. This approach was adopted to visually illustrate the points in time when different aspects of the research have come to the fore at different stages. Goldblatt and Band-Winterstein, (2016: 101) explain reflexivity as 'intentional thinking and critical analysis of knowledge and experience, directed towards attaining a deep understanding of the meaning people ascribe to their assumptions about human behaviours and experiences, and about the world.' Therefore, it could be argued that this process of documenting the reflections and the 'reflexivity becomes an important facilitative and analytical tool' for ethical considerations in qualitative research (Camic, 2021: 19).

Ethical approval was sought and gained from the university (**Appendix K**). Yet, reflections are inextricably bound with ethical considerations, and so this is an ongoing process, not a singular event

at the beginning of the research. The process of keeping a reflective journal represented how, in some cases, the study has been adapted to ensure ethics were central throughout. For example, the following reflexive account outlines a change to the study based on an entry in the reflective journal.

#### **Reflection on ethics**

In the first stage of the research some of the questionnaire included responses which referred to incidences of impact upon families' mental health. One participant referred to experiencing PTSD. Owing to this parental disclosure on the impact the EHC needs assessment process had upon them personally, I responded immediately by adding information to the questionnaire on where to find support if needed. I was also very careful not to select any parents who had disclosed traumatic events for Stage Two of the research and carefully considered the level of support required prior to any interviews being conducted.

So, ethical clearance might be agreed at the beginning of a study, yet with qualitative studies 'there must also be continual external monitoring during the rest of the research process' (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012: 7). This is particularly so with a topic which may be sensitive or cause participants to recall upon difficult experiences. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) refer to care ethics and in particular the focus on relational ethics as requiring a level of emotional sensitivity, compassion or empathy. This aspect was of importance in my research because the study endorsed a values-based approach with participants. Furthermore, when conducting research with participants who may be vulnerable or where there may be challenges around trust, it is even more important to select an ethical approach that will recognise and value 'mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched' (Ellis, 2007: 4). This also highlighted the focus on the researcher and their relationship with participants and, in part, why member-checking was added to the IPA study (see Section 3.3.3.1).

Ethics is interpretable and influenced by social and contextual factors. To address this, guidance can be followed, such as the principles for educational research published by BERA (2018), which were adhered to for this study. Yet, despite following guidance, consideration of my own values as the researcher was inherent to the study and the way in which the ethical considerations were addressed. My position is informed by relational ethics, and more specifically the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2012). The ethics of care is concerned with relational aspects and connectedness, recognising there is an 'asymmetrical dependence' between people because they are connected through relationships rather than a 'mutual independence' whereby individuals operate separately (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012: 29). Ethics of care recognises the concept of 'need' as a

requirement. The term 'need' could be viewed as subjugation or dependency, however within the ethics of care, this stems from a moral perspective aligned to nurturing the maternal instinct, although the caring attitude is not exclusive to women and is just as relevant to men (Noddings, 2012). Essentially, the ethics of care requires us to make decisions which 'take account of our own relationship to the people who would be affected by the decision and their level of vulnerability' (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012: 30). This is a position I have aimed to foster in this study.

Covid-19 impacted on the planned timeline for this study. Ethical clearance was provided in February 2020, just before the first lockdown in England in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. After discussion with my supervisors, we delayed the commencement of the research due to the national crisis and the impact on schools. The university subsequently adjusted their policy on conducting research (CCCU, 2021) and so the new requirements were followed to ensure the study was appropriately conducted. The original ethical clearance and design for the study needed to be changed and so an amendment to ethics was submitted to seek approval for these changes, such as the distribution of questionnaires using social media. The adaptations to the study are outlined in Section 3.4.1.

#### 3.4.1 Rationale for adjustments to the original plans for the study

Originally this study comprised of two additional stages, however, after the study commenced, adjustments were made to the methodological design to ensure the research continued to be ethically sound. This included considerations related to social distancing requirements and university specific requirements related to conducting research during the Covid-19 pandemic (CCCU, 2021). The original diagram representing the study before the changes were made has been included with the redundant stages crossed through (**Appendix L**). This section of the thesis provides a rationale for the changes made to the study, which was requested through an amendment to the original ethical application (**Appendix K**).

##### 3.4.1.1 Rationale for the removal of the additional stages

Originally the study included the following two additional data collection points:

- **Interview with local authorities / parental advisory services**
- **Questionnaire for Professionals**

This was followed with the plans for an optional stage should it be difficult to obtain data from local authorities:

- **Freedom of Information Request**

Each stage will be briefly discussed with a rationale on why this was removed from the study.

- **Interview with local authorities / parental advisory services**

In the original study, semi-structured interviews were planned with the Head of SEN Services and representatives from the Parental Advisory Groups at the identified local authorities. The aim was to understand the procedural aspects of the service and the context for the parents' and SENCOs' experiences of the process. On completing the interviews with participants, it became clear their experiences most commonly related to more than one local authority, either directly or indirectly. Two of the SENCOs and two parents referred to more than one local authority in their accounts. It was therefore difficult to review the local authorities in which participants resided or worked as originally intended. Furthermore, the process of statutory assessment differs so much across different local authorities, it quickly became clear that due to the variance, this data collection could not provide information that would easily relate to the participants' lived experiences.

Local Authorities and SEN Case Workers hold key positions within the EHC needs assessment process and issuing of the resultant EHC plans, but it was decided not to explore SEN Case Workers' lived experience of the process. This was due to the focus of this study on the working relationship between the parent and SENCO. As noted in the literature review, SENCOs are pivotal in this process and a 'central actor navigating, mitigating and narrating the changes in policy' (Curran *et al.*, 2018: 10). I wanted to explore this working relationship specifically and set the research question for this study as: **'What are parents' and SENCOs' experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?'** Including wider data, such as the SEN Case Workers lived experience as another group for the IPA Study could be argued as relevant due to their central role in the process, yet this was not the main focus of the study. The parents' and SENCOs' lived experience of this process, rather than the actual process itself was important in this study and so gathering further data from Local Authorities at this stage of the research became unnecessary to the central research question. Adding this data as part of the thesis may have served to detract from the main question, which I realised as I progressed with the study and became more confident with the methodological approach of IPA.

**Reflection on the methodological design**

Growth in my confidence as a researcher became more apparent to me when I made changes to the design of the study. I realised that the initial design was not the most appropriate way to answer the research question and so rather than persist, I felt able to discuss the proposed change with my supervisors. Indeed, Creswell and Creswell (2023: 194) refer to the emergent nature of qualitative

studies and note that '[s]ome or all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data.'

I was unable to see this aspect until I began the IPA process and realised that the participants 'truths' do not need wider validation from other sources. It is still their truth and the way in which they constructed meaning, irrelevant of the wider data set on the services and provisions available to them. I therefore realised that the analysis of the local authority information and professionals moved away from the focus of the research question and, as a result, made changes to the design of the study.

- **Questionnaire for Professionals**

The original study included a questionnaire for approximately 20 professionals from wider education, health and social care. The questionnaires sought to identify professionals' perspectives on collaborative working and decision making with parents and SENCOs through the EHC needs assessment and planning process. However, on reflection on the principles of IPA as focusing on the lived experience of individuals, it became clear the additional information would not add relevant data to answer the research question, and could even detract from the focus, (the experiences of the parents and the SENCOs). There were ethical considerations in relation to gathering more data than was required to answer the research question. For example, the principle that the research needed to be 'conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose' (BERA: 2018, 4). This underpinned the rationale for removal of this stage from the study.

- **Freedom of Information Request**

It was anticipated that access to local authority or parental services could be more challenging to engage with through an interview process. So, the final stage removed from the study was an optional stage to request information through the *Freedom of Information Act* (2000) in case engagement was found to be challenging. This stage was no longer required due to the removal of the preceding stages which included data collection from local authorities and parental services.

### 3.5 Chapter Summary

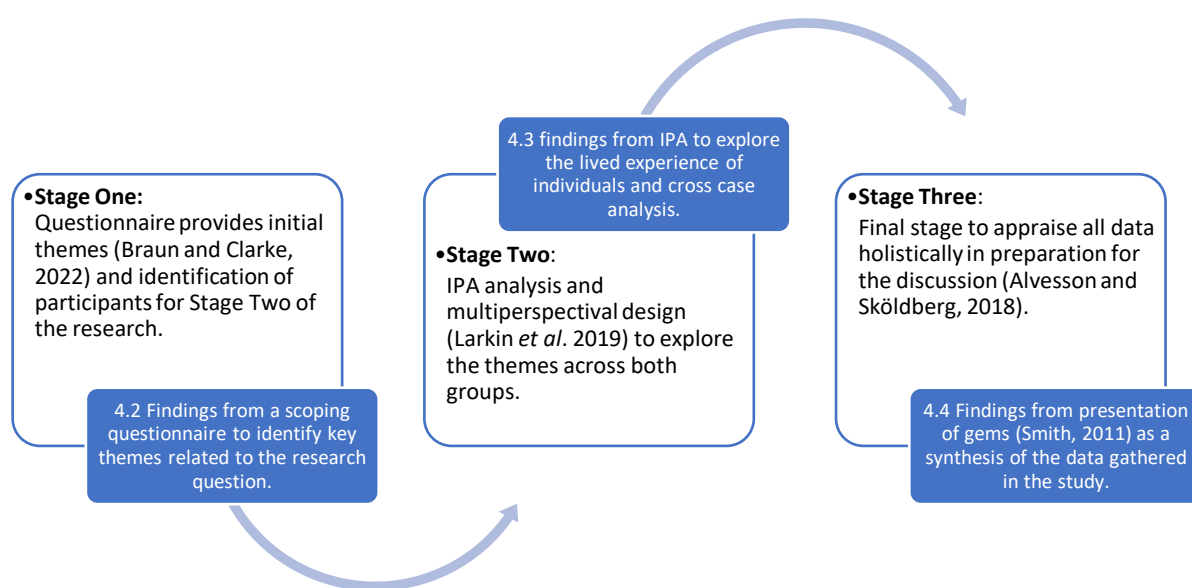
This chapter has outlined the methodology for the study and detailed the rationale for the design and the specific approaches taken in order to address and answer the research question. The interpretivist nature of the study will be an aspect which is reflected upon and representative in the data analysis that follows.



## 4. Chapter 4 - Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction and Structure

This chapter is organised into sections for each stage of the research. Each section will present the findings and analysis from the data collected in that stage representing areas of focus and emerging themes. This approach of presenting the data separately for each stage has been taken because the research is sequential. A limitation of this approach is that it could lead to repetition of themes or notions, so this has been avoided through careful consideration for each stage as outlined in **Figure 6**.



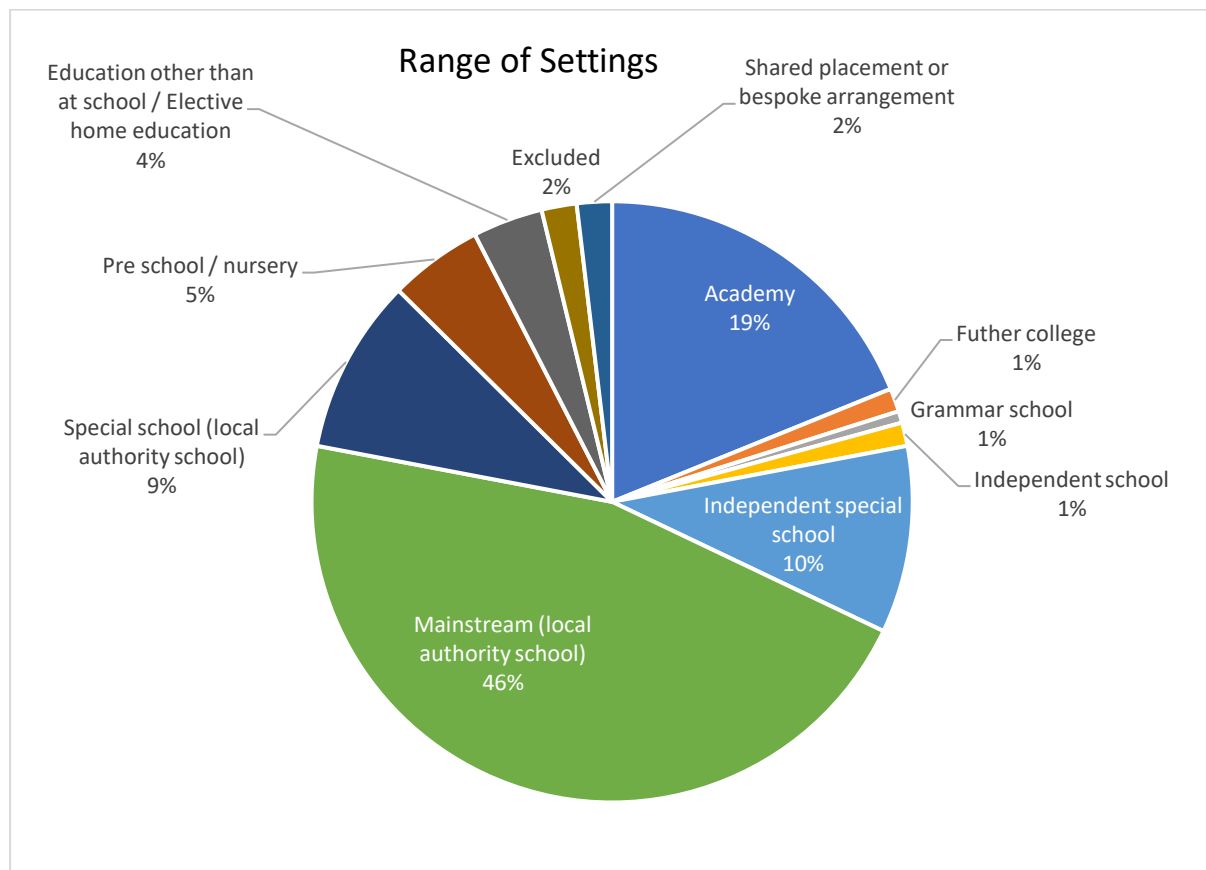
**Figure 6: Summary diagram for the different stages of the study**

Each stage of the research relates to the next and enables the continual engagement with, and opportunity to return to, the data gathered through an iterative process (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2022; Smith Flowers and Larkin, 2022).

Throughout this chapter, data is recorded in the participants words to keep true and reflective of their contribution. The only changes are where there are obvious typographic errors such as '*language titally incomprehensible*' being replaced with '*language totally incomprehensible*'. Where participants have not used capital letters or may have included additional words which do not necessarily fit grammatically, this has not been altered, for example 'ehcp' this has been keep in the original form rather than changing to capital letters.

## 4.2 Stage One: Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for Stage One was collected from a scoping questionnaire which was completed by 84 SENCOs and 76 parents. This represented 59 local authorities across England. The responses included SENCOs and parents associated with 11 different types of educational settings, see **Figure 7**.



**Figure 7: Graph to illustrate the range of settings represented in the responses from parents and SENCOs**

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was conducted on the questionnaire responses. Extracts of the coding and resultant thematic analysis are provided (**Appendix M**). Three aspects in the data emerged related to the research question: **‘What are parents’ and SENCOs’ experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?’**

Firstly, decision making and control and how this is put into effect by parents and SENCOs, secondly, evidence of collaboration between parents and professionals, and finally aspects of the system that impact on decision making and collaboration. Overall, the findings from the questionnaires evidenced:

- limited autonomy and control in decision making
- lack of collaborative practices

- Inherent issues of inequality

These identified areas of focus will be discussed in turn below.

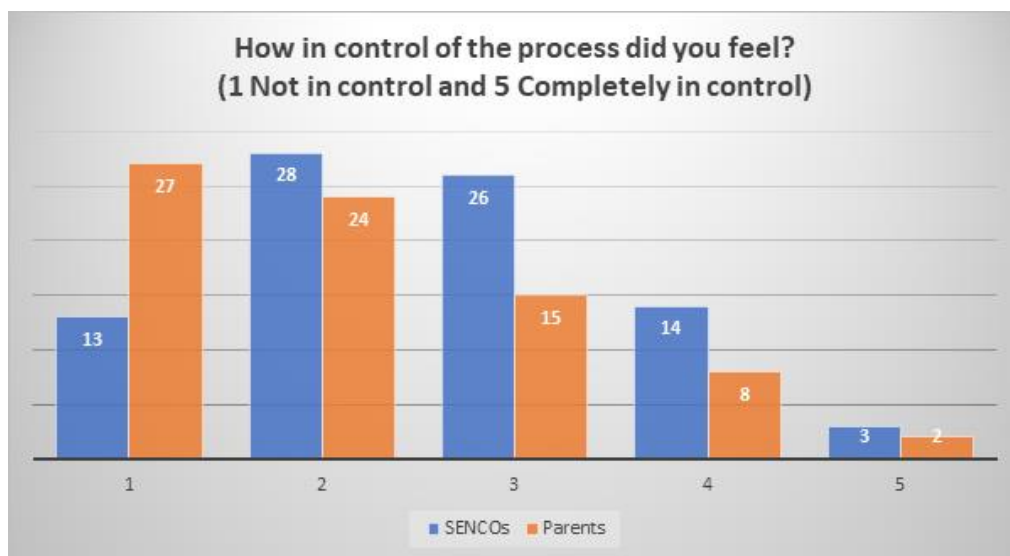
#### 4.2.1 Focus One: Limited autonomy and control in decision making

Key findings:

- Most parents and SENCOs felt they had limited or no control in the process
- There were some parts of the process where parents and SENCOs had more control
- Decision making is taking place in isolation

##### 4.2.1.1 Most parents and SENCOs felt they had limited or no control in the process

Question 14 (parents) and 15 (SENCOs) required a scaled response to the level of control participants felt during the process. The data from the questionnaires illustrated the participants perception on the level of control in the process on a scale of 1 to 5, when 1 indicated no control and 5 indicated being completely in control. Both parents and SENCOs felt mainly out of control, which could indicate a sense of powerlessness in the system, see **Figure 8**.



**Figure 8: Graph to illustrate the level of control parents and SENCOs feel they have during the EHC needs assessment process**

Of the qualitative responses for question 14a (parents) and 15a (SENCOs) on what made them feel *in control* during the process, 6% (n.5) of SENCOs provided negative comments e.g. ‘*nothing*’ and 35% (n.29) did not respond to this question. This was very similar to parents, as 7% (n.5) provided negative responses e.g. ‘*ignored*’ and 32% (n.24) did not respond. When this is compared to the qualitative responses for the question 14b (parents) and 15b (SENCOs) on what made them feel *out of control*

during the process, the number of responses were noticeably higher, with just 11% (n.8) of parents not responding and 20% (n.17) of SENCOs not responding to this question.

Despite the question referring to feeling *in control*, the SENCOs included six references (7%) to the transfer or loss of control in decision making to the local authority in their responses:

*'Once I had submitted my applications, it was all out of my hand. I did have control over the application and what was submitted, but this stopped once it was submitted.'*

*'Once submitted the LA take over and this is when Sencos totally lose control.'*

*'once it is sent to County then there is no control whatsoever it is up to panel to decide whether to assess'*

Overall, there were 38 responses (45%) representing transfer or loss of control in decision making to the local authority for SENCOs for this question. Similarly, there were 31 responses (41%) from parents which referred to issues with working with the local authority, impacting on parental levels of control in the process. This included, poor reports, delays, lack of information being shared, and unlawful practice as illustrated below:

*'By the La not following legal guidelines'*

*'The local authority's time constraints and how poor the content was first drafts'*

*'No one hands you any information from the LA you have to chase it and you never know what your next move is. One person says one thing and another says something else. Awful process'*

*'Waiting for the LEA to respond, original plan not good enough, mediation and tribunal was needed'*

#### *4.2.1.2 There were some parts of the process where parents and SENCOs had more control*

After coding the responses from question 14a (parents) and 15a (SENCOs), a range of themes emerged relating to feeling *in control*, see **Table 6**. This resulted in parents 'Initiating or leading the process' as the most prominent theme, followed by 'Knowledge of law or process / enforcing legal rights'. The most common response from SENCOs, was also 'Initiating or leading the process', which illustrates this aspect of taking control as important for both SENCOs as well as parents. This main theme was followed by 'effective communication' and then 'knowledge and experience' as the next most common themes SENCOs had presented.

Shared themes	
Initiating the process (P1, S1)	
Effective Communication (P3, S2)	
Being listened to (P3, S6)	
Provided with information (P4, S4)	
Parents' themes	SENCOs' themes
P2. Knowledge of law or process / enforcing legal rights	S3. Knowledge / Experience in role
P3. Self-funding assessments and process	S5. Well evidenced submission
P5. Seeking independent / separate advice	
<p><b>Please note:</b> The numbers in the table represent the rank order of the theme based on the frequency of responses from participants (1 being the most common). Shared themes indicate both parents (P) and SENCOs (S) responses. Where the rank order number appears more than once the number of responses were the same (for example 'Effective Communication' and 'Self-funding assessments and process' are both ranked as 3 for parents).</p>	

**Table 6: In control themes: a table representing the themes related to parents and SENCOs feeling in control of the EHC needs assessment process**

The most common shared theme of 'Initiating or leading the process' (see **Table 6**) contrasts the position of subjugation represented in **Figure 8**. Some of the qualitative responses illustrated that parents felt they could exercise some control over the application and requesting an EHC needs assessment:

*'I applied for the EHCP myself so at least I wasn't relying on a 'middle man' between myself and the LA.'*

*'Because we filled in the forms we knew what was in there was accurate'*

*'I used research and the SENDIAS plus family friend who is a senco to ensure I knew what was needed'*

This was also evident with the SENCOs' responses:

*'I choose when to apply.'*

*'Application process is usually directly down to me so I control this part of the process entirely.'*

*'I started the process and I was the one who made the referral, gathered information and I was the one who had most knowledge on the child.'*

Overall, the percentage of responses who made reference to, in some way, proactively taking control accounted for 39% (n.30) of the responses from parents and 25% (n.21) of the responses from SENCOs. The data therefore may illustrate that being proactive appeared to be related to having a sense of autonomy over the process for both parents and SENCOs.

Another factor identified by both parents and SENCOs as enabling them to have a sense of control in the process was their level of knowledge (see **Table 6**). This was not combined as a shared theme for both groups in the data because the knowledge base referred to was different. Parents referred to knowledge of legal aspects and rights, whereas SENCOs referred to their own knowledge of the process they had to follow to complete a successful application. With increased knowledge of the legislation, parents' understanding may help to facilitate a more informed level of control over decisions:

*'The fact that I didn't have to rely on the obstructive school and could do it myself was the only control I had. And the professional reports I paid for myself. Also the fact that the law was clear even if no one followed it; I could at least use it to force action'*

*'The legislation - allowed me to legitimately chase to try to keep the process on track.'*

*'I attended a course run by XXXX (reference to independent SEND advisory group) which was very informative and gave me more confidence when dealing with the school. For example I learnt about the practice of illegal exclusion.'*

Inequality in the ways in which parents can engage due to the levels of knowledge was evident in the additional responses provided by both parents and SENCOs. Examples of the SENCOs' responses included:

*'Those parents who require lots of support to complete EHCPs are often the ones that get turned down.'*

*'The thing that concerns me the most is that very confident parents are more likely to get an EHCP approved (through appeal etc.) which means our most vulnerable children are put at further disadvantage.'*

*'The current system does not work. The parents who shout the loudest, get what they want. It is a known fact that if you threaten to go to tribunal, the local authority will back down and give the parents what they want because it costs too much to go to tribunal.'*

Parents' responses also identified inequalities in the system:

*'I went on courses run by SENDIASS and became empowered to fight ... I can imagine a less tenacious parent wouldn't have had the same outcome.'*

*'I have worked with children and young people for 20 years so have knowledge of where to go for information and how to argue my case for my daughter. I also have numerous qualifications in working with children and young people. Due to this we have possibly had it easier than most people in getting diagnosis for my daughter and an ehcp.'*

*'Only parents who have the education, tenacity and finances get a fit for purpose ehcp. I've raised this to the education select committee after a conversation with XXX (reference to named person).'*

*'The system, in our LA at least, is dependent on parents driving things, knowing their rights and often on them having the money to force the issue.'*

This illustrates the knowledge held by the parent, and particularly in relation to legal rights, led to the ability to initiate, manage and drive the process forward. The notion of knowledge as related to increased power in decision making for SENCOs was clearly linked to the knowledge of the process and system. One example illustrated how SENCOs can advocate for parents due to this increased understanding such as in the example below. However, this example of 'instructing' parents could equally be viewed as indicative of power differentials between parents and professionals:

*'When I took control and instructed parents to disagree as the provisional EHCP was inaccurate and did not reflect the levels of need. This resulted in XXX (reference to local authority) coming out to address our concerns but I had to really push.'*

SENCOs demonstrated knowledge of the process, the system and how information should be presented to the local authority to be deemed a successful application for EHC needs assessment:

*'Initially because I am collating & submitting the application and know what I need to do. I ensure that all the evidence needed is available to the LA.'*

These findings on the levels of control, and the resultant inequalities evident in the system, indicate that applications for EHC plans are not always focused upon the needs of the child, but the focus is on the representation of the needs. So, for example, if the needs meet the specific criteria in the paperwork then this will be accepted, as evident in the additional comments one parent contributed:

*'The lea refused to assess 4 times. Only after attending mediation were we told exactly what to write to panel in order for them to agree to assess. Panel then agreed. After the assessment was completed an ehcp was issued'*

#### 4.2.1.3 Decision making in isolation

Prominent in the data was the sense of individuals engaging in the process in isolation, as well as making decisions in isolation; this occurred repeatedly. This may be an indication that the system requires individuals to be resilient and determined in managing the process, which also necessitates a level of individual agency on the part of the parent or SENCO. This is illustrated by the following parental responses:

*'Simply knowing I would stand my ground. It was faith in myself rather than the system.'*

*'I am a tough cookie and make things go my way'*

*'I constantly chased all involved at every step of the way.'*

The following responses show that SENCOs also illustrated a sense of individual agency in their actions:

*'I'm the lead in all of them.'*

*'I made the request, I chased the info, I communicated with parents and kept them involved. It was 'my' application'*

*'I started the process and I was the one who made the referral, gathered information and I was the one who had most knowledge on the child.'*

The use of the pronouns 'I' and 'my' in these responses illustrate individualistic approaches taken and determination to ensure the process was enacted. This sense of individualism is contrary to the notion of working in collaboration which is supposedly at the heart of the process.

#### 4.2.2 Focus Two: Lack of collaborative practices

Key findings:

- There were limited examples of collaboration shared by parents and SENCOs
- There were some aspects of working with others that parents and SENCOs found useful
- Both parents and SENCOs referred to the lack of collaboration with local authorities

##### 4.2.2.1 There were limited examples of collaboration shared by parents and SENCOs

From question 14a (parents) 15a (SENCOs) there were only three responses from parents (4%) and three responses from SENCOs (4%) that referred to some form of working together. With this



disparity, when compared with respondents taking individual action and control (39% (n.30) and 25% (n.21) respectively), it may call into question if the process is one in which collaborative decision-making can be effectively embedded.

The six examples from the data of collaborative practice (which are noted below) featured under the same theme of 'Effective Communication' for both parents and SENCOs. Only responses that made explicit references to working with others or in partnership (which included references to the sharing or agreement of information before it is processed) were included:

Parents' responses (collaborative elements emboldened for emphasis):

*'Meetings, completed in partnership **with** the school'*

*'Being able to draft the application **with** the SENDCo'*

*'Timetable of assessments, choice of location of assessments, **approval of advice before sharing**'*

SENCO responses (collaborative elements emboldened for emphasis):

*'Even if parents initiate the process **I do it with them** to ensure that what is submitted is as thorough as possible.'*

*'All of the professionals involved had lengthy conversations with me and everything was **finalised by myself and the parents.**'*

*'I made the request, I chased the info, **I communicated with parents and kept them involved.** It was 'my' application.'*

These examples of professionals and parents working together may not be truly representative of effective collaborative practice because the examples could be representative of quite low levels of participation e.g. *'I do it with them'*. Therefore, the limited examples in the data for collaboration over decision making, suggests this is not typically part of the EHC needs assessment process in practice. In fact, the data subverted the notion of working together effectively, with examples from parents of negative positioning or poor experiences of working with professionals:

*'Senco being extremely obstructive'*

*'Biased professionals from LA'*

*'It felt like the LA were constantly putting up barriers for refusal to assess'*

*'Teachers for years telling me my daughter had no learning disabilities so there was no point in applying'*

This data includes examples of oppositional comments and 'othering' which illustrates the difference of status and / or values between parents and professionals. This mismatch in the values, agenda and / or power between those who need to work together will be a barrier to effective working relationships and impacts on positive collaborative practice being effected.

The data also illustrated that collaboration can be affected by changes of professionals, for example a change of school or change of SEN officer. This change of person could have a detrimental impact on the EHC needs assessment process because relationships may need re-establishing and re-building to work towards positive outcomes, as outlined in the SENCOs responses below:

*'Lack of communication from SEN. Case workers leaving the service or not being available.'*

*'XXX (reference to local authority) deciding to make SEND staff redundant and claiming they have too many EHCP'*

In addition, language was highlighted as a factor in limiting collaboration. In some cases, the language used and styles of communication were shared as limiting factors on how inclusive a group might be. It is possible that in groups which are not as stable, the cohesion in communication could be disrupted and exacerbated by the range of different professionals from different disciplines. One example from a SENCO illustrated when the use of language needed to be mediated for the parent:

*'Once had to sit in a 2 hour outcomes meeting where the well meaning EP chairing was using language totally incomprehensible to parents and I kept trying to paraphrase to model how to make it clearer but the meeting just went on way past the parents interest and I felt the process was more about the LA feeling they were ticking the boxes rather than being sensitive to the needs of the parents.'*

#### *4.2.2.2 There were some aspects of working with others that parents and SENCOs found useful*

After coding the responses from question 18 (parents) and 19 (SENCOs) on what the most useful aspects of the EHC needs assessment process were, respondents made some references to collaborative working, (see Table 7). However, the data included some negative responses as well as positive. Parents recorded 'Nothing' as the most common response, followed by 'Specialist / change placement' and 'Appropriate recognition of needs' which were both equally common. The two most

common themes from the SENCOs responses were 'Working with families' and ensuring there was 'Appropriate support in place' followed by 'Working with professionals'.

Shared themes	
<p style="text-align: center;">Getting the plan (P4, S7)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Specialist / Change of placement (P2, S3)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Nothing (P1, S5)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Appropriate support in place (P4, S1)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Appropriate recognition of needs (P2, S4)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Understanding control / autonomy over the process (P4, S8)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Working with professionals (P5, S2)</p>	
Parents' themes	SENCOs' themes
<p style="text-align: center;">P3. Rights</p> <p style="text-align: center;">P4. Networking / social networking</p> <p style="text-align: center;">P6. Child's happiness</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">S1. Working with families</p>
<p><b>Please note:</b> The numbers in the table represent the rank order of the theme based on the frequency of responses from participants (1 being the most common). Shared themes indicate both parents (P) and SENCOs (S) responses. Where the rank order number appears more than once the number of responses were the same (for example 'Appropriate support in place' and 'Working with families' are both ranked as 1 for SENCOs).</p>	

**Table 7: Most useful aspects of the process: a table representing the themes related to parents and SENCOs perceptions on the most useful aspects of the EHC needs assessment process**

From the data in question 18 (parents) and 19 (SENCOs) it appeared that parents and professionals both valued collaborative approaches as a useful aspect of the process. Parents included reference to 'Networking / social networking' (ranked fourth in their responses) and SENCOs ranked 'Working with families' as the most useful aspect. This illustrates the necessity for communication with others as part of the process. However, parents' ranked this aspect as lower than the SENCOs, and their responses illustrate they seek support from external groups and networking, rather than schools and the local authority. The following examples highlight what parents valued from 'Networking / social networking':

*'Facebook /parents groups who have been through the process. Our local forum and coffee mornings/ courses that the forum put on then help empower parents to keep fighting'*

*'Other parents have by far been the most useful form of advice and support. They are there when services are not and give so much more'*

*'Advice from people who had already done an EHCP'*

The SENCOS' comments on the benefits of working with the families, are outlined in the following responses:

*'Parent coproduction'*

*'It draws together a team around the child and builds a supportive relationship between school and parents.'*

*'Making sure that parents are given the voice to advocate for their child and their individual needs.'*

*'Working with the family to listen to what they felt their child needed.'*

Yet the SENCOS' positive responses on working with families are not evident from parents' responses to this question, because 'Working with professionals' was the least common response (see **Table 7**). Five parental responses referred to being faced with barriers and refusals to assess through the EHC needs assessment process. These barriers and refusals may be another factor in the disparity in the SENCO's responses (presenting positive aspects on working with families) and the parents' position which presented less favourable accounts regarding working relationships with professionals.

#### *4.2.2.3 Both parents and SENCOS referred to the lack of collaboration with local authorities*

Issues with the local authority were evident in 41% (n.31) of the SENCO responses and 45% (n.38) of parental responses. The following responses illustrate some factors which may have led to the negative perceptions of the Local authorities. Parents' responses included:

*'It was done to us. No concept of coproduction'*

*'The LA listen to the headteacher who wasn't supportive of the request, without taking into account all evidence parents had provided to show why the child needed a plan'*

SENCOS' responses referring to challenges working with local authorities included:

*'Lack of information and inaccurate info from XXX (reference to local authority)'*

*'Lack of replies to emails, sometimes for 5 months from the local SEN team.'*

Additionally, the data highlighted power differentials where the parents' position and views that assessment should take place were considered as subordinate to the professionals' views. The parental responses below illustrate how this limits opportunity for collaboration:

*'We knew that even though the evidence we'd included was more than enough, the LA would refuse to assess'*

*'Had to wait for school to agree before I could start the process.'*

*'Lack of communication from the LA, not being kept up to date, not being given the full picture, the LA seemingly being very secretive about information saying they could let us know certain information'*

Mistrust of the local authorities is evident in these responses and in data referencing local authority policies which did not align to the legislation, as outlined below.

Parents' responses:

*'Our LA frequently ignore the legislation and guidance and create their own policies to suit themselves'*

*'SEN officer with poor knowledge. LA who think their policy trumps law. Being ignored when requesting that certain professionals provide advice. Attending the planning meeting and realizing it would make no difference, so we would have to go to tribunal'*

SENCO's response:

*'Reliant on boroughs interpretation of needs and paperwork'*

The minimal evidence in the data of collaboration or opportunities to take forward collaborative decision-making could be indicative of a disconnect between the local authorities and the parents and SENCOs.

#### 4.2.3 Focus Three: Inherent issues of inequality

Key findings:

- Parents and SENCOs were disadvantaged by barriers in the system
- Socio-economic status influences the outcomes
- Parents and SENCOs are powerless to address the inequalities in the system

#### 4.2.3.1 Parents and SENCOs were disadvantaged by barriers in the system

After coding the responses from question 14b (parents) and 15b (SENCOs) on what made participants feel *out of control* of the process, a range of themes were evident (**Table 8**). The qualitative responses to this question illustrated that there are a range of barriers experienced by parents and SENCOs leading to disadvantage and marginalisation. Most prominent themes from parents were the ‘Poor quality actions / reports / assessment’ followed by ‘Lack of communication’. The most prominent theme from SENCOs was by far the ‘Lack of communication’ which was then followed by ‘Poor quality actions / reports / assessment’. Again, this illustrates commonality in the main issues faced by both parents and SENCOs despite the differences in their positionality on the EHC needs assessment process.

Shared themes	
Poor quality actions / reports / assessment (P1, S4) Lack of communication (P2, S1) Time / Delays (P6, S4) Unlawful Practice mentioned (P5, S6)	
Parents’ themes	SENCOs’ themes
P3. Lack of information P4. Feelings of intimidation / manipulation / accusations towards parents P7. Lack of inclusive practice / appropriate provisions P8. Lack of support / not knowing where to get support	S2. Barriers working with other professionals S3. Transfer / loss of power to local authority mentioned S5. Variability or inconsistency in the process
<b>Please note:</b> The numbers in the table represent the rank order of the theme based on the frequency of responses from participants (1 being the most common). Shared themes indicate both parents (P) and SENCOs (S) responses. Where the rank order number appears more than once the number of responses were the same (for example ‘Poor quality actions / reports / assessment’ and ‘Time / Delays’ are both ranked as 4 for SENCOs).	

**Table 8: Out of control themes: a table representing the themes related to parents and SENCOs feeling out of control of the EHC needs assessment process**

With regards to the ‘Poor quality actions / reports / assessment’ parents’ responses identified a range of aspects across school and the local authorities as outlined below:

*‘Incorrect information on diagnosis included on the draft. Unsure of the impact on his ability to stay at school. Lack of diagnosis and use of old documents based on older behaviour’*

*'The LA communication was awful and they disregarded their statutory timelines'*

*'Bad judgement and decision making, feeling the child was not the most important element and it was more to do with money and targets'*

The SENCOs' responses were more focused on the poor actions of local authorities as outlined below:

*'Poor communication, being consulted late because LA made mistakes with sending consultations to wrong email addresses etc.'*

*'The case officers completing EHCPs have never worked in school and therefore do not understand the restrictions or difficulties encountered on a daily basis'*

The responses relating to 'Lack of communication' encompassed similar issues across both the parents and the SENCOs, it related to not being able to make contact, not being kept informed, unacceptable delays and being ignored. Most commonly this referred to communication with the local authority for both SENCOs and parents.

An area of notable difference in the emerging themes was that parents reported feelings of 'Intimidation / Manipulation / Accusations' which made them feel out of control; this was not evident in the SENCOs' responses. This may be representative of a power differential between the parents and professionals. The parents' comments illustrating this differential in power are below:

*'Being ignored, threatened with prosecution, maligned.'*

*'the head reported us to social services stating I was making up all her medical info ☹️ it was a horrid time and all the while my daughter couldn't access her education so she suffers'*

*'...Antagonistic school staff and Local Authority staff who deemed that the difficulties developed because of my parenting.'*

*'Gaslighting by school and local authority'*

The complexity of the system and the lack of clarity of the information, in addition to the lack of access, serves as a barrier to communication with parents. One parent made the following comment on the opaqueness of the system:

*'I am a scientist by training and am familiar with using an evidence-based approach. I read and write complex documents in the course of my work (strategic project management for medical science research). However, the EHCP system is so opaque and inconsistent that it is very difficult to navigate as a parent.'*

#### 4.2.3.2 Socio-economic status influences the outcomes

Data supported the notion that parents in a privileged economic position will have more choice in the current system because they will be in a position to employ independent professionals to contribute to the process. The parents who are not in this position will be dependent upon the professionals employed by the local authorities. Socio-economic status influenced the experiences of the respondents, with 24% (n.18) of parents exiting the state-led system by self-funding professionals, instructing solicitors and organising home education.

*'We paid for a professional advocate who was very supportive'*

*'The law was on my side and I hired a decent solicitor'*

*'I was in control of organising our professionals but out of control with the local authorities professionals.'*

From the data, there are examples of the state-led assessments as being of poor quality or inadequate, (**Table 8**). One parent referred to the *'poor quality reports from the LA EP and CAMHS'* as the aspect that made them feel *out of control* during the process. Therefore, this could further evidence parents as being marginalised and having little choice if they do not have the ability to pay for private specialists.

The most extreme action reported in the data were parents referencing ways they have exited the state-led system for EHC needs assessment process. From the parents' responses on feeling *in control*, it is evident that exiting the system was a factor that enabled them to have some sense of agency over the process. In addition, parents were not only exiting the EHC needs assessment process, they were also exiting the school provisions typically provided by the local authority. Examining the different types of school, it was clear that 9 children (12%) were identified as being home schooled, excluded or in Education Other than at School (EOTAS).

#### 4.2.3.3. Parents and SENCOs are powerless to address the inequalities in the system

The data included comments on the unlawful practice when responding to question 14b (parents) and 15b (SENCOs) on what made participants feel *out of control* of the process. In some cases this was evident in the lack of opportunities for inclusive practice which could be considered unlawful due to schools not fulfilling requirements under 'best endeavours' (DfE/DoH, 2015: 91). However, there were also direct references to unlawful actions which is a more serious issue. The data included two examples from SENCOs (2%) and eight examples from parents (11%). Comments from parents illustrated challenges related to perceived unlawful practice and in some cases the sense of helplessness in trying to address this.



Parents' responses:

*'I always felt I had no control. They could do what they like with little consequences even when breaking the law'*

*'Lack of competence by school and their lack of understanding of the equalities act, criteria to meet EHC needs request and children and family law, they only focussed on their own school behaviour policy.'*

*'School believing she didn't meet criteria (LAs unlawful local policy is the problem, a disbelief of our family due to prejudicial other judgements or opinions held by school's ignorance of mental health needs and what drives behaviour. A lack of inclusion, tolerance and flexibility in an education system that has a limited perception of vulnerability and disability).'*

SENCOs' responses:

*'XXX (reference to local authority) constantly missing their statutory deadlines.'*

*'Lack of communication from the SEN department. Huge delays in the process meaning children were at risk of not having what they needed in time to apply for secondary school.'*

What was of serious concern was the reported detrimental effects the process had on the parents lives in the additional comments provided at the end of the questionnaire. This included references to impact upon their mental health, family, and consequently in some cases, financial circumstances and ability to work. This is a clear indicator of complete loss of control and autonomy, and not only within the EHC needs assessment process, but also the wider impact on individuals' autonomy and ability to function day to day. Examples from parental comments on this loss of control are outlined below:

*'It was highly traumatic and placed our family under a lot of pressure. I had to stop working as my child did not have a suitable school placement for two years. ...Our child was completely abandoned for two years and no one at his original school or from the LA backed our request for a working EHCP that named a suitable school. We lost our first tribunal and the whole process has cost us over £20000. Fortunately, he has now been settled in his new placement for four weeks and is absolutely thriving already. It's so frustrating that the system doesn't trust parents but works against them instead of collaboratively.'*

*'It's a monumental fiasco that breaks the people it should support. I could write a PhD thesis on it with the promise of a sequel.'*

*'I was on antidepressants while we went through the process - it was the most stressful year of my life.'*

The data illustrated a sense of powerlessness permeating both the parents and SENCOs responses. The ultimate 'decision' seems to still sit with the local authority and the final decisions seem to be enacted without collaboration. This quotation from a parent encapsulates the participant as powerless against the persistent, systemic issues which must be addressed:

*'It's an horrific process. Not because the legislation is bad or wrong, but because of the gatekeepers in it and a lack of budget / resource / capacity. The problem is political ideology, doing to rather than doing with families, professional hubris and arrogance, a lack of respect for children's rights, austerity and a homogenous inclusion agenda which is the antithesis of Baroness Warnock's intentions. The systems are not personalised, child-centred or with equal respect to family voice or child views. It's a disgrace.'*

#### 4.2.4 Stage One: Summary

The data from Stage One indicated that decision making is not collaborative in the EHC needs assessment process or subsequent management of the EHC plan, and the current system often elicits individuals to take action in order to drive forward the process. The lack of collaboration between parents and professionals in the findings support the notion that co-production is an 'illusion' (Boddison and Soan, 2021: 91). Inequalities in the system and the impact of this on outcomes for children were evident in the data. It was clear despite this increased knowledge or socio-economic status both parents and SENCOs were powerless to address these inequalities in the system and for some it was an incredibly traumatic process.

The second stage of the study was informed by these initial findings because gaining a much greater insight into why there is a lack of collaborative practice in decision making would be the first steps in addressing this in the future. The second stage of the research therefore utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of both parents and SENCOs to gain an in-depth understanding of how they construct their realities of participatory decision-making.

Participants from Stage One of the research were invited to participate in Stage Two through the questionnaire, and 60 parents and 55 SENCOs agreed to be contacted. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are limitations in the data for Stage One, because not all groups of parents could be reached. This was in part due to the method of collection through Facebook groups. It is likely that the parents accessing the Facebook groups are parents who may have faced issues with the EHC needs assessment process which would then lead to more negative perceptions in the data. In order

to address this potential limitation, the selection of participants for Stage Two included maximum variation sampling (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998), to identify positive as well as negative examples from the data for the next stage of analysis.

Stage Two of the study builds on the initial findings of Stage One, to provide an in-depth presentation of the experiences of parents and SENCOs and their relationships in practice as they navigate applying for and managing EHC plans.

### 4.3 Stage Two: Data Presentation and Analysis

#### 4.3.1 Introduction and structure

This section of the chapter provides information on the data and analysis of the interviews conducted in Stage Two of the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from three SENCOs and four parents who had contributed to Stage One (one parent provided a written response). An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework was used to gain a deep understanding of the ways in which parents and SENCOs constructed their experiences related to the EHC needs assessment process and subsequent management of the EHC plans (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022).

Data collection took place over the summer of 2021, but there may have been subsequent changes e.g. the schools children attend, or the outcomes from inspections of local authorities. To ensure the data is contextualised all information in the data analysis and discussion relates to the situation for that individual at that time. Evidence from responses is identified by the name of the participant and the location identifier (e.g. the time or section of the interview). The analysis of interviews followed the steps suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) see Section 3.3.2 (**Figure 4**). The process of analysis is 'an iterative and inductive cycle' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022: 75) and so throughout the analysis, the hermeneutic circle of looking back at the whole and considering an overall impression for each participant was adopted.

The findings and analysis for each group of participants is presented first to enable a clear understanding of the experience and positioning as SENCOs, and then the experience and positioning as parents. This is followed by the findings of a cross-case analysis for both groups. This multiperspectival design enabled clear presentation of the themes for the groups in their own right and then comparison of the themes of the shared experience of parents and SENCOs. The cross-case analysis identified points of consensus and conflict across the two groups and provided lines of argument (Larkin *et al.*, 2019) to inform Stage Three of the data analysis.

Cassidy *et al.* (2011: 269) refer to 'providing an audit trail that could be independently scrutinised to trace the development of the analysis from transcript to final presentation of themes'. **Appendix N** provides an overview of the process and examples of data analysis, with the full analysed data available on hyperlinks.

#### **Reflection on IPA data analysis**

I completed a workshop on IPA data analysis, which included annotating an example printed script. I realised that marking up the scripts physically was quite a different experience to marking them up on the computer. It enabled a more fluid engagement moving between the pages and sections of the script rather than a linear approach, which was my experience of completing analysis via the computer. As a result as part of the hermeneutic process, I printed and returned to the scripts to add written comments where there were any further points of interest.

This process enabled a further level of analysis because I realised I had less 'descriptive' blue statements. This might have been due to levels of confidence in the analysis to be able to add linguistic and conceptual comments alongside the descriptive. It was a useful process to go back to the scripts and the original analysis to slow the pace of analysis and ensure that important information was not missed, such as identifying 'gems' in the scripts (Smith, 2011).

#### 4.3.2. Selection of participants

Although IPA utilises purposive sampling, the selection of the participants for Stage Two of the research was based on 'maximum variation sampling' (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998: 124) within the purposive sample from Stage One data. Two questions on the survey were used as a measure to identify the participants:

- How in control of the process did you feel? (1 Not in control and 5 Completely in control)
- How far do you feel this main outcome has been met? (1 No progress towards the outcome and 5 Fully achieved the outcome)

This enabled the selection of cases to be varied with high (total 5 or above) and low (total below 5) responses within the homogeneous groups of parents and SENCOs. **Table 9** identifies the participants for Stage Two of the research. Three parents and three SENCOs were interviewed, and IPA analysis was conducted on the interview data. In addition, one parent chose to submit a written response to the interview questions. She did not want to contribute through an interview due to having high levels of anxiety, but she did want to contribute to the study, and so her responses were also included within the Stage Two data and analysed using the same method.

Participant	Date of interview	Parent / SENCO	High (Total = 5 or above) Low (Total = below 5)	Control questions 14/15 as a measure	Outcome questions 18/19 as a measure	Total
Amber	5/7/23	SENCO	Low	1	3	4
Bethany	22/5/21	SENCO	High	4	5	9
Clara	11/6/21	SENCO	Low	2	2	4
Amelia	7/7/21	Parent	High	4	2	6
Bonnie	2/7/21	Parent	Low	1	2	3
Carmen	8/7/21	Parent	High	3	3	6
Dominique	Emailed 21/6/21	Parent	Low	1	3	4

**Table 9: Participants for Stage Two of the research**

In the parental questionnaire only ten of the 76 respondents, who were happy to be contacted for Stage Two, scored a total higher than '6' for the overall measure. Five of these parents were contacted to invite them to interview, but without success. Therefore, the closest to a 'high' response rating was '6' for both parents. It is recognised with all the participants' that their accounts will not necessarily be wholly positive or negative based on these measures, and are much more likely to include a full range of emotions due to IPA exploring lived experiences. Nevertheless, it forms the basis for a broadly representative sample.

It is important that each individual experience is presented in its own right, despite similarities across the sample. An underpinning principle of IPA is to gain an understanding of the lived experience of the individual and the analytic attention is on the 'participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022: 75). The analytical processes move from the 'particular to the shared' (*ibid.*, 2022: 75) and so it was important to start with the individuals' experiences before considering wider themes that might emerge across the groups. The key findings for each individual are presented as a summary (Sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.5). This outlines the participants' background information, key themes from their individual interviews (the Personal Experiential Themes or PETs) and then how these fit with the overarching Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The individual PETs are situated in a table to illustrate how each participant's PETs relate to the other participants within the overarching GETs. Full participant summaries with supporting illustrative data are also provided (see **Appendix O**).

Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, although one parent said she was happy to have her name shared at the follow up meeting. As a researcher this presented an ethical challenge because I felt she had every right to own what she had shared in her interview. However, the ethical clearance clearly outlined the requirement for anonymity, so this has been adhered to in the study.

#### **Reflection on participants**

Data was anonymised for analysis. Initially I gave the parents and SENCOs numbers e.g. SENCO1, SENCO2 etc. However, I then changed this to give them pseudonyms, primarily because this was typical of IPA studies. However, at this point of change, the participants felt like they became people again for me. Naming them enabled me to feel more connected to them. This aspect really illustrated the importance of the personal and relational ethos of my research (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012) and reinforced the central arguments of the thesis that people need to be at the centre.

Bonnie mentioned that she would be happy to be named when we spoke in the follow up meeting. She said she would stand by her comments and was happy for people to know it was her experiences. She wanted to own her comments. I felt this was a challenging ethical dilemma and especially because my underpinning values is to respect the individual and to hopefully empower their voice through this research. I wanted to be able to use her name, but after discussion with my supervisors and reflecting on the ethical implications, I followed the process by which this study was agreed (**Appendix K**).

#### *4.3.2.1 Member checking outcomes*

After the full analysis of the data, the Parent and SENCO full participant summaries (see **Appendix O**) and the broad cross case analysis of GETs (**Table 12** and **Table 13**) were shared with the participants in January 2023. At this point the participants were invited to review their own responses and attend a follow up meeting (**Appendix M** – Step 8). Following this invitation, two of the four parents made contact. One parent attended the follow up meeting. One parent scheduled to meet, but then did not attend, and did not respond when contacted again, so this was not pursued due to the need to respect the participants privacy (Birt *et al.*, 2016). Two out of Three SENCOs responded, but just to confirm they were happy with the information and did not feel they required a follow up meeting (**Table 10**).

Participants		Recorded response	Outcome
Parents	Amelia	<b>No response</b>	
	Bonnie	Requested meeting	Shared full script and offered meeting – meeting took place on 6/1/23
	Carmen	Requested meeting	Shared full script and scheduled meeting – meeting did not take place
	Dominique	<b>No response</b>	
SENCOs	Amber	Confirmed agreement with the shared content	Response received on 3/1/23 No further action
	Bethany	Confirmed agreement with the shared content	Response received on 6/1/23 No further action
	Clara	<b>No response</b>	

**Table 10: Responses to member checking**

Birt *et al.* (2016: 1806) argue that if we do not report on the engagement in member checking, then ‘we risk tokenistic involvement of participants and exaggerated claims about the transferability of the data’. I have therefore included a summary of who responded and how they responded to the invitation to review their data (Table 11).

Participants		Outcome
Parents	Bonnie	Summary of the meeting on 6/1/23: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agreed with the content of the interview and the analysis</li> <li>- Shared details on further challenges she was experiencing in relation to SEND</li> <li>- Expressed continued dissatisfaction despite reinspection of the local authority – mentioned that she was unable to see any improvements</li> <li>- Concerns over the inequalities in the system were expressed again – mentioned this in relation to SEND system generally as opposed to the challenges for her child</li> <li>- I mentioned anonymity and she stated she wanted to stand by her words – she explained she was happy for her name to be used in the research</li> <li>- Asked to read the thesis when it is complete</li> <li>- Was passionate about ensuring her story is heard</li> </ul>
	Carmen	Not applicable – meeting did not take place
SENCOs	Amber	Response received on 3/1/23: <i>‘I am happy with how you have recorded everything and don't need a follow up meeting.’</i>
	Bethany	Response received on 6/1/23: <i>‘Thanks for the update. I am happy with the content although I can see that my sentence structure when talking is not very precise! If you need me to clarify any points so you can quote them more clearly then do let me know and I am happy to meet again!’</i>

**Table 11: Overview of outcomes for member checking**

### **Reflection on member-checking**

I designed the study from the beginning to include a return to the participants. Yet, after attending a workshop on IPA and asking if this approach had been utilised in other IPA studies, I was confronted with a number of arguments for not undertaking member-checking. This included:

- the time-constraint for building member-checking into an IPA study;
- IPA is interpretative and so the participant in the 'natural attitude' cannot comment on analysis which has been conducted in the 'phenomenological attitude';
- the researcher has a certain lens by which they are conducting the data analysis therefore there could be a disconnect with the analysis and participants may redact information from the transcript, contest the analysis or withdraw from the study;
- there might be unsolicited interpretations that could be damaging or interpretations might offend the participant.

It was suggested that if I wanted to include member-checking, I should have selected a more suitable methodology for this approach such as participatory action research. The strong arguments presented against member-checking in IPA worried me and made me seriously doubt my approach. I was really concerned that my participants might withdraw, which could potentially be very detrimental to the study. However, after considered thought, I believed the ethos of the study and my own position on placing emphasis on the participants' voice was the principled approach to take and decided to continue with the member-checking as originally planned. By receiving these contrary arguments, I believe, it helped me to build a more robust and well-considered approach. For example, examining the philosophical underpinnings of IPA in more detail, to understand more fully the 'natural attitude' and 'phenomenological attitude' (Giorgi, 1997: 243). The design of the member-checking approach was also carefully considered such as sharing summary data first before sharing the full transcript to reduce any interpretations that might offend.



#### 4.3.3 SENCO participant summaries

Below is a brief overview for each participant, to see the full SENCO summaries see **Appendix O**.

##### **Amber:**

Amber is a female aged 35 - 44 years who has been working in education for 11-20 years. She is the named SENCO working across two schools, but both are in the same local authority. In the questionnaire she identified as working in a mainstream local authority school for infants and juniors. Amber had completed 6 applications for EHC plans from 2014-2019.

##### **Bethany:**

Bethany is a female aged 55 - 64 years who has been working in education for over 20 years. Bethany identified as the named SENCO working in a mainstream local authority school for infants on the questionnaire, but in the interview she explained that she works as an independent advisor for SEND and so works across a number of schools as SENCO. She had experience of working in the Virtual School and within a local authority. Bethany made reference to four local authorities in her interview. Bethany estimated that she had completed 25 applications for EHC plans from 2014-2019.

##### **Clara:**

Clara is a female aged 45 - 54 years who has been working in education for over 20 years. Clara is the named SENCO in an independent school for pre-school, infants and juniors at the time of the interview, but she referred to working in mainstream schools in the past. Clara referenced working across three local authorities in the interview. Clara estimated that she had completed 5 applications for EHC plans from 2014-2019.

#### 4.3.4 SENCO Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Each participant's Personal Experiential themes (PETs) were analysed with a focus on the initial research question and from this analysis, three common Group Experiential Themes (GETs) emerged. The overview of PETs for each participant was organised into GETs and reviewed and then reduced to closely link to the research question and focus for the study. The SENCOS' PETs are situated in Table 12 to illustrate how each SENCO's PETs relate to the other participants within the overarching GETs. This formed the basis of the data for analysis of the SENCO group in this section of the thesis and the multiperspectival analysis in Section 4.3.7 and the final stage of analysis in section 4.4. More detailed tables for each GET, illustrating where the PETs and sub-themes feature across the whole sample are available in **Appendix N**.

	GET1 - Process not person	GET2 – Relationships	GET3 -Power and choice
<b>Amber PETS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child centred</li> <li>• System and Process issues</li> <li>• Misconceptions and reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflicting views and values</li> <li>• External forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SENCO identity and voice</li> <li>• Perceived parental power</li> </ul>
<b>Bethany PETS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Person centred</li> <li>• Process driven</li> <li>• Lack of training</li> <li>• Expectations and reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Investment required for collaboration</li> <li>• Beyond the role of SENCO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systemic issues</li> <li>• Parents disadvantaged / disempowered</li> <li>• SENCO identity</li> <li>• SENCO restricted</li> </ul>
<b>Clara PETS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-centred</li> <li>• Systemic issues</li> <li>• Expectations and reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power and choice limitations</li> <li>• Socio-economic status / advantage</li> <li>• Independent sector consideration</li> <li>• SENCO identity</li> </ul>

**Table 12: All SENCOs’ Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) in relation to the other participants**

In this section, each GET is presented in turn with the key findings outlined at the start of the section followed by an analysis of the data to illustrate the findings.

#### 4.3.4.1 GET1 - Process not person

##### Key findings:

Sub-theme 1 - The importance of person-centred practice to SENCOs	Sub-theme 2 - Systemic barriers to SENCOs effecting person centred practice	Sub-theme 3 - Misconceptions and reality restricting person centred practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SENCOs valued person-centred practice, but were challenged in implementing this in practice</li> <li>- SENCOs had varied knowledge and experience of person-centred practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SENCOs identified mistrust and a lack of confidence in the system which impacts on people feeling valued</li> <li>- The inaccessibility of the EHC plans hindered person-centred planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflicting values on the expectations of the EHC plan and the reality can impact on person centred practice</li> </ul>

##### 4.3.4.1.1 Sub-theme 1 - The importance of person-centred practice to SENCOs

**SENCOs valued person-centred practice<sup>12</sup>, but were challenged in implementing this in practice.** All SENCOs had some knowledge of child-centred practices however the findings in this section of the chapter indicated they are operating in a system which places the needs of the child and the provision as secondary to the system, which is process and paperwork focused.

<sup>12</sup> Person-centred practice includes consideration of both child-centred practice and parent or family centred practice in this section.

The importance of working in a child-centred way was illustrated with examples of how SENCOs realise this in school: *'had children chair, their own meetings in the past.'* (Bethany 0.57) and *'I always involve the children. So I invite the child, I well, I was getting the child to invite people to their annual review,'* (Clara 0:07). However, there was also a tension identified as to how far SENCOs can truly realise child-centred planning in their role. Amber and Bethany highlighted this tension: *'children are supposed to be at the heart of it'* (Amber 0.20). The word *'supposed'* may illustrate the knowledge of what should be happening, but with an awareness this is not in place. Similarly, Bethany refers to *'proper'* person centred processes in place in the past when conducting annual reviews for children and families, but that this was no longer possible due to the number of children they are working with: *'we had a guy come in and actually facilitate a proper person-centred process. And it took two and a half hours. It was lovely. We had music, we had refreshments that the child had chosen. We had like paper all around the room where they could write, we all went open, right? Wrote down what their strengths were a bit more like, um, you know, family group conference type thing. But it just wasn't really sustainable to do it like that we'd love to do, but we had so many children.'* (Bethany 0.57).

Bethany had a wealth of experience to draw upon in relation to working in child-centred ways. She was in post prior to the SEND reforms (2014) and recounted the period of time, 10 years ago, when there was impetus, training, and support to implement child-centred working. Her account illustrates an example of idyllic child-centred practice. Bethany's desire to return to this approach is evident in her reference to *'love to'* be able to work in that way and serves to heighten further the tension between what SENCOs know is best for the child and families and the reality of resource constraints. This professional tension of knowing what needs to take place, but also knowing what cannot be implemented may compromise the professional position of the SENCO role. Clara didn't explicitly identify the tension between what should be happening and the lack of child-centred practice. However, she did still acknowledge that the process itself is not child friendly. So, in the same ways that Bethany could verbalise all the ways in which an annual review could be suited for children and families with the right time, investment and approach, Clara reinforced this with comments on the impractical nature and how SENCOs try to work round this: *'And so you don't have to stay because you will probably be bored, and they normally escape at that stage.'* (Clara 0:07). The word *'escape'* illustrates the confined nature of the meeting and a process the child, and possibly families, endure rather than it being valued and constructive.

SENCOs views of placing parents at the centre of their practices was varied. Each of the SENCOs referred to ways in which they work with parents, but in some ways the commitment to person-centred planning for families was less evident than the focus on child-centred working. Children were

all mentioned first in their responses to the first question in the interview. This may be because SENCOs are working in school and so the children are likely to be their first concern. All three SENCOs could see barriers to being able to work effectively with parents. Amber saw relationships with parents as challenged by external factors for example an unmanageable workload was referred to: *'I haven't in a timely manner got back to them because I've been doing tribunals and witness statements and you know, all the legal stuff re EHCPs I haven't physically had the time'* (Amber 9.23). Similarly, Bethany referred to this pressure of workload and just needing to get the job done hindering being able to truly place the family at the centre of planning. She commented on this when applying for an EHC plan and highlighted how the process can be tokenistic by just obtaining specific information rather than working collaboratively and in a person-centred way: *'In actual fact, the parent does the 'all about me' and what they want, and you talk to them about it, and that's really nice. And then the SENCO goes away, and spends a couple of days on their own in an office, gleaning through everything they can find in the file to write a powerful, a powerful piece of evidence collating everything they can. And then the EP then writes a load of stuff and then when you do your provision, you pull you know, you end up doing in isolation, because you just need to get it done.'* (Bethany 23.15). The comment on communication with the parent as *'really nice'* is in opposition to the comment *'you end up doing in isolation'* and serves to highlight the tokenistic nature of the practices. These findings indicated that SENCOs are forced into situations where they are operating to serve performative, State requirements of writing a *'a powerful piece of evidence'* rather than the requirement to place the family and children at the centre. Later in the interview, Bethany reinforced this position when she referred to the application process for an EHC plan: *'I think the application process itself is quite bizarre, isn't it, because when you do the application, you're doing an application as if it was going to panel as opposed to just what it should be. This child's got special needs, and they need special provision.'* (Bethany – 30:21). Bethany can identify the nonsensical, *'bizarre'* way in which we are operating by seeing the needs of the child and the provision as secondary to the system of a paperwork focused process. This arguably presents a system which is not needs led or child-centred.

**SENCOs had varied knowledge and experience of person-centred practice.** However, currently there is no advantage in having greater knowledge and training because you still cannot implement person-centred approaches and it possibly leads to greater frustration and professional tensions as opposed to not having the knowledge. For example, Bethany had an extensive experience of working in person-centred ways through her work with the Virtual School (for Looked After Children) and her engagement with Social Care. She could see the value in case mapping, but noted the tensions of a bureaucratic system where time is limited: *'I think if you if you did it as a case mapping, rather than*

*the pace that the filling in loads of forms, that might be good. But that takes longer, doesn't it? And SENCOs don't have any time.'* (Bethany 30:21). Her experience demonstrated a detailed understanding of person-centred ways of working, she referred to specific training as key in child-centred working and moving practice forward: *'you do NASENCO, don't you? So if there could be some proper training about structured conversations listening, empathic listening, how how to have I did some tricky conversation training just recently with the Virtual School, which I wish I'd had years ago, on how to move forward that, you know, when people are being really defensive or aggressive or whatever, and that's missing in schools.'* (Bethany 7:53). Bethany realises that without *'proper training'* in specific skills of communication, such as *'emphatic listening'* there is a risk of mismanaging situations where parents are *'defensive or aggressive'*. This showed Bethany as constructing her ideal of person-centred practice from suitable preparatory training experiences, alongside drawing on working in other, wider health and social care services. However, this also illustrates a professional tension for Bethany because she holds knowledge of person-centred practices and how to implement them, but also knows it is not possible to implement in the current system.

Clara constructed person-centred working in a different way to Bethany, but this may be relative to having more limited experiences of working in person-centred ways. She discussed placing children at the centre of planning, but needed prompting to consider parents as central to the process: *'when it comes to the annual review, I always ask them to the parents, you know, contribution. And then and then they attend the meeting. And if they can't attend it in real life, then we'd be doing it across Team meetings. So yeah, so we do we do chat a lot.'* (Clara 4:37). Clara used the terms *'contribution'*, *'attend'* and *'chat a lot'* which illustrates aspects of working together, but does not necessarily indicate parents are being placed at the centre. It is possible that Clara's lack of knowledge, training and wider experiences (such as exposure to health and social care models) limits her perspective on person-centred practice.

#### 4.3.4.1.2 Sub-theme 2 - Systemic barriers to SENCOs effecting person centred practice

**SENCOs identified mistrust and a lack of confidence in the system which impacts on people feeling valued.** All three SENCOs referred to ways in which the current system hinders child-centred working, and how the resultant mistrust and lack of confidence may negatively affect outcomes. Amber's account illustrated how parental perception of the system can hinder trust and confidence: *'quite a few parents are upset, not because of what I've done, but because they don't agree with what is the process or what is the situation'* (Amber 7.11). Amber's representation shows if parents disagree with the system, but the SENCO cannot do anything about this, then it is difficult to maintain open, honest and transparent relationships, potentially leading to adversarial situations.

Similarly, Amber's lack of confidence in the system, could be passed on to parents unconsciously fueling mistrust. Amber's experiences seem to cause frustration because there is no clear communication on changes: *'you had they had creative engagement facilitators who are supposed to work with the parents, but support the school, and that I've never seen one. So I have no idea what they do or where they exist'* (Amber 13.57). She also states: *'And now it's like, well, I don't know and I'm not sure the inclusion partner knows either'* (Amber 13.57). From Amber's experience, she sees the system as operating ineffectively, which may breed further insecurity and mistrust or even impact on the sense of competence for the SENCO. This sense of professional insecurity through having *'no idea what they do or where they exist'* means services cannot be accessed and could be quite damaging for the SENCO to be able to fully support children and families in a person-centred way.

**The inaccessibility of the EHC plans hindered person-centred planning** because SENCOs experiences demonstrated how both professionals and parents can, too easily, be excluded. The inaccessibility of language on the plans was identified by Bethany as exclusionary, she noted there is a great deal of onus and duty upon the SENCO to be the translator of the document: *'EHCs are often written in a way that is just not understandable. And then you're supposed to share them with mainstream teachers, I never bother sharing the whole EHCP'* (Bethany 28:27). Furthermore, Bethany noted from her experience: *'most parents, they don't read the EHCP I don't think. They don't get it. They're just happy if it's means a special school'* (Bethany 28:27). The perception that parents won't understand may lead to information being omitted and is open to tokenistic ways of working. The inaccessibility identified by Bethany, demonstrates how parents are de-valued and hindered from being able to contribute, which ultimately serves to exclude them from the process rather than placing them at the centre.

Additionally, poorly written EHC plans or those which are generalised in nature, limit them as practical, useful, specific tools for implementing appropriate support. Bethany's experience of an EHC plan as being too generalised presented challenges: *'they're a bit they're a bit vague, aren't they? Opportunities to take part in small group work, opportunities for one to one, a broad and balanced curriculum, or do what does it mean? It doesn't mean anything, does it?'* (Bethany 28:27) The confusion *'what does it mean?'* inevitably leads to challenges of implementing provisions and impacts on the ability to place the child at the centre because the plan is so unclear or generalised. This was reinforced by Amber's experiences who noted the importance of having an EHC plan as a document which drives the provision because when it is generalised it is useless: *'the outcome meeting is absolutely vital, because that's where you pull apart that EHCP from word for word, and make sure it's succinct and relevant to the child and practical for the school'* (Amber 13.57). Findings would suggest

that clarity in the EHC plans is important to support transparency and accessibility to enable person-centred planning.

#### 4.3.4.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Misconceptions and reality restricting person centred practice

**Conflicting values on the expectations of the EHC plan and the reality can impact on person centred practice.** All SENCOs constructed parents seeing the EHC plan as the 'answer', yet referred to ways that this was not the case. Clara's experience saw this as vital to parents: *'parents are desperate for an EHCP. And I have to explain to them, we can apply, but our local authorities 68% get turned down first time. And, you know, we can still apply, but I need to be able to prove 13 hours of support.'* (Clara 5.48). Bethany went further to present parents as seeing the EHC plan as an idyllic state or place: *'they're really pleased that you've got, yeah, you've got that, that Nirvana'* (Bethany 20.26). Such incredibly high expectations may place a great deal of pressure on the SENCOs when in reality when the EHC plan is awarded, often very little changes as noted by Bethany: *'they realise that it doesn't really give you as much as they think'* (Bethany 20.26). This may set up a situation where, if differences in values are not acknowledged it could undermine person centred practice. Clara's experience, was similar in identifying the mismatch between the SENCO and parents' expectations on seeking an EHC plan, but the values in this case were positioned quite differently: *'we had real problems with that, because the parents didn't want him to have an EHCP because they felt it was a stigma. They felt it would affect where he went in the future.'* (Clara 5.00).

Conflicting values were also evident in Amber's account of managing what she would consider as unrealistic expectations from parents based on available provisions in school, and what might be required educationally or would be a more realistic provision: *'your child will be out of the classroom for four hours a week, like, do you really want that? They were like, Yeah, we do'* (Amber 1.16). Amber's experience of conflicts in values led to a more serious, detrimental impact on the relationship. She recounted when tribunal is initiated: *'I had to upset the parents and sort of say, well, the parents wanted this EHCP with this level of detail. And I'd said, this is not practical. And hence, we're a tribunal'* (Amber 4.05). The resultant impact is that the SENCOs and the parents are then in a combative position which is difficult to manage if the child is still attending the school, as acknowledged by Amber *'at the end, the parents said, I'm really upset because I'm stuck at the school that I don't agree with'* (Amber 4.05). These findings illustrate points where there are differing values, but also arguably how essential it is to appropriately acknowledge this in working together so that one person's view is not prioritised over another.

#### 4.3.4.2 GET2 - Relationships

##### Key findings:

Sub-theme 1 - The Importance of relationships	Sub-theme 2 - Investment required for working together
- SENCOs recognised that relationships with in-person contact are fundamental in working together - The parents' trust in the SENCO empowered and enabled a level of control	- There needs to be the right conditions for professionals and parents to work together

##### 4.3.4.2.1 Sub-theme 1 - The Importance of relationships

###### **SENCOs recognised that relationships with in-person contact are fundamental in working together.**

Clara and Bethany's experiences illustrated the importance of relationships with parents and other professionals as fundamental to success. Clara refers to *'the triangle almost with parents, child and staff, the closer that triangle can be, the more, the better it is.'* (Clara 0.07), indicating the need for close, personal relationships to improve the quality of working together. Similarly, Bethany saw relationships as foundational and a necessary requirement before considering other forms of interaction such as meetings or discussions taking place which might involve more complex or important decision making: *'getting parents to be fully involved is all about the relationship you have with a parent before you even get to the meeting part of it'* (Bethany 0.57).

Bethany felt trust was central to parents communicating with SENCOs openly, which reinforced her position of relationships as paramount: *'in my experience, parents will give you their voice if they trust you.'* (Bethany 0.57). Equally, Bethany acknowledged that open, trusting relationships can be closed down with ineffective communication: *'SENCOs are teachers. And I think teachers are well, they're, teachers by nature are not particularly good listeners or observers, necessarily. I mean, they tend to be imparters of information'* (Bethany 7.53). Bethany's account of communication challenges educationalist's awareness of their interactions with others, and their ability to be able to listen and work together collaboratively.

Similarly, a lack of in-person contact or communication was identified as leading to barriers in working together. Bethany acknowledged that relationships need to be personal to be effective. Detached relationships are more fragile or susceptible to breaking down: *'the relationship that they had that was difficult was with either social care or the SEN officer, who I guess are more amorphous.'* (Bethany 18.50). This account reinforces the metaphor of the *'close triangle'* referred to by Clara and direct



contact as a protective factor in ensuring positive working relationships. The greater the distance the more 'amorphous' (Bethany 18.50) which can lead to detachment and disengagement.

Both Bethany and Clara were conscious of the need to be positive in managing complex or sensitive situations. Clara stated: *'I'm very aware that if you antagonise people, it doesn't help. It just gets their back. And they're not gonna help you. So the more you can help other people, the more you can be positive, I think that's what's reflected back.'* (Clara 19.25). Bethany saw her role as an advocate for the parents (as well as the child) in being able to challenge the State and the system, *'we had quite good relationships with the county who sometimes we battled with'* (Bethany 4.25). Such challenging, complex situations may serve to heighten the status of the SENCO, as Bethany considered the role in an elevated way and offering salvation: *'parents and carers, they see you as advocate on their behalf. But that's how I feel almost, you know, a potential Saviour'* (Bethany 39.37). Bethany's account conceptualized the SENCO as saving parents from danger or difficulty. This metaphor of 'saviour' really highlights the SENCO as essential in the process.

**The parents' trust in the SENCO empowered and enabled a level of control** based on Bethany and Clara's experiences. This may be due to parents needing the SENCO to take the role of advocate because they are unable to engage in the process due to the complexity. Bethany gave this as an example: *'Some parents didn't really understand the EHCP the school triggered the EHCP. We did the work, we got the 'all about me' bit from the parents, and that was they just wanted it. They couldn't really say what they wanted apart from I just think they will, we agree with you that we should get one they might need a special school. But in terms of the body of the of the text, they couldn't really engage in it.'* (Bethany 11.51). Bethany referred to how parents' poor experiences can be detrimental to relationships when the SENCO is viewed as part of the system. *'a lot of parents who've come to us having battled. And therefore they come in really defensive'* (Bethany 4.25). Therefore, building relationships that involve a level of trust and are strong enough to resist breakdown requires investment and is not a simplistic transactional process due to the nature of, and the complexity of, the situations SENCOs and parents are managing in relation to EHC plans.

Clara, however, referred to her experience of having control in guiding parents: *'I think I have autonomy, I think I have control within school in as much as I can really direct parents'* (Clara 8.46). She went on to state, *'so I can steer them as to what what needs to be said or done'* (Clara 8.46). This position could be linked to the notion of the SENCO as gatekeeper and ultimately having control over the decision-making process. Clara's account demonstrated the navigation parents may need through the complex system and the empowerment of a trusted SENCO in providing guidance. Yet, this act of passing the control to the SENCO could also be open to abuse.

#### 4.3.4.2.2 Sub-theme 2 - Investment required for working together

**There needs to be the right conditions for professionals and parents to work together.** The findings indicated a need for investment in resources, such as time, space and training to be able to work with people in a person-centred way. Amber and Bethany recognised the investment required for working together but both illustrated that this is not happening in practice with their comments. Amber explicitly identified the lack of investment currently in practice: *'I think there needs to be much more collaborative working from the professionals'* (Amber 17.52). Bethany reminisced over past practice where there was investment from professionals to enable participation: *'we used to do work before the annual review, and the child would do a PowerPoint or a collage, or present in a different way, so that they could present at the review having planned something themselves'* (Bethany 0.57) The use of past tense illustrated that the investment in working together was not evident in practice at this time.

The findings illustrated that it is important to invest in building protective factors for positive relationships such as trust, honesty and safe spaces for dialogue. Amber constructed an experience where conflicting values were a barrier to working together productively. She referred to the conflict as nonsensical: *'the parent power that I've seen recently, is actually overtaking professionals knowledge. And it's gone a bit barmy.'* (Amber 1.16). Co-production involves difficult conversations which can lead to difficulties in maintaining relationships when this is not managed well: *'they don't feel like I've supported them because I didn't agree with that. And obviously, yeah, relationships are tarnished'* (Amber 7.52). These conflicting views can lead to tensions or opposition, which impacts negatively on relationships if not addressed. Bethany also identified when relationships can be impacted on by past conflict and difficulties: *'they just want to fight you. Yeah. Because you are the system aren't you. So it's about building trust. And sometimes that takes quite a long time'* (Bethany 4.25). These findings indicated that situations could result in further conflict and detrimental impact on relationships if it is not managed well. Bethany identified the emotionally driven situation, and that repairing these emotionally driven interactions relied on building positive relationships because co-production takes time.

Bethany went on to reinforce the investment required in quality relationships: *'we worked hard on having a relationship. I kind of didn't let them get away with having a bad relationship, because we were always really open, transparent.'* (Bethany 18.50) Bethany also saw the requirement for psychological safety to be able to work collaboratively: *'I think that defensiveness of a SENCO, immediately, puts the SENCO in a very difficult position in that they can't then have that proper co-production because they they are defensive as opposed to really transparent'* (Bethany 7.53). Bethany

identified the emotional impact when things went wrong and how this can create a sense of vulnerability for the SENCO. The psychological condition of being defensive or not being able to communicate illustrated her understanding that professionals need to have a good understanding of their own position, as well as understanding their parents. Bethany illustrated this by demonstrating that when relationships are good, they extend beyond the school and education - they are on a personal level: *'I keep in touch with quite a lot of those parents, you know, some of those kids are like 28 by now.'* (Bethany 20.26). Bethany's construction of the emotional impact and very close relationships that form, show how relationships can exist beyond a typical professional role.

#### 4.3.4.3 GET3 - Power and Choice

##### Key findings:

Sub-theme 1 - The importance of decision making to SENCOs	Sub-theme 2 - External powers limiting the decision making of SENCOs	Sub-theme 3 - Parental power influencing decision making of SENCOs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SENCO professional identity impacted on the ability to participate in decision making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The influence of the local authority on both SENCO and parents making decisions</li> <li>- A culture of perpetual change was disempowering, limited stability and elicited mistrust in the system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perceived parental power can be detrimental to relationships</li> <li>- There were inequitable processes for parents in participating in decision-making</li> </ul>

##### 4.3.4.3.1 Sub-theme 1 - The importance of decision making to SENCOs

**SENCO professional identity impacted on the ability to participate in decision making** and was evident with all three SENCOs. Amber and Clara identified limiting aspects of their status in relation to other professionals. Amber had the perception that the SENCO role was beneath other professionals: *'the EP is obviously above me in terms of qualifications and assessment ideas'* (Amber 4.05). This could impact on the SENCO's confidence in professionally challenging others in meetings. Amber's construction of her role as being professionally at a lower status can lead to self-exclusion from decision making. However, Bethany referred to occasions where she felt empowered working with other professionals: *'I think on the same level, that's been mine, has been my experience. I've had really good relationships with both on on a level. I've never felt patronised'* (Bethany 42.55). Yet, by referring to the term *'patronised'* it may have indicated Bethany's awareness that being patronised is an experience other SENCOs or professionals may have had and may suggest a culture of hierarchical status among professionals. Bethany, had previously recounted an experience of not being listened to, and suppressed: *'you're done too'* (Bethany 37.11). This experience presented a level of disempowerment, despite her account of more positive experiences with professionals. Amber also

went on to give an example of being omitted from the EHC plan process: *'the lack of listening to schools is quite surprising shall we say'* (Amber 20.20). Bethany also referred to being omitted but from working together rather than being excluded from the process entirely: *'I wrote the bloody thing. But they haven't collaborated with me at all.'* (Bethany 23.15). This indicates complexity regarding creating a culture for empowerment and supporting the decision-making of all stakeholders at different levels of the process.

#### 4.3.4.3.2 Sub-theme 2 - External powers limiting the decision making of SENCOs

**The influence of the local authority on both SENCO and parents making decisions** was highlighted by all three SENCOs as limiting. The perception of lack of power and choice once the Local Authority is involved was evident in all accounts. Bethany referred to the inadequacy of the system as a limiting barrier for both SENCO and parents: *'that can be difficult to achieve, you know, in the system that we work in where it's such a battle, isn't it?'* (Bethany 0.57).

In some ways *'battling'* an external force can be unifying if both parties are working together to address this issue. Yet Bethany's positioning of the LA as adversarial places the SENCO in a difficult position of balancing working within and outside of the system. Clara also referred to the feeling of loss of control when dealing with local authorities: *'I don't think I have any autonomy, autonomy in terms of local authorities.'* (Clara 8.46). Clara illustrated how SENCOs can feel a complete loss of any decision-making ability, which can strain relationships if parents see the schools as not being able to effect changes for their children. The cultural perspective of power residing with the authorities was evident in Bethany's account of the variability in local authority approaches: *'all local authorities are interpreting the law in a different way, aren't they?'* (Bethany 30.21). This illustrates the construction of local authorities as holding power if the laws can be flexed to meet different interpretations.

**A culture of perpetual change was disempowering, limited stability and elicited mistrust in the system.** Bethany's experience of the LA referred to how the changes were unsettling and limited opportunities to work effectively with others: *'having a named SEN person, which is quite hard, isn't it to find out who your named SEN person is because they they keep restructuring'* (Bethany 49.15). These constant changes may disempower SENCOs because they are unable to navigate the system themselves. It could also lead to working in isolation because they are unable to connect with, or know the system: *'they've named all their departments in a quite confusing way. Like it's you're preparing for adulthood, not like posts. It's not it's not easy if you were SENCO to get your head around it'* (Bethany 49.15). This can affect decision making because not only are there structural barriers with access, but the individuals may also feel less secure in their judgements. Bethany questioned if these changes and confusing ways to present information may have been a deliberate act: *'Maybe they do*

*that on purpose?'* (Bethany 49.15). Her experience may have led to a level of mistrust and scepticism over the service. Clara's experiences resulted in a similar position of mistrust of the local authority as deliberately obstructive: *'I feel they put in delaying tactics'* (Clara 8.46). Clara's construction of how the challenges are being managed seems to fuel as sense of mistrust in the practices and processes at Local Authority level rather than considering an account of a strained service. Indeed, Bethany identified the inability to manage the demands as a cause for the authorities making the process more challenging to engage with: *'So I feel the whole system is created to to put barriers, to see almost how serious you are. You know, you want to apply for this. All right, we're gonna make you do some work beforehand.'* (Bethany 30.21).

#### 4.3.4.3.3 Sub-theme 3 - Parental power influencing decision making of SENCOs

**Perceived parental power can be detrimental to relationships.** All SENCOs' experiences referred to the level of power parents have in the EHC plan process. Amber felt parents had a higher status than professionals and could undermine professionals' decisions: *'it feels like the parents' ones get priority, because if it fails, then they simply appeal.'* (Amber 16.17). With the word 'simply' she presents the notion of the appeals process as an inequitable two-tiered system in favour of parents. She went on to comment that: *'parents don't have the six month barrier, they just get straight to the next level and then to the next level'* (Amber 16.17). Amber recounted an experience of feeling disempowered when what she had perceived as traditional structures of power were subverted: *'the professionals need to get together and have a good conversation before we get to that next level. Because like the parents I've seen with the level of power they've been given, again, like over the top of the professionals, it feels wrong'* (Amber 7.52). Amber's experience presents her construction of the level of power as a hierarchy, which may also be embedded in culture. Where power differentials do not follow her expected structure, it challenges her established values and possibly undermines her professional identity meaning she feels she has less power to effect change. Bethany's account supported this, with an experience of a parents' decision as undermining the professional's judgement: *'my decision making not to have him in the first place was ignored'* (Bethany 14.46).

In contrast to this, Clara referred to the independent sector and the ways parental power or decision making on educational provisions is limited. *'And that means we'd have to pass the cost to you. Or you possibly have to find another school that is more suitable. So it was slightly blackmail. But it was done with the child's interests, he needs support, he really, really does. And it's getting worse, and he's an unhappy little boy some of the time. So, so I think it's really important to get the parents on board. And whether it's slightly over a barrel.'* (Clara 5.48). There is no indication of collaborative decision-making in Clara's account, the parents must pay for additional support or find another school. The

term *'blackmail'* softens the intent, but essentially the reference to *'blackmail'* and *'over a barrel'* illustrate how power can influence the decisions and ultimately the outcomes.

This dichotomy of power between the parents and SENCOs in all three SENCO experiences leads to a 'them and us' approach. Bethany's way of conceptualising these adversarial outcomes was to place the accountability with the process itself, rather than Amber whose experience identifies the parents as holding more responsibility. Amber even constructed adversarial relationships through the language of conflict: *'if they want to take the SENCO down in order to get where they want then they're quite happy to do that'*. (Amber 11.49). Bethany identified that it was the process that led to adversarial outcomes and working in opposition, not necessarily the individuals themselves: *'They are so what's the word? Aggressive almost, I mean, to go to tribunals are so costly. So it's setting it setting the family against the school and the local authorities'* (Bethany 35.16). These findings lead to the question over whether the system now typifies this oppositional positioning as the norm and sets the context where stakeholders are completely polarised to the principles of working together.

**There were inequitable processes for parents in participating in decision-making.** Bethany referred to parents being told information rather than contributing on a more equal basis in meetings: *'although they feel they can ask, you know, they have a voice. The meeting is more about the school telling them stuff, and them just kind of absorbing'* (Bethany 7.53). Furthermore, the barriers related to language in professional meetings served to disadvantage and disempower: *'in terms of EHCPs, I think they, they're so full of jargon. The I know, I know, in terms of the law, it should be really easy for a parent just to write a letter and say, my child has a special need. However, in my experience, they always get turned down'* (Bethany 23.15). Bethany saw the disparity between the process and the parents ability to engage, yet in some accounts it was highlighted that professionals were unaware of the inaccessibility for parents. Bethany identified where other professionals might have actually disadvantaged parents: *'I think the SEN officers and even the EP did not understand that the parent had no idea what they were talking about.'* (Bethany 26.12). This happened in other cases too: *'and they would use abbreviations, they talk in health jargon. And they totally missed the parents' kind of language skills or understanding of all this jargon.'* (Bethany 26.12). It could be that Bethany, as a SENCO, was more aware of the ways in which to communicate with parents due to having a closer relationship than other professionals.

#### 4.3.5 Parent participant summaries

Below is a brief overview of each participant, to see the full parent summaries see **Appendix O**.

##### **Amelia:**

Amelia is a female aged between 25 - 34 years. Her child's age range was 5 to 7 years at the time of the interview and the primary need was Cognition and Learning. Amelia's child was attending a mainstream school at the time of the interview, but they were waiting for a place in a suitable special school and had been waiting since this was named on the EHC plan two years earlier.

##### **Bonnie:**

Bonnie is a female aged between 35 - 44 years. Her child's age range was 11 to 13 years, and the primary need was Autism and Social, Emotional and Mental Health. The school her child was attending at the time of the interview was an independent special school, but this placement was quite recent because she has identified that her child was placed in a mainstream school on the questionnaire. Bonnie's interview was conducted with her mother present and contributing, she has been referred to as Bonnie's advocate (BonnieAdv) in the data and her speech is recorded in **red font** to differentiate easily in the text. Bonnie was the only participant to complete a second follow-up interview to discuss the initial findings from the interviews.

##### **Carmen:**

Carmen is a female aged between 45 and 54 years. Her child's age range was 11 to 13 years and the primary need was Social, Emotional and Mental Health. The school Carmen's child attended was a mainstream school. During the interview Carmen mentioned that she had another child who had identified Special Educational Needs and also had an Education, Health and Care plan.

##### **Dominique:**

Dominique did not provide any personal information on the questionnaire. Her child's age range was 14 to 16 years and the primary need was Social, Emotional and Mental Health. The school status was shared as 'Other' and the additional information was 'Unlawfully excluded'. Dominique asked to share a written response because she was not comfortable to be interviewed. In the additional information in the questionnaire and in the written response she shared that she had applied for EHC plans for 3 of her children. As noted in Section 4.3.2 Dominique contributed in writing rather than undertake an interview, and as such, the location identifier for her responses are different. These are noted as 'sections' as opposed to time locations on the interviews. Additionally, Dominique feature less in the

analysis and discussion because there was much less data available compared to the data from interviews.

#### 4.3.6 Parental Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Each participant’s Personal Experiential themes (PETs) were analysed with a focus on the initial research question and from this analysis, three common Group Experiential Themes (GETs) emerged. The overview of PETs for each participant was organised into GETs and reviewed and then reduced to closely link to the research question and focus for the study. The parents’ PETs are situated in **Table 13** to illustrate how each parent’s PETs relate to the other participants within the overarching GETs. This formed the basis of the data for analysis of the parent group in this section of the thesis and the multiperspectival analysis in section 4.3.7 and the final stage of analysis in section 4.4. More detailed tables for each GET, illustrating where the PETs and sub-themes feature across the whole sample are available in **Appendix N**.

	GET1 - Process not person	GET2 – Relationships	GET3 -Power and choice
Amelia PETs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-centred or dehumanised?</li> <li>• Misconceptions and reality over the EHC plan</li> <li>• Delays and deficit model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of Quality Relationships</li> <li>• Demands on the Family</li> <li>• Values Based or Tokenistic?</li> <li>• SENCO as Critical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power differentials</li> <li>• Lack of information</li> <li>• Limited choices</li> <li>• Low expectations</li> </ul>
Bonnie PETs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate provision</li> <li>• Child-centred</li> <li>• Dehumanised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working together</li> <li>• Adversarial relationships</li> <li>• Mistrust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exclusion</li> <li>• Choice and autonomy</li> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• Disempowerment</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> </ul>
Clara PETs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inequity in the system</li> <li>• Needs not being met</li> <li>• Person-centred versus paperwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive co-working</li> <li>• SENCO is key / pivotal</li> <li>• Training for co-working</li> <li>• Interpersonal qualities for co-working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal and State control</li> <li>• Disabled despite education and socio-economic status</li> <li>• Professional power (mistrust)</li> </ul>
Dominique PETs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issues in the system / process</li> <li>• Detrimental impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positives of co-working</li> <li>• Valuing parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional power</li> </ul>

**Table 13: All Parents’ Personal Experiential Themes in relation to the other participants**

In this section, each GET is presented in turn with the key findings outlined at the start of the section followed by an analysis of the data to illustrate the findings.



#### 4.3.6.1 GET – 1. Process not person

##### Key findings:

Sub-theme 1 - The importance of person centred practice to parents	Sub-theme 2 - Inadequate provision and practice	Sub-theme 3 - Systemic issues impacting on person-centred practice
- Parents valued genuine person-centred practice in their engagement with professionals - Prioritisation of paperwork devalued person-centred practice, leading to feelings of being depersonalised and dehumanised	- Parents' confidence was impacted upon by the poor or inadequate provisions for their children	- Children were deprived of an education despite having an Education, Health and Care plan

##### 4.3.6.1.1 Sub-theme 1 - The Importance of person-centred practice to parents

**Parents valued genuine interactions in their engagement with professionals.** Carmen's construction of person-centred practice identified the complexity and the need for genuine and sincere care on the part of the professionals:

*'if we really want to nail what is person centred, we need to treat every everybody equally, and ensure that those that are coming to the table in need of help who are vulnerable, that that they should, you know, everybody around the table should be alert to the fact that their dignity and respect should be absolutely prioritised.'* (Carmen 0.40)

This illustrates Carmen's understanding that not everyone is able to engage and contribute, especially when faced with bureaucratic or overly complex processes. She acknowledged that some individuals are *'in need of help'* or *'vulnerable'* and in those instances, *'dignity and respect'* can easily be damaged unless it is *'absolutely prioritised'* with a genuine acknowledgement to respect each other. It cannot be a simple transactional process; it involves care and compassion. The sense of sincere interactions was also highlighted by Bonnie's advocate who gave examples of the importance of feeling valued in the process and highlighted this through authentic communication: *'when I say listen, I mean, really listening, not just nod of the head'* (BonnieAdv 56.33). These experiences support the notion that individuals are adept at identifying when tokenistic or insincere exchanges or practices are taking place. Ensuring there is a genuine opportunity to build in a values-based approach is essential, parents know and can feel when there is and isn't genuine support, as with Carmen's comment: *'Yeah, you participate in the proceedings, but are you included and is it person centred? Not really.'* (Carmen 0.40).

Amelia and Carmen's accounts illustrated that the levels of trust parents constructed in their experiences of working with the professionals at a personal level, tended to influence their perception

of that person, but also their perception of the system as a whole. Where there were good relationships and the families felt valued and understood, there was more tolerance of the system, even if there was a shared knowledge with the professional that the system was flawed. For example, Amelia referred to ways the SENCO advocated for her with the local authority: *'She's right on their heels to say, pull your finger out, what the hell's going on'* (Amelia 6.38). This illustrated that the faith fostered by the relationship with the SENCO may have influenced how the parent perceived the system. Knowing the SENCO is an ally when communication is difficult with the local authority provided a level of trust and comradery. This is particularly relevant for this parent as she commented on constantly chasing information and being a *'secretary'* (Amelia 1.05) for the local authority. The SENCO as mediator and removing that additional demand on Amelia was exactly the professional support she needed at that time.

**Prioritisation of paperwork devalued person-centred practice, leading to feelings of being depersonalized and dehumanised.** All parents constructed experiences of how person-centred practice was framed by examples of negativity. Carmen's experience realised the system is criteria based and dependent on the quality of the paperwork submission and resources. It was not needs or child led: *'you jump through their hoops, and you line up all your ducks on a local level, and then you submit it all.'* (Carmen 9.20). Similarly, Amelia referred to professionals' consideration of paperwork for placement in school as not being reflective of the current situation for her child. Yet, paperwork was most commonly what professionals engaged with when making decisions over the child's future: *'they're still sending out the record from 2019, which says how crap he was and not actually how much he's grown'* (Amelia 14.23). Amelia is acutely aware that it is what the paperwork contains, how well it is written, or how well it conveys information, as the determining factors for access to education and not the child as the primary focus. This was supported by Bonnie's experience as she noted: *'I think the parents should be part of the panel to begin with, when it's decision making that exclusion in itself is hard, because they are looking at a piece of paper'* (Bonnie 17.32). The centrality on paperwork serves to depersonalise the children involved and excludes parents at the key moments in decision making, for example when the panel decides on placement.

Similarly, Carmen identified the EHC needs assessment framework doesn't allow for difference and is too inflexible to be person-centred: *'the whole problem with an assessment framework is that it puts, it then tries to homogenise someone's experience and set it on rails. You know, there's not, there's not enough individualization.'* (Carmen 6.41). She went on to reinforce this later in the interview when she referred to her personal experience of trying to comply with a system which was in opposition to child centred processes: *'nine years trying to fit the system, we finally crashed out once the pandemic hit.'*

(Carmen 26.50). Children's education and people's self-worth are at risk if they are not valued and supported appropriately. For example, Bonnie configured a demonic image when she considered how she was perceived by professionals: *'I am looked at like, I have horns on my head.'* (Bonnie 22.12). This comment really illustrates the extremes to which she was impacted upon by her negative experiences.

#### 4.3.6.1.2 Sub-theme 2 - Inadequate provision and practice

**Parents' confidence was impacted upon by the poor or inadequate provisions for their children.** All four parents shared experiences where inadequate provisions led to a sense of feeling de-valued and loss of confidence in the system. Amelia constructed her son's educational experience as: *'He's not thriving. He's just, he's just surviving at school'* (Amelia 12.09). The reference to *'just surviving'* demonstrates the perception of her son enduring school rather than being valued and being able to develop and grow. Both Bonnie and Carmen spoke about inadequate provisions, but framed this in their understanding of education in a broader sense for children rather than considering their own children specifically, which could be because both are in roles linked to education. Bonnie referred to inadequate provisions in general in schools as being unable to meet needs, and children suffering as a result: *'treatment that these children are getting is disgraceful.'* (Bonnie 14.46). Carmen went further when she identified: *'increasing numbers of children and not having their basic needs met in education, full stop.'* (Carmen 25.16). She went on to state: *'what we've got is huge numbers of children who are neurodiverse or who have clinical chronic illness or invisible ill health, but because these children look normal, they do not have a learning, a noticeable learning disability'* (Carmen 23.36). The findings supported that the lack of support and ability to meet children's needs, fuelled the lack of confidence. Carmen constructed a desperate position with the comment: *'I just look at that inequality and inequity. Because nobody is fighting for these children'* (Carmen 32.20).

Amelia was assigned a special school for her child on his EHC plan, but there were no places available in the local authority schools. Her reference to the omission of information and the unanticipated delay illustrates mistrust: *'no one says well actually because the schools are so limited, and the classes are so small, you'll be waiting most you know, two years, he's about to enter his third year of mainstream when it says specialist provision in his EHCP'* (Amelia 12.09). She was not provided with information on the reality of the situation which resulted in her having to watch her child continue to struggle whilst he awaited a place in specialist provision: *'each year is getting harder for him the gaps are growing educationally and socially'* (Amelia 12.09).

#### 4.3.6.1.3 Sub-theme 3 - Systemic issues impacting on person-centred practice

**Children were deprived of an education despite having an Education, Health and Care plan** as evidenced by all parents. Each of the parents shared their experiences of a mismatch between their

expectations, and the reality of having an Education, Health and Care plan, which exposed the system as lacking in care and compassion. Amelia stated: *'the fact that even with an EHCP, your child is not guaranteed an education'* (Amelia 27.01). She went on to explain: *'you do think it's the key to the golden SEN door. It isn't it just means the school have a reason to get them out'* (Amelia 27.01). Her account illustrates the misconception of the EHC plan as providing access to an education and the difficult notion that this is not the case. Her construction relates the experience to a conspiracy in the ways in which she refers to the school as having additional measures to *'get them out'*. The process itself therefore does not lead to the intended outcomes for children, this is not person-centred and leads to more strain and challenge for families: *'you're not told how difficult it can be afterwards with an EHCP. So I haven't seen a benefit to it yet. Not at all.'* (Amelia 27.01). Amelia's experience illustrated how access to education can be barred, despite going through the very difficult process of gaining an Education, Health and Care Plan.

In opposition to the EHC plan as enabling and person-centred, Carmen and Dominique also gave examples of when their children had been deprived of education. Carmen referred to the severe delays in being able to take forward support positively: *'we spent four years out of education. We eventually brought that team together'* (Carmen 15.13). Dominique felt the system was perverse and offered the opposite of what it is supposed to do: *'the system was corrupt and has in one case acted in a way to actually deprive a SEND child of any education'* (Dominique Section19). Carmen and Dominique's experiences illustrated the system as unable to meet the educational rights of children.

#### 4.3.6.2 GET – 2. Relationships

##### Key findings:

Sub-theme 1 – The Importance of relationships to parents	Sub-theme 2 - Professional requirements for relationships	Sub-theme 3 - Wider impact on relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The quality of the relationship with the SENCO is fundamental to parents</li> <li>- Parents experiences were inconsistent dependent upon the professionals' levels of knowledge and experiences of co-production</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interpersonal qualities of the SENCO and training were essential to foster effective working relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deep-seated mistrust in the system influenced relationships with individuals</li> </ul>

##### 4.3.6.2.1 Sub-theme 1 - The Importance of relationships to parents

**The quality of the relationship with the SENCO was fundamental to parents.** Amelia, Carmen and Dominique shared positive accounts of when they had experienced quality relationships. However,

Bonnie's account of negative experiences illustrated the lack of quality relationships as a hindrance to working together.

Carmen constructed what she would consider to be a quality relationship through reference to the centrality of relational interactions as part of the process. She started the interview with the position of working together as critical to the whole process: *'Front and centre front and centre. It's absolutely at the heart of it.'* (Carmen 4.11). Carmen was able to share her experience of collaboration and what that felt like when working positively in this way: *'I felt able and, and, and empowered to kind of go, that's not going to work.'* (Carmen 39.27). Similarly, Dominique's account of her positive experience illustrates the importance of feeling able and comfortable to express opinions: *'a post 16 application and the ALS was very supportive, open and honest. Really good experience of working with the college to support my young person.'* (Dominique Section11). Dominique acknowledged that good foundational relationships from the start was a way to avoid appeals and challenge: *'Working together should be a process undertaken when a draft plan is being drawn up. This would prevent so many appeals if parents feel their children have what they needed from the beginning.'* (Dominique Section5). Amelia's comment reinforced the need to communicate on the same level with the SENCO: *'it should be an open area where we all like on a zoom, where we can all talk. And we're all in the same room kind of thing'* (Amelia 1.05). The reference to *'same room'* links to notions of the same space (physically) but also links to the notion of having the same standing, status and values, reinforcing mutual trust as essential. Both Amelia and Dominique use the word *'should'* in their descriptions which presented a context of what they wanted to see in practice, but this was possibly not the case consistently.

The data illustrated that experiences of poor quality or negative relationships led to general negativity about the system and education more widely, undoubtedly influencing the outcomes for the child. All parents provided examples of where communication and the quality of the relationship with the SENCO was lacking. The poor-quality relationships led to a loss of confidence in the individual, but this influenced the loss of confidence more widely, such as confidence in the school and / or the system. For example, Bonnie commented on her experiences of working with a SENCO as: *'She was fully with us to begin with'* (Bonnie 11.40). Yet she goes on to illustrate the change by referring to the relationship as deteriorating: *'So me and the SENCOs relationship used to be good to begin with. But the more you fight, the more it becomes hostile, basically, there's no other word for it.'* (Amelia 11.40). Amelia's experience also illustrated the impact of negative relationship permeates and resulted in loss of trust in the school: *'We just we'd lost faith in the school. And in the teachers'* (Amelia 8.16).

**Parents experiences were inconsistent dependent upon the professionals' levels of knowledge and experiences of co-production.** Based on the parental accounts of their experiences, there were varying levels of knowledge of co-production and the experiences of what co-production is or should be from a parental perspective. As a result, parents' access to opportunities for co-production were inconsistent and dependent upon the professionals' levels of knowledge and experiences of co-production. For example, Carmen had more experience of co-production and different frameworks based on the professionals she had been engaged with. Her experience was drawn from health and social care professionals and not from those in education: *'because she had spent two years working in residential settings, she brought the team around the child framework to early help'* (Carmen 11.55). This is revealing regarding the training and principles and approaches adopted in different professions. It also illustrates that parents' experiences based on the professionals they are involved with and their exposure to models (such as models from the caring professions) can impact on outcomes. Carmen was able to identify where co-production was working: *'they have embedded co-production through the whole of the development of the service at all levels, to ensure that it's fit for purpose.'* (Carmen 39.27). She was also able to see that it is possible integrate co-production into educational systems: *'And you can extrapolate that methodology down to working with an individual family, it's exactly the same.'* (Carmen 39.27). However, she also recognised that frameworks cannot be switched on instantaneously, or follow a simple process or transactional approach: *'you can't then extrapolate a process on to that easily.'* (Carmen 46.15). She acknowledged that frameworks can only work if they are flexible enough to encompass range of family needs and so are truly values-based in nature: *'it's fine to have a pathway, but you've got to have agility within it'* (Carmen 8.00).

In contrast to a co-productive experience outlined by Carmen, Amelia provided examples of her experience which gave a sense of being tokenistic and insincere: *'It just felt some of the questions were a bit like, Oh, we should include the parents make them feel part of it'* (Amelia 17.53). She also referred to how she saw the intentions to placate the parents rather than taking account of their views and values: *'Some of the questions did seem a bit I don't know, just seem like they would put in just to fluff up the parents'* (Amelia 17.53). Amelia's account reinforced that the ways in which we interact with each other can create distance or de-value others. Amelia was able to clearly identify this from her experiences. Equally, Carmen's experiences of the enabling ways in which she worked with professionals, may have served to heighten her awareness of when this was not happening: *'Genuinely, what do you think, not, Okay, she she's here, because we've got participation target to meet. You know, which is what I experienced elsewhere.'* (Carmen 39.27).

#### 4.3.6.2.2 Sub-theme 2 - Professional Requirements for relationship

**Interpersonal qualities of the SENCO and training were essential to foster effective working relationships.** All parents' experiences included positive accounts when they were able to describe relationships with the individual person. Carmen's experience highlighted the SENCO's interpersonal qualities as essential to forming and maintaining working relationships. She noted: *'And I think it takes is courage to work with families that's the other thing, it does take a lot of courage. And I think professionals all too quickly get quite burnt out because they're not used to getting uncomfortable.'* (Carmen 39.27). Her reference to 'courage' is an interesting term to use, but illustrated the nature of the very difficult conversations or uncomfortable situations that can occur between parents and SENCOs. The professional requirements of a SENCO included more than just procedural aspects from Carmen's account, the interpersonal skills and ability to be able to form and maintain relationships were also valued. Carmen referred to the relational aspects of working together on a number of occasions in her account which really strengthened this as central.

Carmen's experience illustrated the need to acknowledge professionals may be *'working with organic, vulnerable, fragile people.'* (Carmen 46.15) and if this is not managed well it can have really devastating outcomes for families: *'at the point that we went into early help, you're obviously a family entering a fairly critical, stressful time and you're not informed, you're not well researched, you don't know. So that that notion of the family leading is leading with integrated joined up compassion, focus support, so you're then relying on the professionals to lead follow lead, it's about what is that relationship.'* (Carmen 3.10). Carmen's construction of her experience illustrated the dependence upon the existing relationship because if there was a solid foundational relationship this could help to support and enable family participation and / or leadership: *'it's about what is that relationship'*. Carmen recognised parents may not be in the right place to engage fully and this must be respected, so providing the psychological space for collaboration is essential. This permeates Carmen's account as she acknowledged throughout that relationships are fundamental to working in collaboration: *'Because that sort of participation leadership but into relational model and consistency wasn't in place. It was, it was a complete disaster'* (Carmen 4.11).

Professional requirements, therefore, from Carmen's account, are more than just qualifications. She explicitly addresses this by referring to the challenges in current training provided for the teaching profession: *'there's a massive problem with teacher training, and, and SENCO training'* (Carmen 23.36). She later refers to the ways in which professionals should approach practice: *'mutual respect, and, and, but most importantly, curiosity. So I think where professionals go wrong, is they come in with their qualification, their training, and they forget to be humbled and curious.'* (Carmen 48.24). However, she

notes that professionals lack agency and the services are often constrained and inflexible: *'a lot of the services set up, those professionals just get sort of boxed and boxed into a smaller box, and they lack.. They lack agency, they lack authority, but also, it becomes it just embed siloism, right?'* (Carmen 8.00). Essentially, later in the interview she returns to the critical position that: *'it's not always a massive solution. There's sometimes something really fundamental there, but you only get there through relationships.'* (Carmen 46.15).

The findings supported the position that quality relationships as the core basis for working together effectively. This was supported by experiences where there were changes in relationships as was the case for Amelia. She referred to the different SENCOs she worked with and highlighted the confidence and trust in her SENCO as critical *'I knew that she had his interest'* (Amelia 5:15). Amelia constructed the relationship she had with her current SENCO as being 'lucky': *'We are lucky that the SENCO we have got she's still she's still working out for him.'* (Amelia 8.16). This is possibly due to having a polarised experience of working with a SENCO which she did not have a good relationship with: *'the previous SENCO she was a pile of crap. She's a head teacher. So it didn't fill us with much hope at all. We really lost faith.'* (Amelia 6.38). In losing 'faith' it reinforces the notion of the relationship as core to success and if the relationship is negative, it can have a truly detrimental, and in some cases insurmountable effect, which is likely to result in poor outcomes.

#### 4.3.6.2.3 Sub-theme 3 - Wider impact on relationships

**Deep-seated mistrust in the system influenced relationships with individuals.** All parents included accounts of mistrust in the system, and this mistrust in the system tended to influence the relationships with individuals. There were many examples Bonnie provided of negative experiences and mistrust of the system and the authorities. Bonnie's accounts of feeling her child's needs were not being met were attributed directly to the inadequacies of the system. Very early in the interview she stated: *'you feel like it's a money saving thing. Not about your child'* (Bonnie 3.47). From Bonnie's experience, she constructed the system as intentionally complex and opaque with deliberate subterfuge, for example she stated: *'they don't tell you everything. They actually keep a lot away from you that you are entitled to ask for.'* (Bonnie 3.47). This comment highlighted deliberate deceit and the use of the pronoun 'they' (referring to the authorities) was oppositional, setting a position of 'them and us'. Bonnie's advocate reinforced the authorities as deliberately being obtuse: *'They do use time in the school year as an underhand weapon to delay'* (BonnieAdv 27.03). Bonnie's construction of her experiences illustrated the complete mistrust and detrimental way in which the authority was perceived. When asked what worked Bonnie quickly responded: *'It doesn't work. The system does not work for the parents or for the child'* (Bonnie 14.46). She was passionate about sharing her experience



because, based on her experiences, there had been such a detrimental impact, leading to psychological pain and alienation: *'The lies they tell, yeah. It makes you feel like they're pulling you to shreds. You feel deflated every time you deal with them'* (Bonnie 30.00). This mistrust ultimately led to adversarial positioning, and arguably when the most extreme cases occur, it may result in individuals having to fight to be able to be heard, or to participate, or to access education for their children. Bonnie commented: *'it's ridiculous just the fighting'* (Bonnie 5.33) and the position that: *'we're still fighting'* (Bonnie 22.12). The adversarial relationships with school staff became difficult to overcome or repair. These negative experiences and relationships have an emotional and psychological impact. Amelia referred to the pain and psychological impact experienced from the process as: *'It's just been two years of hell so far'* (Amelia 1.05). Currently it is a difficult, emotional process: *'I can see a lot of parents probably having panic attacks over this and anxiety issues, just over the paperwork alone.'* (Bonnie 30.00). Dominique reinforced this with her account: *'I have been pushed to physical and emotional exhaustion'* (Dominique Section19).

Bonnie's negative experiences of the system seemed to influence her perception of other related services or professionals. She referred to mistrust over the impartial advice service as not independent, evident in her comment: *'don't contact SENDIASS. SENDIASS do not support you. They are actually just like the local authority. It's always in line with what the council want you to do'* (Bonnie 28.09). It also led to tensions in her relationship with school. Bonnie referred to the school's concealment of challenges rather than providing an open transparent system: *'the school doesn't want to admit to the local authority that they can't cope. And that's seen as a bad thing that the schools can't cope.'* (Bonnie 33.12). Bonnie calls for: *'independent support for parents that have nothing to do with the local authorities that are available to come out, and speak out for the parents.'* (Bonnie 39.29).

#### 4.3.6.3 GET – 3. Power and Choice

##### Key findings:

Sub-theme 1 – The Importance of decision making to parents	Sub-theme 2 - Barriers to parents being able to participate	Sub-theme 3: Professional power
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher socio-economic status was not advantageous, it was necessary to access basic services and education</li> <li>- The current culture led parents to believe they were viewed as subordinate to the professionals</li> <li>- There was a lack of choice for parents and children who do not 'fit the system'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parental decision making was limited by the normalisation of an inadequate system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perceived power of the professionals can be detrimental</li> </ul>

#### 4.3.6.3.1 Sub-theme 1 - The Importance of decision making to parents

**Higher socio-economic status was not advantageous, it was necessary to access basic services and education.** Most parents recounted challenges in being part of the decision-making process for their child's education. It was clear from the data, the parents with knowledge or with more advantageous socio-economic status were better able to access the system. Bonnie's advocate stated: *'the more knowledge you have, the better the outcomes for your child'* (BonnieAdv 29.38). Yet, arguably this is not an advantage, but possibly a necessity to be able to access the basic services and education needed for their child. Carmen referred to the way in which she was disabled despite a good level of education and social capital: *'I'm articulate, and I'm literate, and I was able to plough my way through it twice.'* (Carmen 9.20). She is able to engage with the process, but her use of the term *'plough'* illustrated how incredibly difficult it must have been. Bonnie referred to being forced into action to be able to access the system: *'I had to literally become a solicitor with the help of my mum'* (Bonnie 5.33) which indicates the high-level demands required on parents just to be able to access appropriate education for children with more complex needs.

Bonnie's account illustrated her awareness of the system as inaccessible to most: *'We should, right from the beginning, be able to understand what we can access what we can claim for our children. All this is kept away from us.'* (Bonnie 0.32). She also empathised with parents who may not be in such a privileged position: *'Parents who don't understand the education system, I have full sympathy for them'* (Bonnie 14.46). Bonnie's *'sympathy'* illustrates her understanding that those who need access to the system, may be the most vulnerable in society. Her comment reinforces this construction of disadvantage for most: *'if I'd have been weaker in my decisions, I would have probably rolled over and accepted it. And that's what I feel sorry for a lot of parents, because that is exactly what they feel.'* (Bonnie 1.06.55). Bonnie's account illustrates the resilience and determination needed because without knowledge of the system, parents may be even more vulnerable. She identified that parents may be passively accepting less than they are entitled to: *'you can understand that's how they speak to other parents. Those parents that don't understand, are getting walked all over'* (Bonnie 22.12).

**The current culture led parents to believe they were viewed as subordinate to the professionals.** All parents recounted experiences of being judged and the sense of being seen as inferior. Bonnie's advocate referred to her experiences of judgements over assumed levels of knowledge which placed the parent as subordinate to the professionals: *'You are dealt with as though you are in some ways you are rather subnormal, that you don't understand the educational processes. I think they were always aghast when I, when I allowed them to do that. And then I would say, you know, I've worked in this form of education for over 30 years now, I'm also the chair of the governing body'* (Bonnie - yeah)

*please don't try to insult my intelligence by doing this.'* (BonnieAdv 21.11). The reference to 'subnormal' elicits a sense of dehumanization. The term 'aghast' captures the perception of the professionals' as stunned and the default position that parents are ignorant of the educational processes. Bonnie also identified with being treated as inferior and not having knowledge of the education system in her comment: *'I find it really bad that I have to turn around and say, excuse me, I'm not just a parent, I actually work in this industry.'* (Bonnie 22.12). Bonnie constructed her experience as demonstrating complete lack of respect, opposed to valuing the individual for what they bring to the meeting.

The inferior positioning of the parent was also evident with Amelia's experience of being 'done to', which meant she had no choice in a situation: *'it shouldn't just be a decision made, they have a meeting, and then come back to me'* (Amelia 1.05). Amelia's construction of her decision making as ignored also presents a construction of subversiveness by stating they come back to me, rather than being present. This positioning of herself as outside the process could indicate subservience as rooted in culture and evident in the processes itself. Bonnie illustrated that even when parents want to be directly involved in decision making this was limited for children with EHC plans: *'in the end they was trying to take the decision away from me'* (Bonnie 1:06:55). Bonnie's advocate reinforced this sense of complete lack of control in her comment on the EHC needs assessment process: *'The panel that meets, you cannot participate in that at all. They make the decision and you're expected to abide by it.'* (BonnieAdv 1.37). Carmen's experience reinforced the lack of any powers to make decisions. She referred to the shock of encountering the system from an outsider perspective and how she could see that those within the system were disabled and disempowered by the ways in which they were treated: *'now I understand why intergenerational poverty and, you know, intervention of social care. And deprivation perpetuates for families, because it's just totally disabling and disempowering. And it removes all your dignity and respect'* (Carmen 49.06). Carmen's account highlighted how culture within the system could restrict empowerment and actually perpetuates a polarized position where families are not at the centre, but they are stripped of their 'dignity and respect'.

**There was a lack of choice for parents and children who do not 'fit the system'.** Both Amelia's and Bonnie's experiences illustrated that there was no opportunity to make decisions on educational provision for their children because there was no real choice. Bonnie shared: *'They tried to pressure me, because I couldn't go to the resource units. XXXXXX (mainstream school) were saying he can't stay here. We can't cope, quite literally. So I was being pressured to accept the school that I told you about that I didn't like'* (Bonnie 1.05.04). Her experience demonstrated that decision making was absent due to being 'pressured' to accept an offer of placement which she considered to be sub-standard or

inappropriate. Bonnie went on to state: *'The authorities are allowed to do that. So at what point is that a parent's decision?'* (Bonnie 1.05.04). Similarly, Amelia felt she had no choice or influence over decisions for placement: *'we're sort of getting to that point now where we're thinking, come September, we're looking at probably deregistering him and having to do home learning, not because we want to, but because we can't go through each day of having him anxious and sending him in and being called out to come and collect him an hour later. Because he can't cope. Because it's not fair to him. And it's not fair to the other kids'* (Amelia 12.09). Amelia was considering removing her child from education as the only viable choice due to not being able to secure an appropriate provision.

#### 4.3.6.3.2 Sub-theme 2 - Barriers to parents being able to participate

**Parental decision making was limited by the normalisation of an inadequate system.** Amelia, Bonnie and Carmen's experiences included examples of where the system's inadequacies were being normalised. This was evident in accounts where there were very low expectations of the system. For example, Amelia referred to being lucky throughout the interview including gaining the EHC plan and having access to education: *'I feel because we were quite lucky'* (Amelia 5:15). Her construction of the experience of accessing education as a right for her child, was perceived in the reality of a system that doesn't offer this for all children. Amelia's knowledge of the inherent inequality in the system led to acknowledgement that: *'He's luckier than a lot of kids'* (Amelia 10.00). Amelia's construction of the experience as being fortunate highlights normalisation of the inferior provision, for example she states they were: *'used to waiting anyway. So with a diagnosis, with an EHCP, with everything, you just sort of take it on the chin'* (Amelia 1.05). Amelia adopted a culture of acceptance of the low expectations of the system, but arguably this could lead to a position of vulnerability.

Similarly, Carmen identified the normalisation of local authorities as not necessarily being aligned to good practice or legislation: *'this is what should be happening. Okay, so and then I would cross reference it with local policy realise that local policy was entirely in breach of the legislation.'* (Carmen 9.20). An example of this subversion in Carmen's account is when the local authority refused to accept private reports for the EHC needs assessment. Carmen identified the illogical nature of rejecting private reports which may be written to an excellent standard: *'then you get a report that's rich. That's person centred, that is well informed that has smart targets in it, that is appropriate. And the local authority says sorry, can't accept that'* (Carmen 32.20). Carmen's account raised an ethical question over the power of organisations to introduce practices that are presented as policy and can then become accepted as the norm: *'the fact that LAs routinely doubt the credibility and the professionalism of those in the independent sector, I think is hugely problematic'* (Carmen 35.24).

#### 4.3.6.3.3 Sub-theme 3 - Professional power

**Perceived power of the professionals can be detrimental.** In their experiences, all parents referred to the power professionals held which served to discredit, disempower or 'other' the parents. Amelia referred to being disbelieved when she raised issues: *'the school didn't listen to what we said. They listen to what the paediatrician said, though.'* (Amelia 3.01). She realised the professional's voice was prioritised, despite their attempts to request an EHC plan for 6 months beforehand. Carmen's experience was similar in recognising the superiority of the professionals' opinions: *'many professionals feel like they've done their training, and therefore their opinion is more valid'* (Carmen 46.15). Dominique also felt that parents are not afforded the same status as the professionals *'when it says "mum says" because it almost questions the validity of the statement/comment and can also be interpreted and recorded incorrectly.'* (Dominique Section11). These accounts led to voices being suppressed, as was the case with Carmen: *'So they weren't believing it.'* (Carmen 23.36) which could discredit and lead to deeper mistrust between parents and the professionals. This was the result of Dominique's experience because she stated: *'I now see them as underhand and corrupt because of the lack of transparency and the amount of weight given to "professionals"'* (Dominique Section17). This adversarial position of 'them and us' ultimately leads to parents and professionals working separately rather than together: *'there was a lot of naivety on my part. And so in the end, you end up picking yourself up and thinking like, okay, it's on me.'* (Carmen 9.20). Carmen expressed a sense of working alone and not being able to rely on, or trust professionals and schools.

Bonnie referred to disempowerment through the professionals' use of inaccessible language: *'a lot of the council use a lot of jargon words to lots of parents that don't understand'* (Bonnie 0.32). She also explained that this can sometimes be presented in patronising ways in her comment: *'they'll go, Oh, it's nothing to worry about it. It's just it's just terminology we use'* (Bonnie 0.32). Bonnie's advocate highlighted that this disadvantages parents because they do not have the knowledge to challenge professionals: *'you're talking to people who that is their subject, and you're having to stop meetings to say, what does that mean?'* (BonnieAdv 2.29). The inaccessibility of the system can disempower parents, which Bonnie referred to as part of her experience: *'What did they want from me, I don't understand. Then when you ask them again. They send you the same thing again, as if you're thick, and you don't understand that your fault. And you've been given the list of stuff to do, either fill it in, or don't bother. That's how it makes you feel.'* (Bonnie 30.00). Bonnie's experience illustrated that as a parent she was not used to engaging with the paperwork in the same way as the professionals.

Othring was referred to in Carmen's account as a way in which she was perceived differently to parents of children without SEN. She referred to being seen in terms of categories which gave a sense

of being segregated by professionals: *'I was either over emotional. I was either highly anxious. I was at times combative, and adversarial.'* (Carmen 49.06). This range of labels, applied to what could be considered as reasonable emotions to experience based on a challenging family situation, would undoubtedly impact on self-perception and identity based on the ways in which professionals treat parents. Even when this was framed positively, it was not desired by Carmen: *'been called inspiring, inspirational, motivational. Oh, you're amazing. And, you know, when I'm tired, I just because I don't want to be amazing'* (Carmen 49.06). Dominique also felt that the professionals see her in a negative and detrimental way. *'I know I am seen as difficult, pushy and actually I know I was branded as crazy to everyone who saw the letters /spoke with her or the school. (By the SENCO sharing inaccurate data)'* (Dominique Section15). These comments suggested the parents just wanted to be treated in the same way as other parents. Carmen was able to identify the ways in which the professionals' perception of parents can have a seriously detrimental impact and perpetuate disadvantage when this is systemically applied: *'from a family that has never had any state intervention intergenerationally as the most shocking and appalling experience I've ever had. It has really, completely shaken my foundations'* (Carmen 49.06).

#### **Reflection on Group Experiential Themes (GETs)**

I was conscious of the themes emerging across the data during the iterative process of engaging and re-engaging with the data and whether my position was influenced by the analysis. In some cases, there were very powerful accounts which were emotive. I am aware that I have a strong sense of social justice and so I needed to be mindful of making assumptions and making statements from the findings without holding sufficient evidence from the data.

To address this, I ensured that I shared the data analysis at different points throughout, so I could take other perspectives to ensure there was some externality. Indeed, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 75) refer to the 'use of supervision, collaboration or audit to help develop the coherence or plausibility of the interpretation'. Of course, IPA as a methodology, is a joint venture between the researcher and the participants and so it is important to recognise there will always be possibilities of other interpretations of the data. However, by utilising the approach of inviting others to engage in the analysis process, it did enable critical questions and different perspectives on the data to challenge my position. I therefore feel that the three main themes for the GETs are justified and rooted in the data for this particular research focus.

#### 4.3.7 Parent and SENCO Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

This IPA study includes a multiperspectival design because it includes the perspectives of two different groups' experiences (parents and SENCOs) on the same phenomenon. The approach was to conduct a cross case analysis of the data for the points of convergence and divergence across the two different, but related, groups of participants. The aim of this approach was to better understand the experiences from the perspective of the different groups, to provide important information that may support improved ways of working together more effectively in the future. Using 'directly related groups' (Larkin *et al.*, 2019: 186) provides an opportunity to analyse the different views of those immersed in the same experience.

The GETs for the two groups were the same, just with different sub-themes (4.3.4 and 4.3.6). There was much commonality across the GETs and sub-themes (**Table 21** to **Table 26** in **Appendix N**). Therefore, another analysis of the data in the GETs could be quite repetitious and lead to presentation of findings which are very similar to what has already been presented. In order to avoid repetition, the multiperspectival analysis looks at the data across all the participants for Stage Two of the study to identify concepts or conflicts that might appear in more than one GET. To conduct this multiperspectival analysis, the following analytical strategies were adopted for thematic development from complex data based on Larkin *et al.*, 2019:

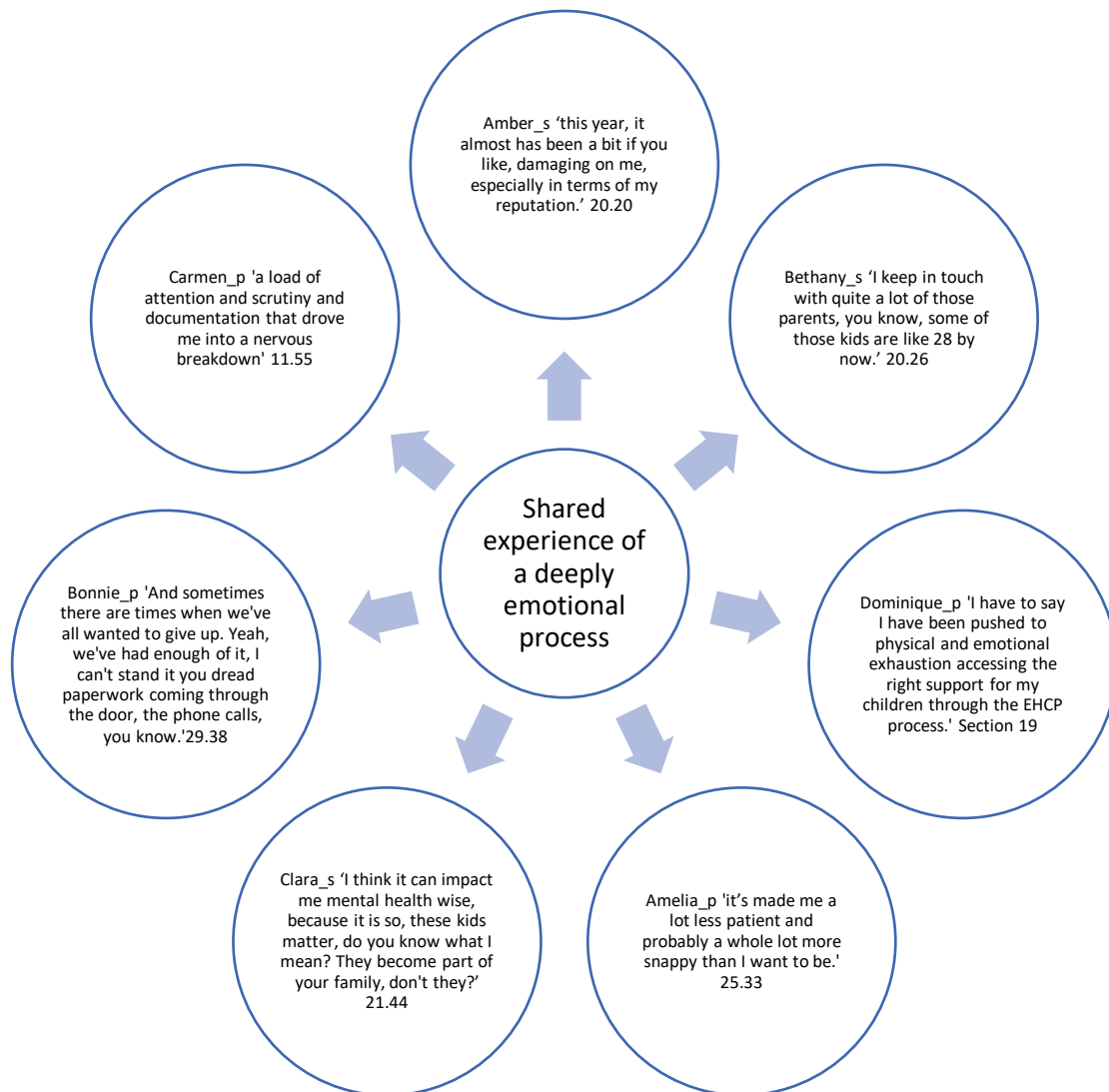
- **Consensus overlap (or conceptual overlap)** - participants from different groups may express the same concerns – this can lead to a concept which underpins the participants' concerns
- **Conflict of perspective** – any clear disagreement on perspectives between the groups
- **Lines of argument** – draws on the preceding strategies to provide an analytical narrative which captures aspects of the experience being studied

As part of the iterative process of IPA, the videos of participants' interviews were listened to again prior to conducting a cross-case analysis, and further notes made directly onto the transcripts. This was a useful process for seeing connections across the data, because the initial focus in data analysis is to stay true to the individuals. This section of the chapter provides an analysis of data, with each strategy as the basis (Larkin *et al.*, 2019). The strategies are included as headings for the sections, with key findings presented, followed by an analysis across the two different groups of participants (parents and SENCOs) to illustrate the findings. Participants are identified as either parent (\_p) or SENCO (\_s) after their name to ensure clarity now the groups have been merged.

#### 4.3.7.1 Consensus overlap (or conceptual overlap)

In this section diagrams have been used to represent points of consensus between the two different groups (**Figure 9** and **Figure 10**). The illustrative data has been used to indicate where the same concerns are being highlighted by participants and where their shared experience links to a central concept.

##### 4.3.7.1.1 A shared experience of a deeply emotional process



**Figure 9: Illustrative data for a shared experience of a deeply emotional process**

Key findings:

- Both parents and SENCOs experienced a deeply emotional process
- All recounted negative emotional impact based on their experiences of the process
- There were some references to positive emotional experiences, but this was more evident with SENCOs



It was clear that all participants shared the experience of a deeply emotional process. This was evidenced by very direct comments about the impact upon their emotional and psychological state as a direct result of being involved in the EHC needs assessment process and management of the resultant plans.

Detrimental impact upon the self was evident from both parents and SENCOs perspectives, although parents did express this to a greater degree. Carmen shared that the *'attention and scrutiny and documentation'* served to drive her to *'a nervous breakdown'* (Carmen\_p 11.55). Similarly, Dominique stated: *'I have to say I have been pushed to physical and emotional exhaustion accessing the right support for my children through the EHCP process'* (Dominique\_p Section19). Both referred to the process as impacting negatively, which was also evident in the way Bonnie felt: *'And sometimes there are times when we've all wanted to give up. Yeah, we've had enough of it, I can't stand it you dread paperwork coming through the door, the phone calls, you know'* (Bonnie\_p 29.38). Amelia even reported how the process had brought about a change in her temperament: *'I'm quite good. I'm quite easy going with things. But it's definitely made me snappy. Like when, knowing I have to call, like the case manager up, and I can feel it in my head. And I just want to be like grouchy with her.'* (Amelia\_p 25:33). These examples illustrate the extremes to which all parents were impacted upon by the process in a negative, detrimental and in some cases permanent way.

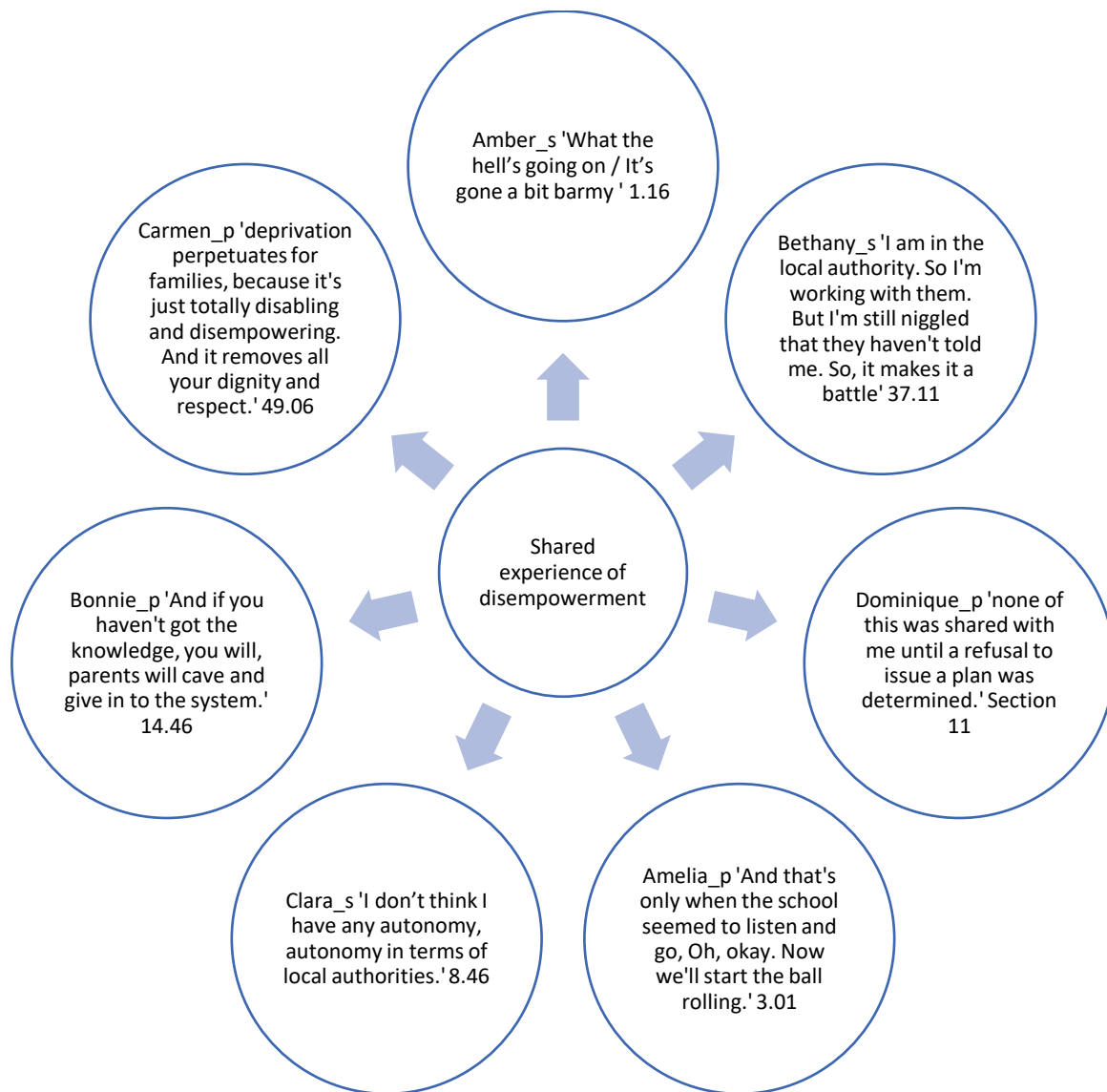
The SENCOs accounts of a detrimental impact based on an emotional experience were linked to relationships with others and often related to where their professional competence was questioned. Bethany mentioned a time when a parent questioned her professional judgements, she commented: *'It really affected me, because I think it was the first time in my entire career that a parent had been really antagonistic towards what, how I felt it was against my work.'* (Bethany\_s 35.16). Similarly, Amber referred to how parental expectations impacted on her emotionally: *'this year, it almost has been a bit if you like, damaging on me, especially in terms of my reputation'* (Amber\_s 20.20). These comments illustrated a level of vulnerability in relation to professional identity and a sense of being challenged in professional judgements or competence.

In addition to SENCOs reporting conflict with parents as having an emotional impact, Amber referred to an occasion when she questioned an Educational Psychologist (EP) over writing a report without seeing the child. She recounted: *'And I basically got ripped apart by the EP who said, you're questioning my authority. How the hell you know, you trust me that I'm doing my job. It was awful. And basically, I end up in tears saying I'm only trying to do the best for the child.'* (Amber\_s 4.05). Again, this illustrated the deep emotional impact of the process even in communication between professionals.

Deep emotional impact was also present in the broader accounts of connections with others, for example Clara referred to the children she was working with as *'family'* (Clara\_s 21.44) and how *'it can impact me mental health wise'* (Clara\_s 21.44) because the children matter, indicating the SENCO role is not a job where you can detach oneself from a strong powerful sense of feelings and emotions. Similarly, Bethany referred to keeping in touch with parents and children long after their education in school was finished, representing the strength of the relationship and how this exceeds the typical parameters of a 'job': *'I keep in touch with quite a lot of those parents, you know, some of those kids are like 28 by now.'* (Bethany\_s 20.26). This illustrated deep emotional connections for the SENCO to maintain contact after so many years, going beyond the work environment and beyond formal requirements. It suggested a level of care by being part of somebody's life through choice.

Highly charged emotions were also linked to positive outcomes, such as the feelings associated with successes in gaining agreement to proceed with the EHC needs assessment process. Clara's account of this illustrated the very deep emotional impact of her experience when she had an application accepted by the local authority: *'when I had the yes to assess, I literally went running down through the corridor to my deputy head, and then banged on the door until it opened. And you know, because I was so excited. And then one of my SENCO groups, I put Oh, my goodness, 'yes to assess' I think I had 120 likes. So from that point of view, we had bubbles at night, my husband is very patient, he understands.'* (Clara\_s 21.44). The phrases: *'literally running'* and *'so excited'* really demonstrated the very heightened level of emotions and extreme reaction based on the positive outcome. It really illustrated applying for EHC needs assessment as a very high stakes process. The fact that Clara shared this with other SENCOs, also demonstrated it is a common experience that other SENCOs will empathise with. They understand of the level of work and the very high stakes placed on the outcome. The reference to *'bubbles'* at home with family members frames the experience as celebratory and having a much wider impact than being contained solely in the work environment.

#### 4.3.7.1.2 A shared experience of disempowerment



**Figure 10: Illustrative data for a shared experience of disempowerment**

#### Key findings:

- Parents and SENCOs recounted experiences of feeling directly disempowered (explicit disempowerment)
- Within the data there was also evidence of indirect disempowerment (implicit disempowerment) that emerged from accepting an inadequate system or inequalities

Within the data, there were two types of shared experience related to disempowerment which will be termed as direct and indirect disempowerment. Participants referred to experiences of direct

disempowerment where disempowerment was explicit in their accounts; this included examples of having no opportunity to be part of the decision-making process. There were also examples of indirect disempowerment where disempowerment was implicit in the participants' accounts and possibly being shared at a sub-conscious level. Examples include where participants were accepting the inadequate system and inequalities as typically what happens in practice.

Direct disempowerment was easy to find in the data, there were many examples provided by all participants. Direct disempowerment included examples across all levels, from an individual imposing their power over another, through to organisations such as schools, or governmental organisations such as the local authority imposing powers. An example of individuals imposing power over the participants included silencing or removing them from decision making. Carmen made reference to an impactful experience of working with one individual as: *'he destroyed our family but he sees, he's told himself a narrative that's that SEND is his thing.'* (Carmen\_p 20.33). *'if you weren't the right sort, you didn't stand a chance. He is very, very blinkered.'* (Carmen\_p 21.47). Carmen's account indicated how a prejudicial or biased position of an individual in an influential position (in this case a headteacher) was entirely disempowering for her family.

Organisations were also identified as disempowering participants in their accounts. Amelia's experience referred to the school ignoring her requests and only taking action when the paediatrician said an EHC plan was required: *'And that's only when the school seemed to listen and go, Oh, okay. Now we'll start the ball rolling'* (Amelia\_p - 3.01). Similarly, Dominique's experience referred to being excluded from the process: *'none of this was shared with me until a refusal to issue a plan was determined'* (Dominique\_p Section11).

Examples of direct disempowerment through contact with the local authorities were evident in all the participants' experiences. Bonnie's account as a parent included a sense of powerlessness: *'And if you haven't got the knowledge, you will, parents will cave and give in to the system'* (Bonnie\_p - 14.46). Clara's experience as a SENCO was similar. She made clear that once the local authority was involved, she felt a loss of power: *'I don't think I have any autonomy, autonomy in terms of local authorities'* (Clara\_s - 8.46). Bethany was in quite a unique position because she was conducting some work for the local authority, as well as her SENCO role. Yet, she still experienced direct disempowerment: *'I am in the local authority. So I'm working with them. But I'm still niggled that they haven't told me. So, it makes it a battle'* (Bethany\_s 37.11).

Indirect disempowerment is subversive and possibly more unsettling, damaging and pervasive. This was evident in the data and may be indicative of a cultural undertone of acceptance of inequality and

an inadequate system for children with more complex needs. One way in which indirect disempowerment was evident was through the participants' use of language of the absurd to describe their experiences. For example, Amber stated: *'I wish they'd let SENCOs just get together and say, right, this is how we need to improve it, because oh, my goodness, this is bonkers'* (Amber\_s 22.04) as a SENCO's perspective on the system. Clara referred to specific aspects of the system which are not operating effectively: *'annual reviews that have taken a year to get the new EHCP back. You know, I've got, so it doesn't help the communication and the liaison and the relationship between the local authority and the parents. But I don't really blame the local authority. I think it's just ridiculous.'* (Clara\_s – 12.55). She identified the system as ridiculous, but is disempowered by the inadequacy in the system because there is not clear way to address the issues. Bethany reinforced this position with her comment: *'at the moment, it's absolutely ridiculous how much money is being wasted on tribunals'* (Bethany\_s 35.16). Parents also used terms to illustrate the absurdity, Amelia stated the process was: *'just a lot of faff'* (Amelia\_p 14.23). These comments represent how the day-to-day management is being interpreted and could represent ways in which people are navigating what they perceive as a nonsensical system. It is recognised the system is not working and is madness, yet people continue to operate within it which essentially is disempowering.

Another way in which indirect disempowerment was experienced by the parents and SENCOs could indicate that culturally we are in a position where we are accepting an inadequate or inequitable system. For example, Amber's comment: *'A one to one which obviously you only get from an EHCP'* (Amber\_s 10.33) demonstrates a position of common knowledge that EHCPs lead to one-to-one support. The term 'obviously' holds significance because this reinforces the default position that EHC plans lead to 1:1 support and perpetuates the myth and culture that it is the only way to secure support for children, not that 1:1 support is necessarily the right support in any case.

Additionally, Carmen's experience reinforced how a cultural position of accepting an inadequate system can be pervasive: *'now I understand why intergenerational poverty and, you know, intervention of social care. And deprivation perpetuates for families, because it's just totally disabling and disempowering. And it removes all your dignity and respect'* (Carmen\_p 49.06). This comment bridges the gap between the examples of direct and indirect disempowerment. Carmen can clearly see the direct disempowerment taking place, but arguably the ingrained, persistent, cultural disempowerment is pervasive in society, and this is implicit and subversive. The inescapable nature of disempowerment leading to *'intergenerational'* disadvantage demonstrates the persistent cultural position as embedded in families and society.

#### 4.3.7.2 Conflict of perspective

In this section Tables have been used to represent points of disagreement on perspectives between the two different groups of parents and SENCOs (**Table 14** and **Table 15**). The illustrative data has been used to indicate where different concerns are being highlighted by participants through their shared experiences.

##### 4.3.7.2.1 Conflicting values or understanding

The differences between parental expectations and the reality, which SENCOs seemed to have a greater awareness of, served to illustrate a point of conflict between the parents and SENCOs. The experiences shared from participants illustrated where the system places people at odds with one another and therefore sets up the positioning of conflict. For example, parents were under the impression that going through the process to gain an EHC plan would enable access to education or more appropriate support for their children. However, in reality this was often not the case. This can lead to blame being placed on the school or the SENCO, when actually they have very little influence over this aspect. There was much evidence in the data to illustrate where the parents experienced disillusionment and the realisation the process was a paperwork driven exercise (**Table 14**).

Issue	Illustrative examples of experiences
Disillusionment over access to education	<p><i>'you're not told how difficult it can be afterwards with an EHCP. So I haven't seen a benefit to it yet. Not at all.'</i> (Amelia_p 27.01)</p> <p><i>'There's pressure put on for a child to have a EHCP. But actually, it doesn't necessarily mean that any more doors are open for them.'</i> (Amelia_p 27.01)</p> <p><i>'parents are desperate for an EHCP. And I have to explain to them, we can apply, but our local authorities 68% get turned down first time.'</i> (Clara_s 5.48)</p> <p><i>'they realise that it doesn't really give you as much as they think'</i> (Bethany_s 20.26)</p>
Paperwork focused	<p><i>'I think the application process itself is quite bizarre, isn't it, because when you do the application, you're doing an application as if it was going to panel as opposed to just what it should be. This child's got special needs, and they need special provision'</i> (Bethany_s 30.21)</p> <p><i>'It just feels like they're sending in a sheet going XXX(Child's name), can't do this can't do this can't do this. And this school takes one look at it and goes na we're fine, we don't want to do it.'</i> (Amelia_p 14.23)</p> <p><i>'None of the EHCP actually reflects those needs'</i> (Bonnie_p 6.54)</p> <p><i>'the assessment process is inherently part of the problem. Because it, it sets up a power imbalance.'</i> (Carmen_p 49.06)</p>

**Table 14: Illustrative examples of perspectives on expectations and reality**

Both parents and SENCOs identified that the process is long and difficult and, as outlined in section 4.3.7.1.1, a deeply emotional process. Therefore, when the expectations were undermined, by not leading to the desired outcomes, this ultimately led to a sense of being devalued by the individuals involved. Amelia’s experience of being offered a placement illustrated this sense of disillusionment with the system: *‘And then it was that point that we realised they’re literally going to apply to any school with SEN provision, not because it suits XXX’s (Child’s name) needs’* (Amelia\_p 20.37). In addition, Carmen commented on the feeling of pressure leading to giving up: *‘lots of people can’t and don’t or give up. And I think that the numbers game I see strategically in XXX1 (reference to local authority) at the moment, they’re actively relying on parents giving up.’* (Carmen\_p 11.55). Additionally, there were different perspectives on the needs of children and what is best for them educationally. For example, whether to apply for an EHC plan, or the needs of children or the level of support is in line with what the SENCO / school / LA can or will implement. **Table 15** outlines some of these issues with illustrative examples.

Issue	Illustrative examples of experiences
Conflict over applying for EHC	<p><i>‘school refused twice, to support. And that’s because they will believe in local policy. He won’t qualify, she won’t qualify, she’s not eligible.’</i> (Carmen_p 17.43)</p> <p><i>‘it feels like the parents’ ones get priority, because if it fails, then they simply appeal’</i> (Amber_s 16.17)</p>
Differing perspectives between parents and SENCOs on the needs	<p><i>‘You shouldn’t be sending him home and punishing him for something that’s a part of his condition. But the teachers don’t accept it, because you all have to toe that line.’</i> (Bonnie_p 33.12)</p> <p><i>‘within a nanosecond, we presumed he was autistic. Parents hadn’t told us um, and parents who don’t know he’s not autistic. I think it’s probably partly cultural.’</i> (Clara_s 5.00)</p>
Different perspectives on support / need	<p><i>‘this is where I’ve clashed with quite a few because it doesn’t mean a one to one’</i> (Amber_s 1.16)</p> <p><i>‘And they don’t listen to parents, about those those ways of dealing with children. They don’t listen.’</i> (Bonnie_p 50.45)</p>

**Table 15: Illustrative examples of conflicting perspectives**

The SENCOs were aware of the reality regarding resources and what is practical in schools in which they work and there were occasions where this was presented as difficult for parents when they had different expectations. For example, Clara referred to the parental expectations and how this is in conflict with the reality of the provision available in an independent school as well as the school’s position on realistic goals for the child: *‘we still feel we need a one to one teaching assistant. And that means we’d have to pass the cost to you. Or you possibly have to find another school that is more*

*suitable. So it was slightly blackmailily. But it was done with the child's interests, he needs support, he really, really does. And it's getting worse, and he's an unhappy little boy some of the time. So, so I think it's really important to get the parents on board. And whether it's slightly over a barrel'* (Clara\_s 5.48).

The gap between the expectations and reality for this parent has illustrated how the divergent experiences between the two groups could lead to more distance and possibly mistrust. The reality of the resources available make it challenging for the SENCO to effectively support the child, but the reality of the situation directly impacts on the educational opportunities for the child.

It was clear from the experiences shared, all parents invested so much, but their efforts were thwarted by the reality they faced. Misunderstanding the 'other' was evident in the data, but this became an issue when it led to a sense of lack of care or understanding. Conflicting values are unavoidable because we all have different values and beliefs, however, the findings illustrated how this is managed is really important because it needs to be supported carefully from a person-centred approach. Carmen's experience reinforced this position when she commented: *'then to listen to those conversations and understand that actually, it's down to culture and behaviour within services. And that actually, there are good people in all these systems coming up against shit people'* (Carmen\_p 37.43). Arguably, the current system, where values of the other are not always appropriately acknowledged or supported will continue to lead to conflict between the individuals, the school and the system.

#### 4.3.7.2.2 Conflicting perspective on power

It is difficult to diametrically split the perceptions on power as a 'conflict of perspective' but there was a point of difference in examples of SENCOs perceiving parents as having more power, and examples of parents as perceiving the school and local authority as having more power.

In the data there were examples of demonic and virtuous imagery, Bonnie referred to: 'I am looked at like, I have horns on my head. I am. Yeah.' (Bonnie\_p 22.12) whereas Bethany referred to the SENCO as a 'potential saviour' (Bethany\_s 39.37) This language serves to highlight the adversarial nature of the system and can illustrate how people may be positioned as oppositional and defensive. This was reinforced by Bethany's comment: *'They are so what's the word? Aggressive almost, I mean, to go to tribunals are so costly. So it's setting it setting the family against the school and the local authorities'* (Bethany\_s 35.16). Parents and SENCOs may adopt defensive positions and different values become oppositional rather than being addressed constructively, and tribunal is an illustration of the use of power to manage when this occurs.

Findings included direct references to SENCOs perceiving parental power as undermining the



professionals: *'the parent power that I've seen recently, is actually overtaking professionals' knowledge. And it's gone a bit barmy.'* (Amber\_s 1.16). Amber went on to explain that this created: *'random situations where I've got two EHCP in the school now that I wouldn't have put in myself, but they've gone through and they've been awarded'* (Amber\_s 7.52). The influence of parental power referred to here could be perceived a 'threat' to professional identity, placing further distance between SENCOs and parents. Similarly, parents perceived school and professionals as holding more power and influence than them: *'And that's only when the school seemed to listen' and 'the school didn't listen to what we said. They listen to what the pediatrician said, though.'* (Amelia\_p 3.01). This evident distance and the perception of power as resting with the 'other' may be hindering opportunity for communication to address when people do not feel valued. It may result in further distance and defensive positioning and could be contributing to people resorting to the available structures as the only way to manage the situation, for example taking the route of tribunal. Holding different values, but without communication to appropriately acknowledge different viewpoints, could be increasing a sense of being oppositional and disengagement. Therefore, inadvertently power may be being used or resorted to manage in the system because people are unable to be collaborative in this default defensive position.

#### 4.3.7.2.3 SENCOs caught in the middle

Findings illustrated that parents and SENCOs were negotiating relationships across a number of stakeholders. What was evident from the data, is that all the SENCOs' experiences illustrated they are constantly balancing expectations of stakeholders they are working with, including parents, schools and local authorities. Bethany shared how she viewed this experience: *'SENCO, you're kind of I've always felt it's a funny opposition, you're kind of in the middle. So you're advocating for the child and the family, but you're also part of the school in it.'* (Bethany\_s 4.25). This unique position for the SENCO as balancing others' expectations or requirements could elicit a constant state of tension or pressure.

Willingness to value others, but the tensions of also delivering what the school requires and meeting the requirements of the local authority, illustrated how the performative aspects of the role might impact on ability to be person centred: *'I've been there where I'm listening to a parent and I'm thinking I totally agree with you. And I would love to be able to give, you know, I can see the provision is here, we're doing our best to meet it. And you're right, we're not really because you know, they're in a mixed ability set, and I haven't got support and the teacher, teacher, I've tried with the teacher, they just don't get it.'* (Bethany\_s 7.53). Bethany presented an experience of conflict in her professional values and what she has available in resources to meet educational needs. This challenge of managing parental expectations alongside the resources available was reinforced by Amber: *'it's getting that*

*balance, right. So you don't offend them. But equally, you've got to show them that what they might want is not practical'* (Amber\_s 1.16). Similarly, the tension between what can be offered in school and what parents expect was highlighted in the independent sector when need could not be met it placed the SENCO in a position of disagreement: *'So it was slightly blackmail'* (Clara\_s 5.48). These examples could cause tension in professional identity by not being able to fulfil a role as you personally and professionally determine. Tension in SENCOs professional identity when balancing relationships could lead to internal conflict of positioning or values: *'she kept saying, it's not you. It's the rest of the school. I'm like, Yeah, but I, you know that as well like that I'm the one that's gonna have to do the report and fight that wherever'* (Bethany\_s 14.46). Bethany is part of the school and so unable to detach from this position, even when, in some cases, she is not fully aligned to the systems and processes within the school.

#### 4.3.7.3 Lines of argument

Analysis of the data from SENCOs and parents as a cross-case analysis has led to the following lines of argument (Larkin *et al.*, 2019). This is presented as thematic sub-headings and short summaries which form the basis of the final stage of data analysis - Stage Three.

##### 4.3.7.3.1 Valuing People in the process

The gap between parental expectations and the reality led to conflicting positions between the SENCOs and parents. Where expectations are not met, parents are disillusioned and see the system and schools as failing their children. The sense that they are not valued leads to distance, disengagement and defensive positions. This reduces individuals to use mechanisms available to take control and gain power such as the tribunal system because they are unable to work collaboratively in these defensive positions. It was evident that different values become oppositional rather than being addressed in a constructive way.

**Main line of argument 1 - Valuing People in the process:** The focus on the procedural, process driven agenda demonstrated performative requirements as being central, rather than understanding, valuing and placing people at the centre. Both parents and SENCOs were subject to this position which serves to undermine person centred practice and care for individuals. There needs to be a focus on care and understanding of the values of individuals who are attempting to navigate the EHC needs assessment process and resultant management of the EHC plans.

##### 4.3.7.3.2 Participation in Working Relationships

The shared experience of deeply emotional responses from all participants really illustrated how fundamental relationships are as part of this process. The very harrowing accounts of emotional turmoil illustrated how important it is to support (both parents and SENCOs) in developing and

maintaining open, honest, trusting in-person relationships. A strength evident in the data were emotional accounts of the very strong connections formed which extend well beyond the parameters of the 'job'. Positive working relationships may serve to be a protective factor to positively influence life chances and outcomes for children. This cannot be left to chance, and needs to be embedded into the system, such as facilitating appropriate spaces for dialogue and investment in resources, suitable training, and appropriate frameworks.

**Main line of argument 2 - Participation in Working Relationships:** Open, honest, in-person relationships are fundamental to building and maintaining suitable conditions for working together. Resources and investment in appropriate training, suitable frameworks and the spaces for effective communication to take place are necessary.

#### 4.3.7.3.3 Levels of decision making in the process

The direct accounts of disempowerment and children being excluded from education are unacceptable. Yet, embedded in the data were examples of indirect disempowerment, with evidence of levels of acceptance and normalisation of a poor, inadequate system. This serves to perpetuate hierarchical structures and cultural attitudes of those who 'fit' as being able to access education and those who do not 'fit' as being excluded. The data illustrated that within this system, choice and decision-making is limited, and therefore participatory decision-making is not possible. Currently there is no real choice or autonomy because the decision-making ultimately lies with the State. Changes to reduce power differences and a change in culture is required.

**Main line of argument 3 - Levels of decision making in the process:** Currently there is no choice or autonomy in decision-making in the process. The direct and indirect disempowerment serves to perpetuate acceptance of an inequitable, poor system. A change in culture is required to address hierarchical structures and power differences, or the current system will perpetuate the mistakes of the past.

#### 4.3.8 Stage Two: Summary

Stage Two included Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the semi-structured interviews with two groups of participants. The selection of the participants was outlined along with the outcomes from the member-checking process at the start of the section.

Firstly, the summaries of individual participants and then the IPA analysis and findings for the three SENCOs were shared (4.3.4). This was followed by the individual participant summaries and then the analysis and findings for the four parents (4.3.6). The key findings from the IPA analysis informed the cross-case analysis of both groups using a multiperspectival design (Larkin *et al.*, 2019). The findings

from the cross-case analysis led to three clear lines of argument for this study to inform Stage Three of the research. Stage Three of the study adopts the hermeneutic process by returning to all the data from Stage One and Two for the final stage of analysis. In IPA, it is important to engage in a process of examining the minutia and then stepping back to look at the whole, and this continual process was adopted throughout the study. However, with the lines of argument identified from the multiperspectival design, there was a specific focus on these aspects in the final data analysis where gems (Smith, 2011) were used as small sections of the data which illuminate an underlying central theme.

#### 4.4 Stage Three: Data Presentation and Analysis of Gems

Stage Three analysis draws together the data and findings from the first two stages of the research. This is because IPA is an iterative process and therefore the analysis doesn't 'stop' at earlier stages, but continues, and so is in line with the hermeneutic circle (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). The final stage includes a return to all data utilising the hermeneutic process (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018: 166) and the use of gems (Smith, 2011) to frame this analysis. Gems were selected because they 'offer analytic leverage, they shine light on the phenomenon, on the transcript and on the corpus as a whole' (Smith, 2011: 7).

Stage One data was not analysed using IPA, but the data is drawn upon in this final stage of analysis because it may be useful 'hearing from *more* people than in a typical IPA project' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 126). The use of mixed methods is encouraged as a creative development of IPA studies and for 'its capacity for a dialogue with other levels of explanation' (*ibid.*, 2022: 196). Therefore, this design provides wider contextual information to draw upon to inform the interpretivist position, and in doing so may provide 'more capacity to bring about change (in practices and policies) than singular designed' studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 123). As data is drawn upon from Stage One and Stage Two the participants are identified as parents and SENCOs from Stage One data and identified either as parent (\_p) or SENCO (\_s) after their name for Stage Two data to ensure clarity.

The key findings in this section of the chapter, as a synthesis of the earlier two stages of the research, identified gems as 'the thing that stands out when you're reading a transcript' to inform the analytical approach (Smith, 2011: 7). The notion is that through looking very closely at the 'part' it will help to understand the underlying conceptual representative of the 'whole' (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018: 166). It is 'an example of the ongoing hermeneutic circling. The whole helps the part and the part helps the whole' (Smith, 2011: 9). In addition, based on the researcher's position now, after analysing the

data, it provides a final stage to draw everything together. In doing so the aim is to get to the heart of the phenomenon in a final return to the research question. The lines of argument from 4.3.7.3 are therefore developed here before moving to the discussion in Chapter 5.

Smith (2011) presents three types of gem, a shining gem will be fairly obvious in the text and apparent to the researcher as a comment illustrating the phenomenon being researched. The suggestive gem needs some attention to expose and will need more effort from the researcher to uncover how this illuminates the phenomenon. Finally, the secret gems are rarer and harder to find, they will also require much more consideration and attention from the researcher to reveal the way it demonstrates the phenomenon. Smith (2011: 12) also relates the different gems to the level of consciousness in the participant and what they are saying, for example with the secret gem he claims ‘the participant may not be consciously aware of the meaning, or even of what they’ve said at all.’ **Figure 11** outlines Smith’s (2011) spectrum for each of the gems. All three types of gem are presented in the data analysis that follows.

Table 3. A spectrum of gems: The role for the object, researcher and participant.

Shining	Suggestive	Secret
O already clearly apparent	O suggests something needs attention	O has chink manifest
R doesn't need to peer	R needs to peer to find it	R needs much peering to reveal
P aware of meaning	P has some awareness of meaning	P not aware
<u>Examples:</u>		
<i>Shining:</i> 'Everybody's watching my son being chopped to pieces.'		
<i>Suggestive:</i> 'Are we all going to get rounded up and taken to a camp somewhere.'		
<i>Secret:</i> 'She was always my brother.'		
	O	Object
	R	Researcher
	P	Participant

Figure 11: Smith (2011: 14) A spectrum of gems

#### 4.4.1 Valuing people in the process

**Main line of argument 1 - Valuing People in the process:** The focus on the procedural, process driven agenda demonstrated performative requirements as being central, rather than understanding, valuing and placing people at the centre. Both parents and SENCOs were subject to this position which serves to undermine person centred practice and care for individuals. There needs to be a focus on care and understanding of the values of individuals who are attempting to navigate the EHC needs assessment process and resultant management of the EHC plans.

## Gem one:

**'They're not looking at a child, they just look at piece of paper, which is heart-breaking.'** (Bonnie\_p 17.32)

This gem is a shining gem because Bonnie knows the focus and priority is on the paperwork and not the child which serves as a root to issues regarding valuing people in the EHC needs assessment and management of the EHC plan. The gem was situated in the following extract:

***I think the parents should be part of the panel to begin with, when it's decision making that exclusion in itself is hard, because they are looking at a piece of paper. They're not looking at a child, they just look at piece of paper, which is heart-breaking. And I understand, you have to sometimes step back from emotions and look at this as a whole. Because it is a business at the end of the day, I do understand that as well. But we're talking about a child's future. It needs to be right from the start. (Bonnie\_p 17.32)***

The gem serves to illustrate the central notion that rather than placing people first, there is an emphasis on prioritising the procedural and paper-based approaches to meeting need. Bonnie places the 'blame' with the authorities with the comment: *'They're not looking at a child'*. The use of the pronoun *'they'* refers to the panel of decision makers regarding the EHC needs assessment and is representative of a position of 'them' and 'us'. In Bonnie's construction, the paperwork is prioritised over the person and represents a performative and efficient system, by *'just'* looking at the paper the decisions can be made swiftly and efficiently. However, this approach arguably contrasts with the notion of an egalitarian person-centred system, which Bonnie alludes to with her opening comment on *'looking at the child'* - seeing the person as an individual. Instead, this gem illustrates Bonnie's construction of the event as depersonalised and detached by just looking at *'a piece of paper'*. It really devalues the person when presented in this way. Even the term *'look'* is quite dismissive and not really indicative of understanding or even reading the documentation, which further reinforces Bonnie's perception of the lack of engagement by the panel member in knowing her child. The system seems to be driven by the need to be business-like and efficient. It is performative as opposed to placing the child at the centre and performative nature reduces the care. Bonnie's experience sees this clearly with her later comment: *'it is a business at the end of the day'* (Bonnie\_p 17.32).

Bonnie's experience linked this focus on the paperwork and performative aspects to the emotional impact as *'heart-breaking'*. Bonnie sees the real children behind the paperwork and is affected by the lack of care and people not being valued in the process. Evident from Stage One data, were accounts

of heart-breaking, emotional impact upon children and their families, including accounts of traumatic outcomes due to the process: *'These practices have far reaching effects on the family's wellbeing. I was diagnosed with PTSD from the process of getting my children support.'* (Parent Stage One). Ultimately it is paperwork and bureaucracy driving the decision-making on children's education and lives. Bonnie's reference to *'heart-breaking'* could be indicative of the whole system and the ways in which people are being treated. The system is dismissive and impersonal, and this gem represents this positioning. This reinforces the notion of distanced relationships as being more difficult to manage as with Bethany's perception of those at the local authority as being *'amorphous'* (Bethany\_s 18.50).

The gem also links to the ways in which people are excluded. The child is not represented fully and the parents are not present, so decisions are happening behind closed doors, which links to Bonnie's comment immediately preceding the gem: *'I think the parents should be part of the panel to begin with, when it's decision making that exclusion in itself is hard, because they are looking at a piece of paper'* (Bonnie\_p 17.32). Clara's experience illustrated how SENCOs, as well as parents, are being excluded from the process: *'My paperwork I've produced for panel is trying to, you know, create a portrait of a child. And I know that I can't go along to every panel, because I'm not allowed to it's my child that's being considered, but I just feel that, you know, I know the system, I wouldn't be asking for support unless I feel it's needed'* (Clara\_s 16.48). Clara recognised the bureaucracy in the system and the prioritisation of paperwork in place of people, but also identified a sense of disregard for the professional's position as a measure of the level of need of the child with her comment: *'I wouldn't be asking for support unless I feel it's needed'*. This mistrust of the professional is emphasised by Bethany's perception of the process when she stated: *'So I feel the whole system is created to to put barriers, to see almost how serious you are. You know, you want to apply for this. All right, we're gonna make you do some work beforehand.'* (Bethany\_s 30.21). This elicited a sense of a system which is criteria driven rather than person-centred. The perception of intentional *'barriers'* and the variance in criteria was also highlighted by SENCOs in Stage One: *'I feel the bar keeps changing, and applications are a stab in the dark depending on the panel. It's putting me off applying.'* Another SENCO stated: *'The level of evidence needed to submit with any chance of success is huge so very time consuming. I have never had a level awarded that actually funded everything outlined in the plan.'* (SENCO Stage One). Arguably these differences and challenges lead to inequalities in how criteria are applied and enables the bar to be changed dependent on demand. One SENCO from Stage One noted the process was: *'Reliant on boroughs interpretation of needs and paperwork'*.

#### 4.4.2 Participation in working relationships

**Main line of argument 2 - Participation in Working Relationships:** Open, honest, in-person relationships are fundamental to building and maintaining suitable conditions for working together. Resources and investment in appropriate training, suitable frameworks and the spaces for effective communication to take place are necessary.

##### Gem two:

'And because we're all time starved, we will do exactly what it says on the tin' (Bethany\_s 33.43)

This gem from Bethany is 'suggestive' (Smith, 2011: 14) because there is some level of knowledge here from Bethany on the constraints, yet there is not a clear, wider link to the resultant tokenistic ways of working and impact on relationships, which limits being able to implement co-production. The gem was situated in the following extract:

*At no point in that that bit that the school has to write Does it say, you know, what work have you done with the parents? What you know, what do the parents think about the interventions? You know, are they working at home with their child? Have you facilitated... There's, there's nothing to prompt you is there? And because we're all time starved, we will do exactly what it says on the tin. If it prompts us to do that, we will fill that in, if it prompts us to do something different, we would then be forced to change our practice. (R – Yeah), we are, we you know SENCOs are template driven, aren't we really? You know, you do what you have to do get it in the post off and then move on to the next thing because that's that's sadly how it works.*

In this extract, Bethany is referring to the Appendix A (DfE/DoH, 2015) and described the parental engagement in this section as quite superficial, but identified the possibility of a different format to address this issue. She mentioned the format as needing to be more focused on eliciting more direct work and conversations with the parents, foregrounding the importance of dialogue and relationships underpinning practice. However, this would take time, resources and investment which she recognised as being very limited.

Bethany's experience represents a challenging context in which SENCOs are working. The term: 'time starved' serves to illustrate how this situation inhibits co-production because co-production is not possible without investment and time. The term: 'starved' links to notion of survival and existing on the absolute minimum, which is the opposite to what is required for co-production (forming and developing open, honest, transparent relationships).



Bethany recognised that relationships were fundamental during her interview, with the comment: *'getting parents to be fully involved is all about the relationship you have with a parent before you even get to the meeting part of it.'* (Bethany\_s 0.57). Clara also recognised that communication and relationships are key: *'I say to parents, I think that the the triangle almost with parents, child and staff, the closer that triangle can be, the more, the better it is. So I try and involve them as much as possible.'* (Clara 0.07). It was therefore concerning that even when SENCOs had knowledge of how to build quality relationships and implement person centred ways of working it does not necessary lead to improved outcomes because based on the findings the system prohibits implementation. For example, Bethany's reference to *'exactly what it says'* provides a sense of being forced into meeting requirements only and following procedure, despite holding knowledge of better ways of working: *'we used to do work before the annual review, and the child would do a PowerPoint or a collage, or present in a different way, so that they could present at the review having planned something themselves so that, you know, kind of, we got quite into person centred planning for a little while'* (Bethany\_s 0.57). Bethany spoke in detail about the ways in which she was able to effect person centred planning, yet it was framed as impossible in the current context in which she and the other SENCOs are operating. The phrase *'time starved'* could be a justification for the inability to work in person-centred ways where relationships and the time to build and maintain them are prioritised. Stage One data included a comment from a parent which echoed the effect of this challenging aspect of practice as their experience too: *'School rushing the process through. Sat in senco office whilst she typed up my responses. Envelope sealed, ready to send off to LA before I'd even left the building'* (Parent Stage One). This lack of time and resources seemed to place Bethany, and others into a default position where they fall back on what it required or deemed necessary *'on the tin'* and then this can become tokenistic and insincere. Parents had an acute awareness of when this was the case as with Amelia's comment, *'Some of the questions did seem a bit I don't know, just seem like they would put in just to fluff up the parents'* (Amelia\_p 17.53). Furthermore, parents could identify when there were barriers to SENCOs working with them constructively, as evidenced in the Stage One *'I felt that the school and SENCO, although generally very supportive and wanting to be helpful, just did not have the expertise, knowledge or time to help with the EHCP process. Because of this, they actively discouraged an application which resulted in a delay of over a year'* (Parent Stage One).

The phrase Bethany used *'what it says on the tin'* illustrated procedural ways of working which could also serve to stifle professional autonomy and creativity. Her reference which followed on from this gem noted: *'SENCOs are template driven, aren't we really? You know, you do what you have to do get it in the post off and then move on to the next thing because that's that's sadly how it works.'*

(Bethany\_s 33.43). This account illustrates a position of passivity on the part of the professional in that they seem to blindly follow process and procedure rather than have the autonomy or indeed the space to question, to be curious or creative. It is likely, that individuals will not know how to, or feel they have permission to be *'curious'* (Carmen\_p 8.00) in rigid, performative structures. Arguably, the system needs to change to accommodate this approach because as illustrated by Bethany's experience holding knowledge is not enough to be able to implement effective relationships for co-production to take place. These findings question the existing environment for enabling flexible, curious and autonomous professions as highlighted by Carmen: *'it's fine to have a pathway, but you've got to have agility within it. And you've got to have professionals who aren't gatekeepers, who are curious, who actively have agency.'* (Carmen\_p 8.00). This is such a key point because people don't fit into rigid, fixed models and frameworks, they are sometimes *'organic, vulnerable, fragile people'* (Carmen\_p 45.15).

The fact that Bethany referred to *'all'* as time starved is noteworthy and could be indicative of SENCOs, but it could be representative of the wider school setting, or it could even be suggestive of society more generally and broader societal attitudes. It links to the nature of us all managing in a business environment, lacking in time or investment to support. As noted in section 4.4.1 *'Valuing people in the process'* the drive to marketisation and financial gain or efficiency leads to the need to meet targets and to be performative in nature. This in turn reduces the time and space for care for individuals and for opportunities to build working relationship to work co-productively. The findings illustrated there is an inability to implement effective working relationships due to the external pressures, yet this is short-sighted because by saving money now and meeting the targets it may cost more in the longer term.

#### 4.4.3 Levels of decision making in the process

**Main line of argument 3 - Levels of decision making in the process:** Currently there is no choice or autonomy in decision-making in the process. The direct and indirect disempowerment serves to perpetuate acceptance of an inequitable, poor system. A change in culture is required to address hierarchical structures and power differences, or the current system will perpetuate the mistakes of the past.

#### Gem Three:

*'We're lucky he's getting an education. And he's got one or two peers he'll talk to, but he's not. He's not thriving. He's just, he's just surviving at school, really'* (Amelia\_p 12.09)

This extract includes two types of gem next to each other. The first gem is a secret gem: ***'We're lucky he's getting an education.'*** I do not believe that Amelia had any conscious awareness that she was using the term *'lucky'* when she was referring to the educational provision for her child. Smith (2011: 6) refers to the disproportionate significance of a passage in relation to its size, but how this can have a notable impact on the researcher. I kept returning to this comment from Amelia but initially was unsure why. Amelia's comment on being *'lucky'* captured my interest in the same way that Smith (2011: 6) noted: 'a passage intrigues or mystifies' and can draw the researcher back numerous times. This aspect is explored in the discussion of the gem. The next gem in this extract is shining because it seemed to serve as a realisation on Amelia's part and really does illustrate in one sentence the unacceptable culture of children not having access to appropriate educational opportunities: ***'He's not thriving. He's just, he's just surviving at school, really'***. These gems were situated in the following extract:

***And we're sort of getting to that point now where we're thinking, come September, we're looking at probably deregistering him and having to do home learning, not because we want to, but because we can't go through each day of having him anxious and sending him in and being called out to come and collect him an hour later. Because he can't cope. Because it's not fair to him. And it's not fair to the other kids. (R -Yeah). And that's the thing at the moment whilst he's in mainstream. He's just doing worksheets and things is, which is fine. We're lucky he's getting an education. And he's got one or two peers he'll talk to, but he's not. He's not thriving. He's just, he's just surviving at school, really.***

The secret gem: *'We're lucky he's getting an education'* served to illustrate an acceptance, and to a certain degree normalisation of the poor, inadequate system and low standards in relation to education for children with more complex SEN. The use of the word *'lucky'* illustrated Amelia's knowledge of the reality that many children do not get EHC plans or do not have access to an education at all. She therefore considered her child as lucky because he did have an EHC plan and was, at the time of the interview, accessing some level of education. The normalisation of the system and process is dangerous because it is disempowering and may present an automatic passive positioning of parents. Those who are not passive, or even defiant in standing against the inequalities, are potentially labelled as troublemakers. It is possible that passivity is a mechanism to cope with such an indefensible, inequitable system. Amelia referred to being *'lucky'* seven times in her interview, which could present a position of subservience. Yet, it is the hierarchical structures and cultural attitudes that in reality are forcing parents into a position of subservience in accepting an inadequate system and low standards. In addition to this sense of disempowerment, there were in some cases, accounts

of complete helplessness evident in the responses. For example, *'I always felt I had no control. They could do what they like with little consequences even when breaking the law'* (Parent Stage One). Access to education is the right of every child in England, yet the data illustrated inequalities as being accepted due to the sense of helplessness or enforced passivity. This, in turn, leads to an inability to access appropriate provisions for children and forced acceptance of what is offered. For example, having *'one or two peers'* and *'doing worksheets'* could be considered a bare minimum rather than an appropriate and enabling education.

Amelia's construction presented the experience of a two-tier education system for those who 'fit' the system and those who do not 'fit' the system. There were no suitable places in specialist provision for Amelia's child despite this being specified on the EHC plan, as a result they were considering home education, but: *'not because we want to, but because we can't go through each day of having him anxious and sending him in and being called out to come and collect him an hour later. Because he can't cope'* (Amelia\_p 12.09). Amelia's account illustrated that there is no real choice or autonomy in the system, which can lead to parents and SENCOs having to make the best of the difficult situations they face. This lack of decision making was also evident in Stage One data for both parents and SENCOs. For example, issues with the local authority were evident in 41% (n.31) of the SENCO responses and 45% (n.38) of the parental responses. There were a number of direct references to lack of decision-making, such as: *'Once submitted the LA take over and this is when Sencos totally lose control'* (SENCO Stage One). There were also systemic issues identified as limiting how SENCOs could engage in a meaningful way, such as: *'The constant change of personnel at XXX1 (reference to local authority) is a huge barrier. I don't feel the process is transparent enough and I always advise the parents to enlist the support of XXX (reference to independent advisory service) to guide them and offer additional advice'* (SENCO Stage One).

The second gem *'He's not thriving. He's just, he's just surviving at school, really'* is a shining gem illustrated by a realisation on Amelia's part that her child does not 'fit' the system and is being excluded because he is *'just surviving'*. The phrase *'just surviving'* illustrates the bare minimum and is in juxtaposition with the earlier comment of being *'lucky'*. This construction is paradoxical, but really highlights the desperate situation of parents being forced to accept the bare minimum and the pressures that this is acceptable, because some children don't even get an education. However, the only alternative to the current situation for Amelia's child is removal from school and no State provision of education. The repetition of *'not'* and *'just'* may indicate the emotional difficulty for Amelia in the realisation that she has no choice in the system and cannot influence the outcomes for her child. The use of the word *'really'* emphasises the reality of the situation. The stark difference

between expectations and reality is evident because so many parents think the process will lead to the 'key to the golden SEN door' (Amelia\_p 27.01). However, in reality, despite going through a really challenging difficult process, they often still do not get what they need for their children.

The examples of direct and indirect disempowerment in the findings served to perpetuate acceptance of an inequitable, poor system. The following comment from a parent from Stage One of the research illustrated how people were devalued and the failures in meeting children's basic educational needs:

*'We felt the professionals had no idea what they were doing and we were made to feel like bad people and parents. Even with the plan my son is being failed, the whole system is broken and SEN families are being tortured by the whole process.'*

The unacceptance of difference and challenges of dealing with an inflexible system were highlighted by Bonnie, who referred to this as the 'square box of teaching. If you're anywhere out of them lines, it as if you've blown their minds, they can't cope' (Bonnie\_p 56.33). This potentially marginalises those who are not able to engage due to not being able to 'fit' in the system and further constrains voice and choice. This notion was reinforced by Carmen's experience, when she noted: 'there's not, there's not enough individualisation.' This adversarial positioning of an inflexible system possibly leads to individuals in taking more radical actions to be heard, when they do not accept the sub-standard offer. This was evident in the Stage One data with 14 parental references to battles or fighting, for example: 'I realised how bad education is and that I had to fight tooth and nail to get my child the support she needs .... so I did' (Parent Stage One). Education should provide all children with the opportunity to 'thrive' without necessitating parents and SENCOs to 'fight' the system. The lack of decision-making powers for parents and SENCOs in the findings suggest a change in practice is required to address hierarchical structures and power differences that continue to persist.

#### 4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the analysis and findings of the three different stages of the research (see **Figure 6**). Stage One included the analysis and findings from a scoping questionnaire which provided the initial themes to inform Stage Two as well as selection of the participants for Stage Two of the research. Stage Two utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the approach to explore the lived experiences of two groups of participants, the parents and the SENCOS. This stage also included a multiperspectival design to consider the points of convergence and divergence across both groups when considering their experiences of the same phenomenon. Stage Two resulted in lines of argument (Larkin *et al.*, 2019) presented in Section 4.3.7.3 and then applied to Stage Three as a basis for the analysis. Stage Three of the research involved a return to the hermeneutic process and

consideration of all the data from Stage One and Stage Two to explore the identified lines of argument. This analysis was approached by selecting relevant gems (Smith, 2011: 7) to explore how a small extract from the data can be illustrative of the wider phenomenon because it will 'shine light on the phenomenon, on the transcript and on the corpus as a whole'.

The analysis and finding from each stage of the research ultimately resulted in three areas which emerged as being prominent.

1. Valuing people in the process
2. Participation in working relationships
3. Levels of decision making in the process

These three areas will be drawn upon in the next Chapter where the findings will be discussed in relation to the wider literature, theory and context.

#### **Reflection on the findings**

When conducting the data analysis, I found that I returned again and again to the term 'lucky' shared by Amelia. Initially was not sure why this had capture my interest, but then realised it made me really angry that a parent was placed in a position where they were made to feel 'lucky' because their child could access education. I felt that Amelia's amenable nature was essentially being taken advantage of by the system, which infuriated me because it illustrated how parents are forced into positions of subservience or battling and that cannot be right. I made me reflect on how many parents accept the poor system because there is little or no alternative. I became aware of my 'fore-conceptions' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 20) in data analysis because this has such an emotive impact on me personally. In order to address this, I discussed the analysis with my supervisors and IPA groups to challenge my interpretations and ensure they were valid based on the data.

## 5. Chapter 5 - Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction and Structure

The discussion chapter draws on all evidence from all stages of the research, although most prominent is Stage Two as the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the central focus of this study. The original research question to answer was: **‘What are parents’ and SENCOs’ experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?’** However, through the iterative process of data analysis this has led to refining the original broader question into three more specific research questions. This is based on the emerging lines of argument in 4.3.7.3 which were then subsequently developed in 4.4. This approach aligns to the emergent nature of IPA, whereby engagement with the data on a cyclical basis leads to different levels of interpretation and movement through these ‘levels to a deeper analysis, as it progresses’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022: 30).

Co-production is central to this study and is central in the current governmental policy proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Co-production is a way to address the current issues of parents and SENCOs as being ‘done to’, lacking trust and confidence in the system. However, the data continually reinforced that co-production is not happening in practice and there is much confusion over what co-production is and how to implement this to support participatory decision-making in the management of EHC plans. Soan and Monsen (2023: 120) refer to co-production as ‘a relatively new term being used in educational policy. It is a recent ‘buzzword’ which is frequently misrepresented’. Therefore, this study seeks to gain a better understanding of why this confusion persists in relation to co-production and how this can be enacted in practice by parents and SENCOs.

#### 5.1.1 Revised research questions

From the analysis of Stage One and Stage Two data, three areas emerged as prominent which have informed the development of the more refined research questions to form the basis of the discussion. The three research questions which aim to be answered in this chapter are:

##### **1. How do we value people in the process?**

Findings from the study are presented and discussed to conceptualise the SENCO as a caring educationalist in a values-based profession to oppose the performative driven agenda in current practice. **Co-production will not happen without care.**

##### **2. How do we ensure parents and SENCOs can participate in working relationships?**

Findings from the study are presented and discussed to argue for effective dialogue to

improve working together, with appropriate training and frameworks to enable this to happen in practice. **Co-production will not happen without communication.**

### **3. How do we improve on the parents' and SENCOs' levels of decision-making in the process?**

Findings from the study are presented and discussed to call for a change in power differences and the systemic structures the SEND system sits within to provide some level of choice. Decision-making is not an event, but a process, therefore how we support participatory decision-making is of primary importance. **Co-production will not happen without choice.**

As data is drawn upon from all stages of the research in this Chapter, the participants are explicitly identified as parents and SENCOs and will also have an identifier for any direct quotations with parent (\_p) or SENCO (\_s) after their name to ensure clarity.

#### 5.1.2 Complexity and the 'art' of practice

Throughout the discussion the term 'art of' is used to refer to key ideas being presented e.g. the art of caring, the art of communication and the art of decision-making. This is deliberate because what is very apparent from the findings is the levels of complexity involved. SENCOs cannot be simply trained in undertaking co-production. The following areas of complexity are addressed in the discussion:

- **The complexity of caring:** Valuing people and working in person centred ways is underpinned by an ethos. It requires time and investment to build, maintain and sometimes repair relationships;
- **The complexity of communication:** Communication over the EHC needs assessment process and plan can be an emotional experience, sometimes involving complex, frustrating or difficult situations for both parents and SENCOs. In some cases situations can mean communication is taking place with potentially vulnerable individuals requiring sensitivity and a repertoire of communication skills to be adopted by stakeholders;
- **The complexity of decision making:** The culture and structures underpinning decision making are influential. Participatory decision-making is not a simple transactional event, it is a process and requires understanding that it is ongoing and dialogic.

Therefore, the term 'art' represents the notion of undertaking a considered act in practice. It represents something that is crafted and deliberate. This could include an act, knowledge or skill that is shaped and reflective not something that is simply learnt and applied.



## 5.2 Research Question 1: How do we value people in the process?

Findings from the study are presented and discussed to conceptualise the SENCO as a caring educationalist in a values-based profession to oppose the performative driven agenda in current practice. **Co-production will not happen without care.**

### 5.2.1 Person-centred and the art of caring

#### 5.2.1.1 *Care within education*

##### ***'children are supposed to be at the heart of it' (Amber\_s 0.20)***

Co-production will not happen without a values-based, or person-centred approach. This essentially relies on those involved in the process placing people as central and 'caring' for them. I argue that care is vital to an individual's wellbeing, which also links to the notion of care as being essential within education.

In his seminal work, Rogers (1995: 117) refers to an inherent need in every being as dependent on 'a basic trust in human beings, and in all organisms ... there is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement towards constructive fulfilment of its inherent possibilities.' Therefore, as persons are accepted and prized (or valued) they develop a more caring attitude towards themselves. As they are emphatically heard, they then listen more accurately leading to understanding and valuing themselves. This process leads to the self becoming more congruent with their experience and therefore more real, genuine and 'there is a greater freedom to be the true, whole person' (Rogers, 1995: 117). From this position, care is vital to our sense of self and self-growth. Similarly, Noddings (2012: 234) argues that: 'longing to be cared for ... whether it is manifested as a need for love, physical care, respect, or mere recognition – is the fundamental starting point for the ethic of care.'

With this in mind, care is relational, and dependent upon our exchanges with others. Noddings (2012: 233) argues that we should '[a]lways act so as to establish, maintain or enhance caring relations' which reinforces the mutability of this philosophy, basically: '[h]ow good I can be depends at least in part on how you treat me' (Noddings, 2012: 236). This is a key aspect to consider with regards to person-centred approaches because there has to be another person who is given fair prominence in the interactions taking place. Noddings identified: '[t]he ethic of care rejects the notion of a truly autonomous moral agent and accepts the reality of moral interdependence. Our goodness and our growth are inextricably bound to that of others we encounter.' (Noddings, 2012: 245). Therefore, adopting this perspective means any social process (which would include education) is influenced by care.

The prominence of 'care' as a nourishing property for growth and development within education is therefore essential and should not be underestimated. Arguably, teaching as a profession, is desirable because individuals are invested in principles of social justice and an egalitarian positioning. The explicit inclusion of 'care' within education can be powerful as Noddings' (2012: 235) argues: '[i]f all children, both girls and boys, are raised to be competent carers and sensitive cared-fors, exploitation should be rare.' Therefore, the underpinning ethos of education as embedding the ethic of care will serve to 'prevent the very separation that induces the dualisms exploiter/exploited, oppressor/oppressed, moral agent/object, and so on' (Noddings, 2012: 236).

As well as seeing care as essential to education of children, I would argue the underpinning principle of care relates to all the relationships we encounter in schools. If the ultimate aim is to work with others to foster a caring educational environment, it is important to foster a caring ethos. Hellawell (2019: 95) refers to the 'ethical obligation to work together in the best interests of the child or young person' and so individuals being able to care for one another in a respectful, dignified way is fundamental. How parents and SENCOs interact will influence outcomes for themselves as well as the children in schools. However, the findings of the study reinforced the notion that performative aspects of education have driven out the opportunity for educationalist to be able to 'care', and as a result this is hindering SENCOs being able to work with children and families in a person-centred way to enable co-production.

#### *5.2.1.2 Authentic caring interactions*

***'when I say listen, I mean, really listening, not just nod of the head'*** (BonnieAdv\_p 56.33).

Being authentic in the way in which we care for others is important, but because care is relational, it can be perceived in different ways despite the intentions of the care-giver, 'there are no recipes for caring. Cultural and personal differences will result in different manifestations of care' (Noddings, 2012: 233). Caring for others is not simplistic and can be considered as an 'art' because it requires investment and is not a simple transactional process. Care, to some degree will depend upon the values of individuals in their professional roles and their ability and willingness to adopt a person-centred approach in practice. As outlined in the literature review, Rogers (1995: 116) referred to three conditions required for person-centred therapy to create a growth-promoting climate, this included:

1. Genuineness or 'congruence'
2. Acceptance or 'unconditional positive regard'
3. Empathetic understanding

These three aspects are not distinct to therapy but could be argued as underpinning person-centred practice across disciplines. In this section of the chapter, genuineness or ‘congruence’ is explored in relation to professional practice and the working environment and how this relates to care. However, challenges related to tensions in professional identity and how this can impact on authenticity, will be explored more fully in section 5.2.2.3.

There were many examples of SENCOS as genuinely considerate of the children and families they were working with, and demonstrated sincere care based on their comments, for example: *‘these kids matter, do you know what I mean? They become part of your family, don’t they?’* (Clara\_s 21.44). However, this did not always translate into authentic or sincere interactions with parents due to the system limiting their ability to demonstrate this position in practice as noted by Carmen: *‘Yeah, you participate in the proceedings, but are you included and is it person centred? Not really’* (Carmen\_p 0.40). This resulted in tokenistic exchanges taking place as identified by Bethany: *‘And because we’re all time starved, we will do exactly what it says on the tin’* (Bethany– 33.43). The systemic challenges, such as lack of time, stopped SENCOS from presenting as authentic due to the demands of the role limiting conditions for care (or a person-centred approach) to take place. This in turn served to devalue others and ultimately disincorporated working together. Therefore, a working environment which is values based, with genuine person-centred approaches is essential for co-production. People will not be able to engage in trusting, open communication if they feel devalued, unimportant and treated in a perfunctory or tokenistic way.

As well as professional identity influencing the portrayal of congruence (discussed further in 5.2.2.3), the actions that professionals take, or do not take, also influences perceptions on how caring they are. For example, Weinstein *et al.* (2021: 3) identify how essential ‘genuine’ listening is when responding to others, they note: *‘[l]istening cannot be reduced to performing a series of techniques from an automated script. Rather these techniques must be used in conjunction with genuine interest and caring for the individual speaking, even if only while listening to that conversation.’* They also cite Tyler’s (2011) work noting research has shown that speakers can detect non-genuine listeners, which leads to them not reacting well in those circumstances. Indeed, Bethany referred to teachers as *‘not particularly good listeners or observers’* (Bethany\_s 7.53).

The level of control SENCOS face through the system, and the requirement placed on them to perform certain actions, such as the requirements for specific paperwork tasks could influence the level of congruence perceived by parents. Amelia referred to the Appendix A as *‘Some of the questions did seem a bit I don’t know, just seem like they would put in just to fluff up the parents’* (Amelia\_p 17.53).

This sense of insincerity due to experiencing a controlled process is similar to Weinstein, DeHaan and Ryan's (2010) findings when they conducted an experiment with helpers, where the helpers were either autonomously motivated, or controlled. The results of this study showed there was more gratitude and positive reactions to those helpers who were autonomously motivated, which could be an indication of the ability of the individuals who received the help to discern when people are authentic in their actions. Hellawell (2019: 91) refers to ethical discernment as opening up 'spaces between these contradictions of care and control' with one aspect of ethical discernment as differentiating between performativity as a 'terror' and a 'form of agency'. She cites Banks' (2014) work regarding the growth of ethics in the field of social care and how Banks questions if this offers a critique to performativity or if it serves as a feature of it, by noting whether: 'ethics is promoted as part of the resistance to an erosion of values-based professionalism, or in order to ensure conformity' (Hellawell, 2019: 65). It was clear in the findings of this study that parents were able to determine when interactions were not genuine and tokenistic in nature. Even when insincerity is far from the intention of the professional, the responses from the professionals are mediated based on the context in which they are working. This controlled situation impacts on levels of care possible in the interactions taking place and is clearly perceptible to the recipients.

## 5.2.2 The performative requirement

### 5.2.2.1 *Rainbows to ruin?*

***'the SENCO goes away, and spends a couple of days on their own in an office, gleaning through everything they can find in the file to write a powerful, a powerful piece of evidence collating everything they can... you end up doing in isolation, because you just need to get it done.'* (Bethany\_s 23.15).**

The political context is always going to be a driving factor in the direction of education because it is currently based on a system where the elected government has control. Soan and Monsen (2023: 75) draw on the work of Smith *et al.* (2018) to refer to the short-sighted term of office plans as opposed to longer term strategic plans for education because '[v]isions have been written but then quietly disappear if another political agenda is introduced, causing confusion and disruption to local authorities, school leaders, teachers and parents/carers'. We are operating within a political arena which is currently market driven and performative in nature in opposition to an inclusive education system. An example of the political influences over the level of performative drive evident in education is explored in this section of the chapter.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families included a rainbow as their logo (DCSF, 2007a) on their documentation (**Figure 12**), this was a Labour Government initiative which aligned to the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007b) which was introduced from 2007 along with the new branding of the

department as the DCSF. The focus was to improve the education, health and happiness of children with the report acknowledging families as central to that endeavour. When the new Education Secretary Michael Gove came into power in May 2010 as part of the Coalition Government, the department was renamed the Department for Education and the logo was removed.



**Figure 12: Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007a) logo**

During their period of opposition, the Conservatives had nicknamed the DCSF the ‘Department for Curtains and Soft Furnishings’ (Shepherd, 2010 np), this mockery, along with the sharp change in direction led to some concerns that the rebranding by Gove ‘could mean that children and families will now become a lower priority for ministers’ (Shepherd, 2010 np). In fact, the editor of *Children's Services Weekly* stated: ‘Because children and families are no longer mentioned, we have gone back to talking about a service, rather than the children and their families. Children and families must remain at the heart of what the department does. Children's services will now become a subset of education and that inevitably could mean that some schools might just want to do teaching and learning’ (Shepard, 2010 np). Labour, of course, could be equally critiqued during their term of office for sharing in the neoliberalist journey despite the rhetoric of inclusion. Armstrong (2005: 136) claims that their policy ‘on inclusion is characterised by incongruities with the broader, reconceptualisation of educational values in terms of the values of performativity, uncritical notions of ‘academic standards’ and the role of education as a producer of human capital.’ I argue therefore that the pathway towards a neoliberalist, performative position was paved prior to the Coalition Government taking office, but then solidified with the rebranding and a shift away from children and families as being a central focus of government. It could be argued that the change in government agenda shifted the focus to push up educational standards – which can be viewed as a positive. Yet, the rebranding and removal of rainbows (DCFS) may be symbolic in the shift towards an increased neoliberalist position focused on performative requirements (DfE). Essentially, the progressive shift towards a more obvious performative drive in education served to further diminish care in the system. The potential dangers of this path were forewarned in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century by Rousseau (1755) who referred to competition and power as influencing moral behaviors in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. He refers to how ‘the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labour,

slavery and wretchedness.’ (cited in Dent, 2005: 66). Today, education is increasingly marketized and uneven and unfair in its distribution, which possibly leads to immoral behaviors.

#### 5.2.2.2 *Performative drive devaluing individuals*

***‘I think the application process itself is quite bizarre, isn't it, because when you do the application, you're doing an application as if it was going to panel as opposed to just what it should be. This child's got special needs, and they need special provision.’ (Bethany\_s 30:21)***

The findings of this study aligned with the recent reviews in SEND (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) in identifying the lack of confidence parents have in the system (Parents GET1: Sub-theme 2 - Inadequate provision and practice). However, what was evident in the findings, but not explicitly noted in the new policy proposals is the tension between performative requirements and valuing people.

Schools being primarily driven by academic achievement is not new, Armstrong (2005) cited the seminal work of Rutter *et al.* (1979) from over 40 years ago on school effectiveness noting: ‘government preoccupations with academic achievement rather than upon what is perhaps more illuminative from the standpoint of inclusive schooling, namely the social and affective dimensions of children’s experiences of schooling’ (Armstrong, 2005: 146). Yet I would argue that this persistent issue with an increasing focus on performance, is possibly leading to a more hostile educational environment as schools, and more broadly society, become more competitive and less inclusive to the detriment of valuing children and families. Current policy creates a tension between performative targets and inclusion supported by Soan and Monsen (2023: 28) who refer to the ‘notion of personalized learning for pupils with SEN [as] not consistent with the aims of the national curriculum and school performance measures.’ The evident polarisations in the current DfE/DoHSC (2023) proposals may exist because we are trying to make something fit into a structure which it is not suited for. For example, making caring professionals fit in a business model, ‘*Because it is a business at the end of the day*’ (Bonnie\_p 17.32). The *SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan* (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 71) propose ‘a national and local inclusion dashboard that will present timely performance data across education, health and care.’ Accountability is important, but does this further endorse a performative drive, which is in opposition to the DfE/DoHSC (2023: 7) vision of ‘a more inclusive society that celebrates and enables success in all forms’.

It could be argued that performative drive, based in consumerist ideology, is not only evident in the political direction for education but also in wider services and society, and is therefore unavoidable. Other public services have shown evidence of this direction of travel. The Francis Report (2013) evidenced the reduction in care in the health service due to the focus on marketisation highlighting a ‘culture focused on doing the system’s business – not that of the patients’ (Francis, 2013: 4). This was

followed by the recommendation to '[f]oster a common culture shared by all in the service of putting the patient first' (Francis, 2013: 4). The detrimental impact noted by Francis (2013) illustrates how this neoliberalist shift in the health service, which is explicitly a 'caring profession', due to the need to be cost-effective and meet targets, reduces the significance of 'care' as being central in the profession. Additionally, in social care there is evidence of performative requirements diminishing services with 'the undue importance given to performance indicators and targets which provide only part of the picture of practice, and which have skewed attention to process over the quality and effectiveness of help given' (Munro, 2011: 6). Professionals contributing to the review explained that 'statutory guidance, targets and local rules have become so extensive that they limit their ability to stay childcentred' (Munro, 2011: 6). Ury (2007: xi) notes how this performative drive in society pervades everything, resulting in an 'astronomical increase in the demands being made on each of us in this era of overload and overwork' for all of us. This has been highlighted in the SENCOs workload report (Curran *et al.*, 2020) with 74% of SENCOs reporting the disproportionate amount of time they spend on administrative duties. One SENCO's response highlighted the impact this drive had on the ability to work with children and families: 'I cannot bear the fact that I now spend my time doing paperwork and not using my skills, experience and understanding of learners with additional needs to work with learners, work with colleagues, to support learners with additional needs or be co-productive with parents of learners with additional needs' (Curran *et al.*, 2020: 10). What was central to the findings of this study, and also claimed by Ury is the 'eroding ethics' which is resultant of the societal shift favouring performative outcomes over care for others.

The findings in this study illustrated that paperwork is being prioritised over people, which compounds a sense of feeling undervalued (SENCOs GET1 and Parents GET1). This aligns to Sales and Vincent's (2018 :67-68) findings, which identified that professionals were concerned 'that outcomes of the process do not necessarily reflect the child's needs but rather are influenced by factors such as the extent to which the child is considered 'high profile'<sup>13</sup>, the ability of a parent to advocate on behalf of a child, and concerns about how provision will be funded.' Therefore, a child's needs are not necessarily perceived as providing sufficient evidence to proceed with EHC needs assessment. The system is open to misconduct and inequalities in that decisions are made on how well the specific criteria is evidenced and met in the paperwork. This tension highlights a wholly unjust system. It may also illustrate how SEN is being forced to align as a system of choice and commodity which could be

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<sup>13</sup> This does not necessarily mean they have great needs than other children. They have been highlighted and foregrounded in the system by parents, professionals and /or the state. This relates to the subjective nature of identifying and then determining needs of an individual and the consideration as to who has power over this process.

perceived as more neoliberalist rather than inclusive and egalitarian. Tomlinson's (2012) account of the 'rise of the SEN Industry' illustrates this refocus on economic growth and 'the economic imperative to raise educational and skill levels for all these young people, even the more unpromising groups for whom 30 years ago this was not a priority' (Tomlinson, 2012: 283). This causes a tension in the system because the way in which it is currently structured 'requires the services of an army of special professionals from the early years to college courses and beyond, for those who find difficulty in modern competitive education systems' (Tomlinson, 2012: 269). It could be argued that education as a shift from 'a social good to that of an economic good' (Hellowell, 2019: 91) as preparation for working life is not necessarily a bad thing. However, what is concerning is the potential negative impact on person-centred practice and consideration of individuals' values, which results in poor treatment of parents and SENCOs and ultimately children in schools. Currently, there is an unsolvable conflict between special and inclusive education as not being compatible (Armstrong, 2005; Slee, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012; Hellowell, 2019; Soan and Monsen 2023) and this tension results in people not being placed as central and cared for in the system. As Slee (2011: 155) argued, 'inclusive education needs to be decoupled from special education.'

Therefore, the finding illustrated that the marketisation of education and performative requirements structures impede care and '[t]he consequences may be reductionist thinking about 'what counts', undermining of collaborative working, distorted priorities and 'ritual practices' and sometimes forms of cheating' (Hellowell, 2019: 48). Mearns and Thorne discuss the education system specifically and identify how performance standards begin in primary schools and permeate the system through tertiary education, with academic achievement as the 'single measure of a schools' effectiveness' (2010: 6) and 'universities are now in effect business enterprises' (2010: 7). They state: 'students are no longer simply students, but part of a commercial empire' (2010:7). It is important to note that change was needed in ensuring that educational establishments are providing quality education, but this has come at a cost and has potentially now gone too far because caring for people is 'being forgotten in the interests of economy or in the frenzy to achieve so-called results' (2010:7). In reality this may be inescapable due to increased marketisation within society as evidenced in the increase in performative drive as taking priority across all caring professions (Francis, 2013; Mearns and Thorne, 2010; Munro, 2011; Soan and Monsen, 2023).



### 5.2.2.3 Professional identity and the performative environment

***'SENCO, you're kind of I've always felt it's a funny opposition, you're kind of in the middle. So you're advocating for the child and the family, but you're also part of the school in it.'***  
**(Bethany\_s 4.25).**

The findings illustrated SENCOs as experiencing a tension between the performative environment in which they are operating and their core values. As Hellowell (2019: 47) identified, the 'current SEND framework does not simply change what people do, but also who they are'. The current SEND system and the wider societal drive for performative outcomes impacts on the ability of the professional to work in co-productive ways. Cochrane and Soni (2020: 385) note that the SENCOs' knowledge 'has been highlighted as key to the success of the EHC process'. Yet even when there is knowledge of person-centred practice and co-production, this is not applied in practice due to prohibitive structures. SENCOs verbalised what they knew *should* happen in practice and what they wanted to implement, yet they continually experienced conflict based on what they had to do to meet statutory requirements. Hellowell (2019) refers to the way in which professional ethics can be in contrast to professional regulations and codes of practice. She identified that codes of practice can be a way to ensure ethics is regulated and 'conforming to externally defined standards, rather than based on mutual trust' (Hellowell, 2019: 65). Often, this was in conflict with their professional values, but it was often positioned as the only way to get the job done, as reinforced by Bethany's experience: '*we will do exactly what it says on the tin. If it prompts us to do that, we will fill that in, if it prompts us to do something different, we would then be forced to change our practice*' (Bethany\_s 33.43). This tension of knowing how to work in person-centred ways, but being limited by the system in which they are operating, served to impact upon their professional identity because they were always balancing the requirements and/or needs of others to meet competing demands. This was evidenced with Bethany's comment: '*you're kind of I've always felt it's a funny opposition, you're kind of in the middle. So you're advocating for the child and the family, but you're also part of the school in it*' (Bethany\_s 4.25). Mearns and Thorne (2010: 2) identified this tension for therapists as they negotiated 'legitimate but often obsessive concern for higher standards, public accountability and cost-effective results' against a forced situation 'to adopt attitudes or pursue attitudes which are radically at variance with their core values and beliefs.'

This degree of internal conflict elicits 'emotive dissonance' (Hochschild, 2012: 90) which I would argue can have a very serious impact on professional wellbeing and ability to work effectively. Under the first condition of Rogers' (1995: 115) position for a person-centred approach, he claims the therapist or individual, needs to be transparent to the client by 'openly being the feelings and attitudes that are

flowing within at the moment.’ Yet, these findings illustrated this open, transparent approach to facilitate person-centred practice is not possible. SENCOs often hide or mediate their feelings, for example: *‘I’ve been there where I’m listening to a parent and I’m thinking I totally agree with you. And I would love to be able to give, you know, I can see the provision is here, we’re doing our best to meet it. And you’re right, we’re not really because you know, they’re in a mixed ability set, and I haven’t got support and the teacher, teacher, I’ve tried with the teacher, they just don’t get it’* (Bethany\_s 7.53). Gore’s (2016) research claimed SENCOs are forced into a position of hiding their true emotions due to the highly emotional demands placed upon them by the role. Her findings were informed by Hochschild’s (1983) theory on Emotional Labor (EL – please note the Americanised spelling) with regards to how feelings are commercialized to sell ‘for a wage’ (Hochschild, 2012: 7). EL becomes evident when individuals ‘induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 2012: 7). This aspect of practice has also been identified in Richards’ (2022: 4-5) more recent study where she notes the: ‘match or mismatch between practice/work and ethos/approach, finding that teachers, in keeping with other professions where caring is central, can experience conflicts between their work and their values and identity.’ EL aligns to the findings of this research, yet it presents a challenge in how person-centred practice is enacted. In contrast to Rogers’ position on congruence as fundamental to enacting person centred practice, EL theory refers to pushing the “‘real self” further inside, making it more inaccessible’ (Hochschild, 2012: 34).

This inability to be able to reveal the true self presents challenges for professionals in presenting as authentic or displaying ‘congruence’ in their practice. Lin *et al.* (2023: 820) refers to Day’s (2011) longitudinal study on the development of teachers’ identity involving a complex ‘interplay of sociocultural/policy, workplace/institutional and personal factors.’ Additionally, the SENCO role has ‘broadened and widened with multidimensional responsibilities’ (Lin *et al.*, 2023: 821-822) illustrating further levels of complexity surrounding professional identity. It could be argued these inherent complexities could stimulate tensions between a reactionary personal response and a required response for the professional situation. Mearns and Thorne (2010: 4) also referred to ‘new capitalism’ and how the ‘relentless competitiveness, is depriving many workers of fixed reference points for stabilizing their sense of who they are.’ Hochschild’s (1983) work on Emotional Labor questions the authenticity of a professional when they have to elicit emotional responses for the purposes of their employment. Authenticity is lacking when ‘[w]orkers who refuse to perform emotional labor are said to “go into robot”’ (Hochschild, 2012: 129). This notion of working conditions impacting on identity was further supported by Nias’ (1989) research on the ways in which a particular historical context

impacts on teachers' perceptions. Her seminal work proposed concepts of the substantial and the situational self, and concluded that England in the 1980s encouraged socialisation of teachers into a culture of 'individualism, isolation and a belief in one's own autonomy and the investment of personal resources' (Nias, 1989: 13). Nias' claims have since been drawn upon by Passy (2013: 1064) who refers to the substantive self as incorporating 'self-defining beliefs, values and attitudes at the core of both person and professional' and the situated self as 'reacting to and interacting with others in social situations'. A conflict occurs between the substantive self and values and expectations of policy reforms when policy is directive and focused on specific competencies and behaviours, because this encourages professionals to adopt behaviours where there is no commitment to intrinsic values. A 'marketable self' forms, because professionals are subject to a 'world in which others decide the nature and purpose of their profession' (Passy, 2013: 1066). Alexander (2010: 411) argues that as a result of this environment teachers are willing to 'comply and implement' and are deficient in the 'skill, or will, to improvise'. This makes it very difficult to be authentic in oneself and authentic when caring for others. Ryan and Deci (2017: 309) highlight the importance of authenticity in relationships arguing that it 'is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and lower strain', which is arguably a better context for all interactions taking place (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 309). Furthermore, they identify that 'in high quality close relationships one is able to be oneself – this is, to be the person we authentically want to be' supporting the notion that the less conflict between the true (or substantive) self and the professional (or situated) self the better. Yet, it could be argued that portraying an authentic (or substantive) self may not be possible in the current capitalist society in which we live. Mearns and Thorne (2010: 5) acknowledge the vulnerability of this environment and the 'risk of being deemed weak, inadequate or dispensable. Authenticity (a prerequisite for mental health) becomes dangerous'.

### 5.2.3 SENCO as a caring educationalist

#### 5.2.3.1 *The detrimental impact of the lack of care*

***'And I basically got ripped apart by the EP who said, you're questioning my authority. How the hell you know, you trust me that I'm doing my job. It was awful. And basically, I end up in tears saying I'm only trying to do the best for the child.'* (Amber\_s 4.05).**

The findings showed a detrimental impact to parents and SENCOs in managing the system without sufficient care. There were highly emotional accounts including in the worst cases examples of trauma and illegal, exclusionary practices for children and parents (Section 4.2.3.3 - Parents and SENCOs are powerless to address the inequalities in the system). The lack of care is having and will continue to have a seriously detrimental impact on individuals if this is not addressed. Mearns and Thorne (2010: 5) identify the organisation and society as culpable in this failure where: 'exhausted employees who

only too readily blame themselves for their lack of resilience or inability to survive in a context that seems to ignore their needs as human beings and treats them instead as machines devoid of feelings’.

Essentially care, involving qualities such as compassion and empathy are essential when working in highly emotional contexts with complexities of people and their lives. Opportunities for care are forced out of the system by performative demands (as noted in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2) and reduces the opportunities for professional investment, such as relevant and appropriate training for professionals and resources, such as time and space to provide psychological safety. Values-based practice is complex and will not happen without these aspects being explicitly addressed and embedded in practice. The cost may be presented as a barrier to embedding such practices that might not yield immediate data on impact and outcomes, but what is clear is the cost of not embedding these practices as far higher. The local authorities are not currently able to meet their high-needs funding requirements (National Audit Office, 2019) and the tribunal costs for 2020-21 were almost £60 million (Jemal and Kenley, 2023). Additionally, the high-level of children excluded from education, which was four times higher for children with SEND in 2022 (DfE, 2022), undoubtedly leads to poor life outcomes, unemployment or even entering the penal system.

There has been an increase in funding for pupils with high needs, but this has not kept pace with the rise of the number of pupils who have more significant needs (National Audit Office, 2019) There was a 32.4% real-terms reduction in funding for each pupil with high needs between 2013-14 and 2017-18 (National Audit Office, 2019). The locally authorities were facing an estimated funding gap of £600 million in 2022-2023 (Local Government Association, 2024). As highlighted in Sales and Vincent’s (2018:75) study, ‘the discrepancy between identifying a need, and subsequently meeting that need through appropriate provision, is unlikely to be fully resolved without also addressing resourcing issues.’

Based on the National Audit Office’s (2019) findings, local Authorities are using the dedicated schools grant reserves in order to meet the high-needs funding requirements. The schools forums who oversee the allocation of funds are however increasingly unwilling to agree such transfers because in real terms this is reducing the funding for provisions in mainstream. The ‘weaknesses in mainstream schools’ support is likely to lead to growth in the demand for EHC plans and more costly special school placements’ (National Audit Office, 2019: 6). We need to redress the balance so that mainstream provisions are sufficiently resourced to provide appropriate education and care for children with SEN and their families so they aren’t deprived, disadvantaged or excluded entirely.

### 5.2.3.2 Education-care

**'working with organic, vulnerable, fragile people.'** (Carmen\_p 46.15).

Based on the findings of this research, I would posit the term 'education care' in considering the future direction of the role of the SENCO. We have 'health care' and 'social care' therefore, the term 'education care' is an equivalent term and proposes a new way to conceptualise the SENCOs' position within education.

Although the SENCO role is grounded in education, it encompasses a greater demand now, such as taking on safeguarding and well-being responsibilities or even social care requirements. These demands are more akin to the 'Caring Professions'. It could therefore be argued that the SENCO role goes beyond the typical care a teacher would provide, to encompass care for the wider family and well-being of the child more holistically. It is important for professionals not to cross the boundaries of their discipline such as taking on health and social care responsibilities without having appropriate training, however, in practice this is what is happening on a daily basis. SENCOs (and wider school staff) are continually placed in the position of managing broader issues such as housing, poverty, addiction and as Sharpe (2020: 212) claims, taking up the duties of 'social worker, carer, and counsellor'. It is key to have a balance where a values-based approach is central, but for SENCOs this needs to be within the realms of education and within the realms of professionals' expertise. Within education 'care' is important and central for person-centred practice, but taking on additional responsibilities outside of levels of training and competence is not. SENCOs acting as counsellors or social workers may lead to conflicts in professional identity and a sense of competence. In the worst case scenarios, it could lead to detrimental outcomes for children and families. Interestingly, Sharpe's (2020: 239) research claims SENCOs are 'qualified to exercise this boundary-crossing from education to social working'. However, there could be a level of discomfort in taking on roles outside professional levels of expertise. Amber's experience illustrated the tension when she was compromised in this way: *'then I ended up rewriting the EHCP. And I was like, that's not a SENCOs' remit. And that worries me, because then the EHCP published is based on me'* (Amber\_s 4.05). Arguably, there needs to be clear boundaries to ensure that SENCOs are not taking on more responsibilities, but are able to work effectively with professionals who do have skills in social work and counselling etc.

What was evident from the findings was SENCOs and parents who had been involved in health and social care models and ways of working had greater understanding of person-centred practice, illustrating that there is much we can adopt from the wider care sector to support practice. It is useful to consider the values-based approach and frameworks in place for these services as well as the notion of a 'caring profession'. Considering the SENCO role as an educational-care profession within

education may be a useful shift to adopt more sensitive and caring approaches. How we communicate as professionals is really crucial, insincerity or perfunctory processes are seen immediately by those on the receiving end.

Despite the term 'care' already being explicit in both 'health care' and 'social care' the damaging direction of performative agenda has led to care as being seen as secondary to targets and cuts to illicit immediate, visible 'value for money' (Mearns and Thorne, 2010; Munro, 2011; Francis, 2013). This challenge across services reinforces the need to make the term 'care' central to what we do in 'health' and 'social' services and more explicit within education. Ignoring the issue and people will enable the problems to continue to the detriment of society as a whole. Language can be powerful as evident in the rebranding of the DCSF to the DFE. The term 'education care' includes language of care as a deliberate shift in focus from the marketized performative driven agenda to a focus on placing the care of people as central.

Therefore, the re-focus on education as 'education care' aims to acknowledge the difference in the SENCO role now (encompassing a wider remit) and also to address this issue across education, (alongside the other caring sectors), to look at the profession through a different lens and to address the challenges by providing a person-centred offer to children and families. Richards' (2022) claims that the SENCO role needs to be considered as a profession distinct in the ways in which other professions with professional bodies are recognised (e.g. general practitioners, counsellors etc.) because they complete very specialised work: they are 'the EHC plan implementation enablers' (Richards, 2022: 16).

#### 5.2.3.3 Self-care

***'this year, it almost has been a bit if you like, damaging on me, especially in terms of my reputation.'* (Amber\_s 20.20).**

Caring for the self as well as caring for others is essential. The findings of this research demonstrated the process is highly emotional for both parents and SENCOs (Section 4.3.2.7.1.1). Richards (2022: 5) refers to 'mitigating the challenges with emotional effort' as a difficult balance to maintain which 'requires particular emotional qualities'.

Hochschild (2012) refers to three conditions workers can take in relation to Emotional Labor (EL). The first is to identify entirely with work, but this risks burnout. The second is to identify the self from the job but there is a risk of blaming oneself for being an actor and not sincere in this condition. The third condition for a worker is that they can distinguish themselves from the 'act'. Yet this risks estrangement because it leads to being 'illusion makers' (Hochschild, 2012: 187). He claims that the greater the sense

of control, the reduction in the risk of harm. This is similar to the position of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which includes the term ‘competence’ to refer to a sense of ‘effectance and mastery. People need to feel able to operate effectively within their important life contexts.’ (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 11). Having a sense of competence is important to fulfilment in professional roles and professional identities. ‘the personal and emotional aspects of SENCo work, including EHC plan implementation, can be unseen, unrecognised and undervalued, and it is suggested that there is a need to recognise, prioritise and address the need for emotional and moral support of SENCos.’ (Richards, 2022: 16).

With a wider remit on the role of the SENCO it is also essential to consider the SENCO’s care needs as well as parents. The findings of this study illustrated the highly emotional and in some cases psychologically demanding nature of the role would endorse supervision as a consideration for SENCOs’ wellbeing. Richards’ (2022) research claims supervision should be considered for SENCOs in the same way in which it is in place for care professions because ‘[p]rofessionals whose central role involves caring, access clinical supervision to support wellbeing and practice and professions have bodies and organisations that act as information and support hub’ (Richards, 2022: 16). She claims reflection and debriefing work as ‘mechanisms to support the practitioners and enhance practice. However, such provision is only available on an informal basis for SENCos. This is a deeply concerning situation, especially when combined with recent findings of increased emotional need in children with SEND’ (Richards, 2022: 15).

#### 5.2.3.4 *Quantifying care*

***‘the only thing the only thing that galvanised systems into action was not non-attendance at school. The only only thing that people started caring about even though I was raising problems for years’ (Carmen\_p 17.43)***

Measuring the benefits of care and a person-centred approach is difficult to quantify. In a society driven by performance targets it is more challenging to measure the impact the merits of intangible aspects that are not easily quantifiable like ‘care’. There are two positions to consider, which include:

1. How important is care to us as a society?
2. How important are measuring outcomes and accountability?

Firstly, in considering the importance of care to us as a society it is worth reviewing foundational principles of the new social contract for education presented by UNESCO (2021: 7), namely: ‘Assuring the right to quality education throughout life’ and ‘Strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good.’ They go on to comment on how this can be realised and state: ‘We will build a new social contract for education through millions of individual and collective acts – acts of courage,

leadership, resistance, creativity, and care' (UNESCO, 2021: 10). Arguably, care is important and by not caring the costs will be much greater in the longer term. Crucially, Munro (2011: 10) noted that '[h]elping children is a human process. When the bureaucratic aspects of work become too dominant, the heart of the work is lost.' Of course, feelings are difficult to measure, but it does not mean they should be ignored or devalued, Mearns and Thorne (2010: 75) note that perhaps it is 'anti-intellectual to reveal vulnerability and the need for validating relationships', yet vulnerability is part of all of us and needs to be recognised not seen as undervalued.

Secondly, if we value processes such as monitoring, outcomes and accountability, then we need to consider how we can 'quantify' or measure care. It could be argued that we would not want to endorse a position where public funds are not monitored, might be misappropriated or misspent because it could so easily lead to corruption. Not everything is easily measurable, it is important to consider what happens if we only value what is measurable. We therefore need a sensible balance in measuring and 'quantifying' what we do. In a context where everything has to be quantified and measured, we need to acknowledge care as different, but still having value, despite challenges with measuring and quantifying short term outcomes. Cost effectiveness of resources and the outcomes of interventions are measured and professionals are accountable, which is important, but this can become reductive and focused on quick fixes. Trying to 'fix' families in a time-limited term intervention, rigidly following prescriptive approaches can place an enormous strain on professionals and services when these outcomes are not immediately visible. Carmen's experiences illustrated this when she referred the pressure to cut funds when improvements were identified, but it is not that simple: *'county still fight every year. Oh, you're done, how's it going with XXX (Professional's name)? Is coming to an end? No XXX (reference to a specific approach) framework and working with developmental trauma is a long term plan.'* (Carmen\_p 15.13). Hellawell (2019: 132) refers to the challenges with measuring outcomes and the inability to be certain of outcomes for individuals which 'cannot be guaranteed merely by designing technically smart targets or by following particular instructions of prescriptive codes.' Or, as in Carmen's account, by following specified timeframes for support because some may need longer, more, less or different in the approaches.

SEND proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 29) present a 'Case Study – Lincolnshire Young Voices' evidencing successful co-production at local authority level. This illustrates it is not something that can be captured in short-term targets and quantifiable data. Realistically, the measurable outcomes for embedding care and person-centred approaches are likely to be evidenced in the longer term, and particularly so due to the persistent and deep-rooted societal issues that need to be addressed in the current SEND system. They will not be turned around through a short-term measurable intervention.



Interestingly, Mearns and Thorne (2010: 75) frame person-centred therapy as often being viewed as anti-intellectual because 'it opens wide the doors to the expression of feelings and the experience of intimacy engendered by acceptance and understanding.' They present the argument that the 'concentrated effort required to understand and accept another person leaves little room for debate, argument, analysis, evaluative judgement and other behaviours commonly associated with intellectual discourse and rational processes' (Mearns and Thorne, 2010: 75). The requirement for 'concentrated effort' may illustrate why it can be a really demanding endeavour to engage with the 'feelings and experience' of others as 'intellectual' and needs real commitment on the part of the professional. However, in response to this position they immediately counter claim that 'empathy and unconditional positive regard invite a willingness to be bold in the world of feelings and a commitment to withholding of judgement in the service of a cherishing compassion' (Mearns and Thorne, 2010: 75). This surely illustrates the value of 'compassion' which from the findings of my research is missing from the current context, as noted by Amelia: *'for her. I'm just another parent. And I know that they're overloaded with that. I do know that. But just it's just, have a bit of compassion sometimes'* (Amelia\_p 20.37).

### 5.3 Research Question 2: How do we ensure parents and SENCOs can participate in working relationships?

Findings from the study are presented and discussed to argue for effective dialogue to improve working together, with appropriate training and frameworks to enable this to happen in practice. **Co-production will not happen without communication.**

#### 5.3.1 Participation in working relationships and the art of communication

##### 5.3.1.1 *Quality relationships are fundamental*

***'it's not always a massive solution. There's sometimes something really fundamental there, but you only get there through relationships.'* (Carmen\_p 46.15).**

The findings in this study illustrated that quality relationships are fundamental and a pre-requisite for co-production to take place. This importance of quality relationships was evident with the relationships between the parents and SENCOs, but also evident in other relationships referred to by both parents and SENCOs, such as the relationships with other professionals and relationships with the local authorities. What became clear is the significance of in-person or face to face relationships as opposed to distant '*amorphous*' (Bethany\_s 18.50) types of relationship. This aligned to the finding of the Lamb (2009: 40) inquiry which noted that '[p]ersonal contact is a key factor for parents of children with SEN and no information system will be valued that does not make provision for face-to-

face communication.'

Relationships serve a basic human need and are fundamental to our growth as humans and productive members of society. A tenet of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is the importance of relationships and relatedness as a basic psychological need and the experience of supportive relationships will directly contribute to our wellness. We are social beings: 'SDT specifically assumes that humans have evolved to be inherently curious, physically active, and deeply social beings' (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 4). This is supported by many studies conducted in the domain of psychology. Harlow's (1958) experiments with primates illustrated the need for maternal closeness to build relationships for healthy developmental growth. The psychological damage experienced by Romanian children when they were deprived of interaction also depicts our need to be nurtured and to form positive relationships with others as essential (Rutter *et al.*, 2007). Bowlby (1958) and further studies in attachment (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970) add support for healthy relationships from infancy, to be able to form healthy relationships later in life. More recently there has been an argument for belongingness as a basic need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) illustrating the continued dependency we have on others as part of our own growth, development and wellness.

Experiencing quality relationships therefore are fundamental and could be considered as part of how we value the individual, which links closely to the position in Section 5.2 arguing for a person-centred, value-based approach to working with others. The importance of quality relationships is not new in relation to working with parents of children with Special Educational Needs and has been embedded in policy for some time (DES, 1978; DfE, 1994; DfES, 2001; DfE/DoH, 2015; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Yet, this continues to be reviewed and critiqued (Lamb, 2009; DfE, 2011; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022). The central finding of this study calls into question what quality relationships are and how we aim to make improvements in the quality relationships between parents and SENCOs in practice. **Table 16** highlights identified elements for quality relationships from theory and policy with associated evidence from this study.

Identified elements for quality relationships from theory and policy	Associated evidence from the study
Personal connections with others and 'relatedness' Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017).  Face to face relationships (Lamb, 2009)	'getting parents to be fully involved is all about the relationship you have with a parent before you even get to the meeting part of it' (Bethany_s 0.57)
Values-based approach which is person-centred (Cahn 2000)  Acceptance through 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1995: 116)	'So unless the professionals around the family truly value the people who are in need, and unless they are open to developing a framework that involves active listening, listening to hear, and to be in a position of we're here to help.' (Carmen_p 4.11)
Trust in relationships (Lamb, 2009; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC 2019)	'So it's about building trust. And sometimes that takes quite a long time' (Bethany_s 4.25)
Openness and transparency (Lamb, 2009; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC 2019)	'it should be an open area where we all like on a zoom, where we can all talk. And we're all in the same room kind of thing' (Amelia_p 1.05)
Being authentic in relationships and actions (Weinstein, DeHaan and Ryan, 2010) Congruence (Rogers, 1995)	'So I think where professionals go wrong, is they come in with their qualification, their training, and they forget to be humbled and curious.' (Carmen_p 48.24)
Mutual respect and dignity (Lamb, 2009; Osborn and Canfor-Dumas, 2018)	'mutual respect, and, and, but most importantly, curiosity.' (Carmen_p 48.24)
Understanding the position of the other person and empathy, such as 'empathetic understanding' (Rogers, 1995: 116)	'So that that notion of the family leading is leading with integrated joined up compassion, focus support, so you're then relying on the professionals to lead follow lead, it's about what is that relationship.' (Carmen_p 3.10)
Psychological safety (Mearns and Thorne, 2010)  Ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2012)	'I felt able and, and, and empowered to kind of go, that's not going to work.' (Carmen_p 39.27)

**Table 16: Identified elements for quality relationships with associated evidence from this study**

### 5.3.1.2 Quality relationships are underpinned by communication

**'you can't have these courageous conversations. Unless you are totally without ego.'**  
(Carmen\_p 48.24)

Quality relationships can only be achieved through communication and so the quality of the communication taking place is key. Conditions for strong, positive relationships to develop, and to be sustained, include the elements noted in **Table 16**. Building these underpinning shared values and understandings does not just happen, it takes time to have conversations, to gain trust, to experience safe spaces for communicating. Communication could be perceived as a medium or conduit for

achieving quality relationships (Hirokawa and Poole, 1996) and therefore, the communicative abilities of professionals and parents is an essential factor influencing outcomes - effective communication is a skilled art.

Osborn and Canfor-Dumas (2018) claim that healthy human relationships are dependent on how we communicate with each other and that this essentially forms the foundations for personal happiness, effective collaboration and flourishing societies. They call for a talking revolution to improve on the 'quality of how we actually communicate with each other, one to one' (*ibid.*, 2018:1) illustrating the notion of mutual relationships which are in-person or face to face. They refer to 'developing the art of creative conversation' (*ibid.*, 2018:2) and posit this approach as 'focused on meeting a range of fundamental human needs – for connection, respect, clarity, understanding, hope and many others. These are crucial to relationship-building, *regardless of who we are talking to or what we are talking about.*' (*ibid.*, 2018: 10).

These communication skills and virtues need to be appreciated and developed which calls upon a supportive environment that values professionalism and agency. 'Shared decision-making relies on the interpersonal skills and virtues of individual professionals (as well as on the realised capabilities of parents and responsible legislators and employers)' (Hellowell, 2019: 70). Some individuals will be in a position to effect this in practice, but as Hellowell (2019: 70) notes, 'others may deliberately and defensively limit their engagement' which can be problematic because currently parents of children with more complex SEND rely on the relationship with their school. Poor relationships can lead to inequity of experience and possibly limits access to services and support.

It was clear from the data that there is inconsistency in experiences, variance in knowledge of co-production, as well as challenges in how to communicate effectively. The findings identified a lack of training, tools and / or frameworks to enable effective communication to take place. Consistent, embedded effective communication has not happened so far in practice, so it is unlikely it will happen without specific intervention. Hellowell (2019: 80) refers to the 'characteristics and character traits of the 'good SEND professional' and how these are cultivated by individuals and organisations.' Therefore, there is a requirement to consider ways to embed more effective communication in order to support the implementation of co-production.

### 5.3.2 Unavoidable difficult conversations

#### 5.3.2.1 *A highly emotional process for all*

***'It was highly traumatic and placed our family under a lot of pressure. I had to stop working as my child did not have a suitable school placement for two years.'* (Parent Stage One)**

It could be questioned as to why communication is so difficult, and we are still at a stage whereby communication cannot be effectively embedded in practice, let alone co-production. Yet, this was clear in the findings which illustrated that the process of applying for and managing EHC plans is highly emotional for both parents and SENCOs. Therefore, communication becomes much more complex and involves higher-stakes and a skilled approach in managing situations involving *'fragile people'* (Carmen\_p 46.15). SENCOs need appropriate support and training to be able to effectively engage with these sometimes challenging contexts and situations. Communication comes first (before we can move to co-production) and therefore a focus on developing and valuing communicative skills must be the first step for SENCOs and parents.

Gastil (2014: 129) refers to shifting the focus away from policy and process and concentrating solely on the dialogue as an initial foundation. Focusing on communication and relationships first can mitigate some of the challenges because it provides the opportunity for an improved understanding of each other, which one parent so compellingly conveyed: *'it's not always a massive solution. There's sometimes something really fundamental there, but you only get there through relationships.'* (Carmen\_p 46.15). What was clear from the data is the need for psychological safety for dialogue to take place. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is illustrative of the basic physiological as well as psychological needs required to be able to participate in dialogue and shared decision-making. Yet the findings illustrated examples of where this was absent from both the parents and the SENCOs (Section 4.3.7). Without acknowledgement of the varying psychological states of participants it becomes more difficult to communicate and almost impossible to engage in co-production or to lead meetings as noted by Carmen when she was told *'you've got to lead it XXX (Parent3's name)'* despite entering the service at a *'a fairly critical, stressful time'* (Carmen\_p 3.10). It is important that professionals recognise that parents have a 'much greater investment in partnership than professionals due to their long-term commitment to and affective involvement with their child' (Hellowell, 2019: 101). It is essential that the professionals are sensitive to this difference and the unequal positioning in relation to power differentials and expertise in any relationships with parents.

It could be assumed that it is obvious that people will experience different states at different times (DES, 1978). However, being able to effectively read people's states and employ an appropriate response is a skill. The personal attributes and qualities of the professional are central to effecting

positive relationships with parents (Hellawell, 2017). This position was supported by Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2009 :654) who argued that the ‘parent–professional relationship needs to be fluid, able to respond to changing perspectives and shifting perspectives as parents and professionals engage with new experiences and influences.’ Partnerships and relationships are not fixed or simplistic, but ‘include facilitation of multiple perspectives, recognition of fuzzy boundaries and acceptance of the absence of certainty’ (Hellawell, 2019: 121). This requires the professionals’ ability to engage with ethical complexities and ‘extending respect and fairness for those who think differently’ (Hellawell, 2019: 121). The requirement for sensitivity, flexibility or suitable adjustments to a situation is essential in order to build, maintain or repair relationships (as identified in Table 16). It may be that we need to focus more on valuing and fostering a better understanding of individuals ‘their personal histories, life aspirations, and ways of seeing the world’ (Gastil, 2014: 131) before considering embarking on conversations involving processes such as the EHC needs assessment.

The findings illuminated that a limiting factor to being able to value individuals and form and maintain quality relationships is due to the societal shift towards marketisation as the default position (see section 5.2). The performative drive serves to reduce time, devalues individuals and opportunities for ‘care’ which is what is required to nurture psychological needs, e.g. safety and self-worth. The current performative drive in the system is therefore a barrier to fostering quality relationships and serves as a detrimental factor to co-production. Advancing a dialogic, values-based approach may help to mitigate the sense of being in opposition to others in the process and the isolation and marginalisation evident in the data.

Hochschild (2012: 189) refers to the danger of the flight attendant who tries ‘to be genuinely friendly to a line of strangers’. Yet the SENCO is typically not dealing with a ‘stranger’. They know the children and families, sometimes very well, and so building relationships could be a protective factor in mitigating Emotional Labor (EL) as evidenced in the examples of strong relationships (Parents GET – 2. Relationships). Quality relationships are required for person-centred practice. However, the intensity of the relationship could be an enabling or disabling factor. If the relationship is too close and emotionally demanding this could limit person-centred practice. Sharpe’s (2020: 239) research with primary school SENCOs led to her claim that ‘SENCOs report that developing trusting relationships with families has led to more social work demands being placed upon them.’ Hochschild also identified the significant emotional demands in relationships where ‘the deeper the bond, the more emotion work, and the more unconscious we are of it’ (Hochschild, 2012: 68). Yet, in contrast to this position, if the relationship is too distant this can also be a limiting factor for person centred practice as evidenced with the ‘*amorphous*’ (Bethany\_s 18.50) relationships referred to with the LAs.

### 5.3.2.2 Systemic challenges making conversations more difficult

***'a lot of the services set up, those professionals just get sort of boxed and boxed into a smaller box, and they lack.. They lack agency, they lack authority, but also, it becomes it just embed siloism, right?'* (Carmen\_p 8.00).**

The way in which the system operates currently, compounds the emotionally driven situations because it serves to set up adversarial relationships (Armstrong, 1995; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). The findings of this study corroborated conflicting values between parents and SENCOs based on differences in expectations and reality, which exaggerates the already highly emotional process and essentially leads to more frustrated communication and difficult conversations. Hellowell (2019: 74) refers to the field of SEND as 'riddled with ethical dilemmas.' It is essential to address these ethical dilemmas and the resultant differences in expectations and reality, otherwise parents and SENCOs will continually be placed in opposition, rather than working through the challenges more constructively. The dilemmas Hellowell (2019) identifies for the SEND professionals are noted in **Table 17** alongside the illustrative evidence from this study to draw out examples of where this has occurred in practice for both SENCOs and parents.

It is therefore unsurprising that values and communication can be at odds due to the tensions these dilemmas present, which results in adversarial positions being adopted. The SENCOs are in a continual position of balancing competing priorities and parents can also clearly see the ethical dilemmas in their experiences. Hellowell (2019: 55) refers to resource constraints and challenges SENCOs face when explaining the 'diminishing resources, particularly to parents, [which] also challenges maintaining productive relationships.' These misaligned values and conflicting positions sets up a context for poor working relationships because the it can lead to mistrust, insincere communications and / or lack of confidence in the system.

Identified moral dilemmas in the SEND Code of Practice (Hellowell, 2019: 74)	SENCOs – illustrative evidence of an ethical dilemma	Parents – illustrative evidence of an ethical dilemma
(1) an individual’s right to make decisions and choices and the professionals potentially conflicting responsibility to ensure their welfare;	'your child will be out of the classroom for four hours a week, like, do you really want that? They were like, Yeah, we do' (Amber_s 1.16).	'XXXXXX (mainstream school) were saying he can't stay here. We can't cope, quite literally. So I was being pressured to accept the school that I told you about that I didn't like.' (Bonnie_p 1:05:04)
(2) the sometimes conflicting responsibilities towards the individual, their family or advocate, the employer, the taxpayer and society at large;	'SENCO, you're kind of I've always felt it's a funny opposition, you're kind of in the middle. So you're advocating for the child and the family, but you're also part of the school in it.' (Bethany_s 4.25).	'the LAs are willing to put up their legal teams at great expensive public money to fail. And I think that's something that they should be held accountable for. Because that is money that's coming out of the XXX (specific identifier) budget, which could go to work for the young people they're supposed to be looking after' (BonnieAdv_p 42:11)
(3) balancing equity, equality and diversity;	'The current system does not work. The parents who shout the loudest, get what they want. It is a known fact that if you threaten to go to tribunal, the local authority will back down and give the parents what they want because it costs too much to go to tribunal.' (SENCO Stage One)	'That way we get rid of this child that doesn't conform to our square box to a different school, but not indicate to the local authority that we're having problems.' (Bonnie_p – 43.10)
(4) resolving dilemmas between recommending 'appropriate' versus 'available' services;	'I've been there where I'm listening to a parent and I'm thinking I totally agree with you. And I would love to be able to give, you know, I can see the provision is here, we're doing our best to meet it. And you're right, we're not really because you know, they're in a mixed ability set, and I haven't got support and the teacher, teacher, I've tried with the teacher, they just don't get it.' (Bethany_s 7.53)	'Because it is a business at the end of the day, I do understand that as well. But we're talking about a child's future. It needs to be right from the start.' (Bonnie_p 17.32)
(5) boundaries between personal and professional values and identities	'I'm a professional. I'm a teacher, I'm a SENCO. But actually, my opinion is not, I don't think my opinion matters when it goes to panel' (Clara_s 16.48)	'if you weren't that if you weren't the right sort, you didn't stand a chance. He is very, very blinkered' (Carmen_p 21.47)

**Table 17: Hellowell (2019) dilemmas for SEND professionals and illustrative evidence from this study**



### 5.3.2.3 SENCOs need support and training to effectively manage difficult conversations

***‘So if there could be some proper training about structured conversations listening, empathic listening, how how to have I did some tricky conversation training just recently with the Virtual School, which I wish I'd had years ago, on how to move forward that, you know, when people are being really defensive or aggressive or whatever, and that's missing in schools.’ (Bethany\_s 7:53).***

If we are dependent on the type of relationship that forms between professionals and parents alone (without appropriate training and support in place) families’ experiences will always be inequitable because there will continue to be inconsistent pockets of practice. Hellawell (2019: 101) refers to the ‘significant level of discernment from individuals’ and the need for professionals to draw on ‘qualities beyond the current skills-based training and prescriptive guidance offered’. To address this insufficiency and variance, caring educationalists (as noted in Section 5.2) need relevant and appropriate training and support in developing effective communication skills and strategies (discussed in this section), as well as knowledge and experience of flexible frameworks (which will be discussed in Section 5.3.3.2).

Co production is difficult and difficult conversations are unavoidable due to the very sensitive nature of the interactions and emotional experiences of families and children when faced with participating in decision-making. Stone, Patton and Heen (2010: xii) argue that successful implementation of change ‘eventually *requires* people to have difficult conversations’. So how professionals are appropriately prepared to manage these situations is essential. The findings of this study illustrated that there was no specific or standardised training or support for co-production, which resulted in variance in the levels of knowledge of person-centred practice and ultimately opportunities for participatory decision-making or co-production to take place.

Co-production has been endorsed as a way to address the mistrust and dissatisfaction in the SEND system in the recent government proposals (DfE / DoHSC, 2022; DfE / DoHSC, 2023). Co-production is more central now in government policy and agenda than it has been in the past and so it is more important than ever to ensure this is managed appropriately. In the current proposals for change (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) co-production is mentioned 21 times, in comparison to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015: 61) where co-production featured once as a definition for how local authorities ‘ensures that children, young people and parents feel they have participated fully in the process and have a sense of co-ownership.’ Some of the new proposals refer to co-production in relation to policy development, such as the ‘process for developing the National Standards [which] needs to involve a wide range of key partners, including children, young people and families’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 28). This

is arguably more manageable to put into place because the policymakers are in a position to facilitate forums for involving wider stakeholders. It could be considered positive that co-production features more prominently in policy development for the future of SEND, but if this does not also translate in to practice on the ground, there will be continued challenges faced by professionals and parents.

It is essential to have effective dialogue as a way to improve working together, but without the right conditions and training in managing difficult situations or conversations, we will continue to rely on this happening by chance. Within the SEND Code of Practice, it states that ‘Practitioners in all services involved in the assessment and planning process need to be skilled in working with children, parents and young people to help them make informed decisions. All practitioners should have access to training so they can do this effectively.’ (DfE/ DoH, 2015: 149). Yet it is clear this is not the case in practice based on the findings in this study. The consultation response summary noted some respondents wanting to hear more about: ‘plans to ensure the workforce has the training, expertise and support to achieve our vision for the system’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 93). This is an essential aspect of implementation and an area that has fallen short in the past SEND reforms (HoCEC, 2019; National Audit Office, 2019; House of Lords, 2022). It would be remiss of policymakers to assume they can legislate for co-production but not put in place the appropriate supportive mechanisms to facilitate this happening.

The findings in this research calls into question the understanding of, support for, and training available on specific ways to manage more difficult communications in highly emotional and complex situations. Hellowell (2019: 122) argues that the ‘personal qualities and motivations of individual professionals maybe crucial catalysts where policy reforms make new demands on partnership working and must be given sufficient attention and care.’ What is clear is that simplistic training will not sufficiently address this level of expertise required. Similarly, Soan and Monsen (2023: 92) recognise the importance of quality education for the teaching professional and claim that teaching is reduced to a ‘technical-role’ without ‘secure grounding in child-development, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history of education, teaching pedagogy and content knowledge’. There is an explicit commitment to strengthening initial teacher training and also the training for SENCOs in the proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Specifically, the National Professional Qualification (NPQ) is referred to as a way to align to wider training reforms and ‘provides the knowledge, practical skills and leadership expertise needed for the role, [the DfE] will work with SEND experts to develop the NPQ framework and course design’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 58). Additionally, the new NPQ for SENCOs (DfE, 2023a: 12) requires SENCOs to ‘learn how to’ work ‘with other leaders to ensure a culture of co-production which captures and values pupil and family voice in all aspects of the curriculum, its delivery, and in wider whole

school policies.’ Yet, unless there is specific training to develop SENCOs knowledge and skills in co-production including how to become reflective and autonomous professionals to effectively manage difficult situations, implementation will be dependent on a workforce with varied starting points. Co-production is a complex concept (detailed further in Section 5.3.3.1) influenced by political agendas, different values, trust and power etc. It cannot be embedded with just training and acquisition of knowledge alone; it must also include a genuine investment in person-centred approaches. Hellowell (2019: 34-35) refers to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers as not necessarily focusing on just ‘technical know-how’ but on ‘an examination and a strengthening of underlying attitudes and beliefs’, especially as they often have to face conflict and dilemmas in practice which is difficult to navigate with a simplistic ‘what works’ approach.

### 5.3.3 Enabling Communication

#### 5.3.3.1 *Co-production is complex and demands communication*

***‘you’ve got to take the time to listen to the vulnerabilities so that then you can then assess the right areas. And, and you’ve got to give that the time’ (Carmen\_p 39.27).***

Co-production is complex and influenced by a range of factors including political agendas, different values, trust and power - so, this will not happen in practice until the right conditions are in place. Fundamentally, co-production is impossible to elicit without effective communication to help build strong relationships as a first step.

The complexity of co-production and being in a position to build strong working relationships is rooted in addressing power differentials. Cahn (2000: 31) refers to co-production as a construct, a framework that requires valuing all contribution with parity, he identifies that co-production is a process and may involve ‘collaboration or confrontation’. This indicates a difficult process which needs support mechanisms around it. Cahn (2000) refers to co-production as embodying a set of core values that have universal relevance e.g. to love, to communicate, to care. Therefore person-centered practice is fundamental to co-production because in order to address the power differentials and inequalities of past (and current) practices, we need to ensure that people are central to how we work and this is an ethos of the professionals and the organisations in which we are working. Cahn (2000: 32) argues that ‘[m]ost people subscribe to these values. I have yet to find anyone who take issue with the proposition that human beings have the capacity to love, to communicate, to care – and those capacities are assets’. In opposition to this position, the findings illustrated it almost impossible for local authorities to implement co-production, arguably due to not being able to form strong working relationships because interactions are distant and ‘amorphous’ (Bethany\_s 18.50).

Additionally, the varying levels of knowledge of co-production was problematic. Both SENCOs and

parents understanding of co-production was based on their experiences, for example working with or exposure to other disciplines and frameworks. Those who had experience of working within contexts involving health and social care were typically exposed to wider perspectives on co-working and also had some knowledge of frameworks that enabled communication and co-production to take place. Arguably, there is no uniform ethical code across the professions for those working in special educational needs in England, they are typically guided by codes from their own professions (Hellawell, 2019). The SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) provides guidance, but unlike the USA (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015) does not provide a dedicated ethical code and standards for all professionals working in SEND, although this may be addressed with the proposals for new National Standards (DfE/DoHSC, 2023).

A person-centred ethos in practice (Section 5.2.1) and training for SENCOs (Section 5.3.2.3) along with the development of effective communication can lead to adoption of clear, shared approaches or frameworks to support the implementation of co-production. Shared frameworks need to provide structure but also need to be flexible enough to move with people's diverse and individual needs. Frameworks will be explored in more detail in this section of the chapter, however, I would argue that fostering effective communication is the first step that needs implementing. We are not in a position yet to implement co-production frameworks until the communication underpinning it is improved.

#### *5.3.3.2 The need for flexible frameworks to enable communication*

***'the whole problem with an assessment framework is that it puts, it then tries to homogenise someone's experience and set it on rails. You know, there's not, there's not enough individualization' (Carmen\_p 6.41).***

Ensuring there is effective communication across the different professions is another important element in securing more effective and positive outcomes for children with SEND and their families. Using shared frameworks, may provide more consistency in supporting parents in participatory decision-making. Currently the statutory and policy guidance is based upon the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) but this document is too complex to be considered as a functional framework. In addition, it is interpretable and has resulted in variations in practice across local authorities. Another factor for consideration is that the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) has to work alongside other established frameworks such as the ethical codes and standards for specific professions, e.g. for General practitioners (GMC, 2024) or for teachers (DfE, 2021) which can lead to conflicting information, different language or terminology being used and different values being prioritised.

Implementing a shared framework might be considered as prescriptive, but in a complex system, it can help to provide a more consistent approach to professionals communicating to address some of the complexity and provide some stability for working together. Frameworks can assist with managing dialogue in complex situations as noted in the literature review which detailed a number of approaches (Carpenter, 1997; DfES, 2009a; Genuine Partnerships, 2019; Herring *et al.*, 2017, SCIE, 2022). Hellowell (2019) also discussed the merits and limitations of a number of frameworks related to ethical decision making. What is fundamental, is how frameworks are applied in practice. If it is relentlessly implemented in an automated fashion, this undermines the principles of working in a person-centred way. Hellowell (2019: 131) argues that evidence-based practice which is regulated by a statutory code, fails to recognise the ‘fundamental precariousness of outcomes for children with complex needs.’ Instead, she cites Fox’s (2015) position on ‘practice-based evidence’ (Hellowell, 2019: 131) which integrates the best research along with expertise and a values-based approach. This positioning ‘necessitates a clear articulation of values and an acceptance of uncertainty and doubt as integral to ethical professional practice’. Yet claims this is not an approach which is currently ‘promoted or sought after’ (Hellowell, 2019: 131). This reinforces the underpinning importance of underpinning values and care as the conditions to be able to appropriately apply the frameworks in practice.

The most pragmatic way in which to introduce a framework for SEND would be through the new National Standards (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) and ensuring it can facilitate shared use across the services, enabling and supporting collaborative ways of working for all stakeholders:

‘We received consultation feedback on the importance of the National Standards for health and care as well as education. The Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England have agreed to engage health and social care bodies at set points and on specific standards. They will be closely involved in the development of the National Standards, which will ensure strategic oversight and input from frontline health professionals. We will develop National Standards that recognise the role of health and social care and the interdependencies, while operating within the existing statutory framework for health and adult social care’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 30).

Currently the system is adversarial and legalistic in addressing moral dilemmas or any differences in perceptions (Soan and Monsen, 2023) and so rethinking the models by which we operate is essential in ensuring shared frameworks are effective. For example, Soan and Monsen (2023: 12) refer to ‘adapting more consensus-based models, such as the New Zealand / Aotearoa ‘family group conference’, [which] might provide a refreshing alternative (Ministry for Children, 2017).’

Bethany referred to how the caseworker model has potential in facilitating participatory decision-making: *'And you need to, you need to probably take away a lot of the paperwork, and it needs to be face to face meeting. More like, more like case mapping, maybe, again, like social care.'* (Bethany\_s 30.21). Yet, even Bethany recognised that it *'takes longer, doesn't it? And SENCOs don't have any time.'* (Bethany\_s 30.21), indicating that systemic changes also need to take place (SENCOs GET3 - Power and Choice). The new proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 53) include reference to the casework model and 'high-quality delivery by casework teams' with the need to 'further consider the skills and training that these teams receive', which is essential if co-production is to be embedded in day-to-day practice and the experiences of parents at the point of service delivery. Furthermore, research from Godoy *et al.*, (2022: 3) claims that 'adopting a values-driven decision-making framework focused on more equitable outcomes could help caseworkers improve their ability to ensure all families receive the necessary support to maintain a safe, stable, and nurturing home environment.'

Drawing on existing frameworks may be useful in the collaborative aims across health, social care and education for developing the new National Standards for SEND (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). However, there are dangers in simply applying frameworks from one context to another without appropriate and full consideration of the implications. Health and Social Care practice is different to education and this must be acknowledged. Neustadt and May's (1986) *Thinking in time: the uses of history for decision-makers* warned that reasoning from analogy means we will often look at what works from other models and then apply this only observing the similarities. This can sometimes lead to failure because we do not fully consider the dissimilarities and the implications of the differences. Therefore, it is essential to fully consider the strengths as well as the limitations of existing frameworks for shared decision-making that have been successfully used to support person-centred practice in health and social care before considering adopting models across the services. The DfE/ DoHSC (2023) proposed trials would be a good opportunity to evaluate different models, in a similar way to the pathfinders for the implementation of the SEND reforms in 2014. However, what needs to be addressed this time is sufficient time to trial, monitor and evaluate outcomes before the changes are adopted, which was not the case for the SEND reforms in 2014 (Hellowell, 2019).

It is important to have a common approach across professions to help with common ways in which to communicate, build shared values, and provide consistency for all, including parents. This level of transparency could reduce the mistrust and lack of confidence in the system. Additionally, if shared across professions, it could be useful and practical in reducing costs and. The findings of this study supported a shared national framework for participatory decision-making in SEND, due to issues identified in parents and SENCOs experiences outlined in **Table 18**.

Issue	Description	Illustrative evidence
Inequality across services	differences across local authorities' interpretations of the guidance calls for a standardised process (portal) to ensure more parity in accessing services	'And what I find is, the amount of inconsistency is between these EHCPs is phenomenal. You... the amount of funding as well that people get varies drastically. There's no unified. What's the word I'm looking for? <i>(Parent2 Adv - Format)</i> Format for it. Because they all do it differently.' (Bonnie_p 36.05).
Variance in approaches and/or provisions	difference in education and health and social care impacts on parity in the ways in which we are working together and the consistency of approaches	'social care have had a lot more training, I think, then SENCOs in doing that, co-production, haven't they in the family group conferences, in the kind of kind of casework where they've really listened to the family' (Bethany_s 5.47).
Language used by different services	terminology across the services was varied and, in some cases, misunderstood. Shared frameworks can help to adopt a common language	'it needs to be idiot proof, they need to explain every step. They will say panel to you and tribunal but you don't have any experience, you know, nothing' (Amelia_p 8.59)
Complex system	there needs to be clearer processes across the services. The lack of accountabilities with competing priorities impacts on developing shared aims and objectives	'everyone thinks that going for an EHCP is just a simple assessment process, it's so much more than that. You're put under a safeguarding lens often, even if it's the Strengthening Families framework, I've got huge issues with the Social Care System anyway. But it's, as soon as you start assessing people. And as soon as you start assessing needs, the assessment process is inherently part of the problem. Because it, it sets up a power imbalance. And it drives, it increases vulnerability. Absolutely. And it adds adversity.' (Carmen_p 49.06)

**Table 18: Issues identified in parents and SENCOs experiences and associated evidence**

A possible challenge with devising and implementing a shared framework across professions, would be managing differing values across services as well as blurring of professional boundaries (McAuliffe, 2014). Shared frameworks present challenges because any framework will be underpinned by core values and beliefs. For example, NHS England have the '6 Cs as the core values and expectations which include: 'Care, Compassion, Competence, Communication, Courage, Commitment' (NHS Professionals, 2023: np). They were initially launched in December 2012, but remain central to this day and so changing or potentially adapting core values and beliefs that are embedded in services may present as a challenge. Although, to counter this position, if there was a common or shared, agreed values across the services supporting SEND, then this can also help to unify on certain aspects. For example, it may help to provide more consistency in shared outcomes and objectives for the EHC needs assessment process.

Blurring of professional boundaries from implementing a shared framework might also present challenges for some because they may feel threatened. This can happen when there are values clashes across professions. McAuliffe (2014: 12) claims 'many people do not have good knowledge of the value foundations of professional disciplines other than their own, and have little respect or tolerance for difference of opinion.' There was evidence of conflict in professional exchanges in the experiences recounted by SENCOs, for example Amber's account of an Educational Psychologist's involvement in the EHC assessment process in her setting: *'So I emailed the EP to say that as in, there's something going wrong here. We've got to sort this out. And I basically got ripped apart by the EP who said, you're questioning my authority. How the hell you know, you trust me that I'm doing my job. It was awful.'* (Amber\_s 4.05). Yet, others may see a common or shared framework as an opportunity to learn and enhance their own practice and see their skills set as complimentary to other professions. McAuliffe (2014: 16) highlight that new models and frameworks can lead to the 'creation of cultures of collaboration' which does not happen without deliberate discussion among the professions.

Most evident in the study were the dangers of frameworks that are inflexible. It is important there is quality training for professionals alongside the frameworks to ensure that the application of frameworks are not simply used as a tick lists or applied in a tokenistic way, rather than a tool to be used critically and flexibly according to the context. This is currently evident as an approach in a number of services (Munro, 2011; Francis, 2013; HoCEC, 2019) Indeed, Munro (DfE, 2011: 37) noted that 'many professionals describe themselves as working in an over-standardised framework that makes it difficult for them to tailor their responses to the specific circumstances of individual children' which stresses the importance of the flexibility in frameworks and professional autonomy to be able to apply any set frameworks in a flexible way to suit individual or family requirements. As Carmen noted, *'the whole problem with an assessment framework is that it puts, it then tries to homogenise someone's experience and set it on rails. You know, there's not, there's not enough individualization.'* (Carmen\_p 6.41).

There needs to be commonality in the way frameworks are used across the professions, but they must not be used in a way that limits professionals' ability to meet individuals' and families' needs, such as professionals being forced into positions of doing: *'exactly what it says on the tin'* (Bethany\_s 33.43). Appendix 4 of the House of Lords (2022: 93) identifies this risk in the proposed changes for SEND: 'The proposals for a set of national standards could make welcome improvements, but they should strike a balance between driving national change and remaining flexible enough to enable local innovation'. This is a key point because when working with families, rigid structured approaches will not always be suitable and may differ over time. Despite these potential challenges with implementing frameworks,



it is evident that they are needed to address the identified issues from the study (see Table 18). Not having a clear, consistent approach where professionals have a common language for communication and shared values is too dangerous when working across the services.

#### *5.3.3.3 Can communication combat a State-run operation?*

***'nine years trying to fit the system, we finally crashed out once the pandemic hit.'***  
**(Carmen\_p 26.50).**

Quality foundational relationships are a pre-requisite to enable participatory decision-making. So, in a similar way that person-centred practice and communication are pre-requisites for co-production, quality foundational relationships have the same standing. They are an essential element for co-production because without quality relationships, decisions are presented under the guise of being participatory when they are not or are made in complete isolation.

The notion of ladders of participation (Arnstein, 1969) as progressively enabling stakeholders more influence and control over decision making could, as an ideal, include co-production as the aim of the EHC needs assessment process. The Roper, Grey and Cadogan (2018: 1) definition of co-production highlights higher levels of participation related to collaboratively working together. This moves beyond traditional participatory models to enable individuals to be 'positioned as knowledge holders, leaders and people from whom there is much to learn', which from my findings I would claim is aspirational in the current context. There were limited examples of SENCOs and parents working together in the data, which reinforces Boddison and Soan's (2021: 91) findings of the 'coproduction illusion'. Co-production was evidenced as almost impossible for local authorities due to challenges with forming a meaningful relationship which underpins this way of working. The State are in control of the decisions, and ultimately make the decisions, so parents and SENCOs will never feel part of the process while the control is held and managed centrally. This centralised control and sense of helplessness in effecting change permeated the findings (See Section 4.2.3.3 - Parents and SENCOs are powerless to address the inequalities in the system and Section 4.4.3 - Levels of decision making in the process).

In reality then, co-production is not universal as envisaged in the SEND reforms (2014). The findings reinforced this perception of a disparity between expectations and the reality experienced by parents and SENCOs. It was clear that an element of this disparity related to parents believing they have choice, but then realising they do not have choice (Parents GET1 - Process not person). Even if we can improve the communication and relationships between parents and SENCOs, this will only ever have limited impact if the ultimate power lies with the State. We perhaps might question the function of the EHC plan and process and if the requirement for collaborative decision-making is appropriate, if

this continues to be a State-run operation. Garrett (2009) refers to which master to follow the value-based approaches or neoliberalism, noting the tension between the public sector or marketisation. If we accept the process as State run, then we can stop forcing a democratic ideal on a process which is not designed for such approaches. Although there is a danger in simply polarising these aspects, it is important to question the viability of the current system. External pressures such as a lack of resources, lack of appropriate specialist placements and inadequate provisions place strains on working relationships and individuals being able to work co-productively. Parents and SENCOs are operating within a restrictive system, and this needs to be acknowledged first or this leads to misconceptions, such as parents believing they can have choice and access more than is possible. It also may lead to parents as perceiving the SENCO as the barrier or the gatekeeper (Maher, 2016).

Currently, training and frameworks in co-production can only exist within boundaries because the wider context is that the State holds the ultimate power over the decision-making. This leads to the question over whether the assessment process is fit for purpose, or does there need to be a radical change to enable communication to take place. The current proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) endorse co-production, but we need to be realistic about what is possible, because without this realistic lens we continue to set up expectations that cannot be met which fuels increased frustrations and dissatisfaction leading to lack of parental confidence, more statutory assessments and tribunals.

Despite acknowledging these limits within the current system, findings in the study evidenced parents and SENCOs referring to more positive experiences of working with health and social care colleagues, where models of co-production were successful. Additionally, the new proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) refer to a case study where co-production has been effective in an education context, so although co-production is not standard practice yet for the SEND system, there are models that do work and can be drawn upon in developing the good practice required for a universal offer. Therefore, co-production is possible, but we need the right conditions, we cannot depend on policy change alone. To foster co-production, we need a system that can support valuing individuals and effective communication as foundations to build the relationships that can enable co-productive working. I would argue that unless we have systemic change that fosters care, communication and choice then the issues will persist, despite the further endorsements for co-production in policy. These tensions regarding levels of power and how these aspects influence participatory decision-making will be explored in more detail in the next section through discussion of the final research question.

### Reflection on thesis

I found this point of the study most challenging because I began to question my central argument in the thesis. After considering arguments presented by Cribb and Gewitz (2012) in relation to the findings and wider literature on co-production, I began to question if co-production was suited to a State-led or State-run operation. Arguing for co-production was central to my thesis and so the possibility of coming to a conclusion where my argument is contrary to this position was incredibly difficult for me. I began to question, how can I argue for co-production if the control and the decisions related to the EHC needs assessment process will always sit with the State? After all, '[n]ot everything can be co-produced' (Roper, Grey and Cadogan, 2018: 11). It led me to reflect more deeply on co-production and what is appropriate, but also what is possible considering the current context. At this point, I began to form the notions of co-partnership as a more suitable way forward, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## 5.4 Research Question 3: How do we improve on the parents' and SENCOs' levels of decision-making in the process?

Findings from the study are presented and discussed to call for a change in power differences and the systemic structures the SEND system sits within to provide some level of choice. Decision-making is not an event, but a process, therefore how we support participatory decision-making is of primary importance. **Co-production will not happen without choice.**

### 5.4.1 Power and the art of decision-making

#### 5.4.1.1 Participatory decision-making as a policy solution

***'The panel that meets, you cannot participate in that at all. They make the decision and you're expected to abide by it.'* (BonnieAdv\_p 1.37)**

Napoleon (1899) said 'Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide' (Libquotes, 2023). Being able to participate in decision-making could be argued as fundamental to our welfare and sense of purpose. It relates to the sense of control and autonomy which, according to Self-Determination Theory, is required as a basic need for well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Yet for State led processes, the findings showed that there is very little to no choice in the current system for parents and SENCOs. Parents had little choice over access to education, educational provisions, school placement or the content of the EHC plan, as with Bonnie: *'in the end they was trying to take the decision away from me'* (Bonnie\_p 1:06:55). Findings also showed there was little opportunity for decision-making regarding the EHC needs assessment process for SENCOs

due to the control local authorities hold, essentially undermining an essential aspect of welfare. One SENCO commented: *'Once I had submitted my applications, it was all out of my hand. I did have control over the application and what was submitted, but this stopped once it was submitted'* (SENCO Stage One).

As a policy decision, we can see why co-production might be chosen as a way to address the lack of confidence and 'vicious cycle' evident in the current system (HoCEC, 2019: 15). Indeed, Cribb and Gewirtz (2012: 515-516) refer to shared decision-making as being presented as 'the antidote to all of the ills of earlier welfare regimes which are constructed as statist, unrelentingly top-down and paternalist'. Yet they go on to acknowledge the 'moral burdens and problems' (*ibid.*, 2012: 516) for service users and professionals in adopting this approach, it is not simplistic and presents a number of tensions which must be appropriately acknowledged by policy makers if co-production is to be implemented. For example, Hellowell (2019: 104) argues that 'greater involvement is not always liberating for parents and that it makes huge demands on them.' In addition, parents may also be 'already disproportionately challenged by their circumstances' (Hellowell, 2019: 104). Another tension is that current political agendas and policy tends to make the assumption that parents will want to engage in co-production at a strategic level (DfE/DoH, 2015; DfE/DoHC, 2023) as opposed to prioritising choice for parents on the level of co-production they might want to engage in, e.g. on an individual level (**Table 1**).

Additional demands of this nature being placed on parents is not exclusive to parents of children with SEN. It was raised by McNamara Horvat and Baugh (2015: 8) who referred to the huge burdens on parents, which they claim increased over the 20 years prior to writing their article. They claim that education reforms in America increased choice and served to raise standards, but that not all parents were in a position to effectively 'navigate this new education landscape'. The shift in parents' responsibility for their children's behaviour, educational provision and their academic outcomes were 'shifting from the traditional education system in the U.S. to one replete with choice options has also shifted the burden from the collective shoulders of society onto the shoulders of parents' (McNamara Horvat and Baugh, 2015: 10). This resonates with educational reforms in England and presents a situation where increased responsibility lies with parents, yet there are not the increased associated powers for parents to influence the structures in education, or to be able to make-decisions or have choice. This lack of opportunity to contribute to decision-making is likely to illicit 'a weaker sense of personal efficacy' which may lead to feelings of being 'ineffective or insignificant' (Gastil, 2014 :116). This could lower levels of commitment to the process and diminish respect for collaboration, further supporting parents and SENCOs to take individual actions or withdraw from the process as opposed

to working together (see Section 4.2.1.3 - Decision making in isolation).

Shared decision-making was not evident in practice based on the findings (SENCOs and Parents GET3 - Power and Choice). It may be the case that presenting co-production as a policy solution (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) is actually serving to highlight the inadequacies in the system and I would argue this is a key influencing factor in the increase in statutory assessments and tribunals since the introduction of the SEND reforms in 2014. I am not endorsing the position of lowering levels of parental participation in decisions, but possibly in the past, parents were aware they did not have choice and knew the control lay with the State. What is worse than knowing you have no choice, is giving the illusion of decision-making powers. Hellowell's (2017) research on the introduction of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) considered if the SEND reforms and increased rights for parents were empowering to individuals. She referred to the move from compliant parents to compliant partners (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012) and the concerns of the professionals in her research regarding their part in 'engineering this parental compliance and portray[ing] it as empowerment' (Hellowell, 2017: 425). Therefore, highlighting the introduction of greater powers for parents in participatory decision-making (*Children and Families Act, 2014*) as illusionary and changing practice only in the *terms* being used, not in the *practices* taking place. Parents have rights in law, and this may have raised expectations, yet what was envisaged for the SEND reforms (2014) is not yet evident in practice. The ultimate 'decision' seems to still sit with the State and the final decisions seem to be enacted without collaboration. Without an appropriate system which could facilitate choice, parents (or partners) still need to be compliant. As Armstrong (1995: 2) had noted much earlier 'partnership appears to have the capacity to liberate parents and children by giving them access to decision making machinery whilst at the same time controlling them through that very machinery.'

#### 5.4.1.2 Complexities influencing participatory decision-making

***'So, this is co working, joined up working. So, I think there is I think there is language that could be.. that is more appropriate that could ensure that practice followed that.'***

**(Carmen\_p 3.10)**

The level of autonomy over decision-making and ways in which power differentials might influence outcomes are important to consider, especially because decision-making (based on the SEND reforms (2014)) should be participatory and therefore collaborative or shared with the State, organisation or wider stakeholders. Tensions over power in the EHC needs assessment process is evident and is problematic in enacting shared decision-making because structures have historically been viewed as dictatorial and imposing actions and outcomes, rather than considering individuals' values and beliefs as part of the process. Gastil (2014: 14) refers to the variance in power that those in groups might

hold, but also notes that ‘final group authority must be divided evenly among group members through procedures like consensus and majority rule’. Yet, Hellowell (2019: 103) refers to a number of different theoretical frameworks for partnership working which includes ‘Communicative Action and Principles of Deliberation’. This model refers to the goal of consensus as being ‘criticised as encouraging premature closure rather than continuous engagement in understanding difference’ (Hellowell, 2019: 104). Indeed Fullan (2020: 10–11) notes that school leaders ‘must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups – especially with people different from themselves. Effective leaders constantly foster purposeful interactions and problem-solving, and are wary of easy consensus.’ Similarly, when Roberto (2013: xiv) refers to shared decision-making, he explains ‘[b]y *consensus*, I do not mean unanimity, like-mindedness, or even pervasive agreement. By *consensus*, I do mean a high level of commitment and shared understanding among the people involved in the decision.’ This illustrates that participatory decision-making cannot be viewed as a single ‘event’ or ultimate destination but is a much more complex process involving discussion and debate.

Decisions, therefore, are iterative and part of an ongoing dialogic ‘process’ so for any group decision-making, there is a need for quality relationships to be in place as evidenced with Dominique’s comment: ‘*Working together should be a process undertaken when a draft plan is being drawn up. This would prevent so many appeals if parents feel their children have what they needed from the beginning*’ (Dominique\_p Section5). This is of particular concern for the EHC needs assessment and then the resultant management of the plan, because of the ongoing nature of the process e.g. initial assessment, followed by assess, plan do review cycles and annual reviews. If decision-making events are viewed as singular incidences, it is possibly too simplistic to support dialogue and participatory engagement. Roberto (2013: xv) posits that we ‘should spend time “deciding how to decide”’ and claims that we need to consider three levels of decision-making from the individual perspective (e.g. the cognitive processes we adopt for decision-making), the group dynamics (e.g. interaction with others, including power differentials) and organisational factors (e.g. the environment, cultural and societal context in which decisions are made). Each aspect has a bearing on the process of decision-making. Therefore, decision-making needs considered thought, and could be considered an ‘art’. Valuing the individual, ongoing quality relationships and effective communicative skills with others are fundamental to enable choice through participatory decision-making. Involving parents needs to be conceptualised by professionals in a way to consider how the decisions will be made and what process or approach will be used to facilitate that, rather than taking a one-off decision in a meeting, or requesting their input on a document such as an Appendix A (DfE/DoH, 2015). This was illustrated by a parent who shared: ‘*School rushing the process through. Sat in senco office whilst she typed up*

*my responses. Envelope sealed, ready to send off to LA before I'd even left the building'* (Parent Stage One).

In any situation, there will be limits on what is possible and the available resources which will influence the 'choices' that can be made. Like parents, it was clear SENCOs had limited decision-making powers within the EHC needs assessment process from the findings in the study. Based on the current system, this is challenging to combat because it requires top-down changes. However, identifying the strengths in SENCOs' and parents' relationships, may provide pathways to enable improved participation based on their locus of control in the current system, such as with processes related to the management of the EHC plan which tend to be more school-based. Parents and SENCOs having a greater understanding of the dialogic nature and complexities of shared decision-making could facilitate a greater sense of control or autonomy for all stakeholders. It could help to provide an understanding of what is and is not within their control and therefore remove some of the challenges over expectations and reality, or conflicting values to focus on what can be done in practice. It will not necessarily address issues over lack of choice with processes that are predominantly State controlled, but movement from the bottom up in this way, could be one way to challenge the lack of choice evident in the system currently. It will enable the voices of participants to be heard and will provide some level of choice in school regarding decisions and outcomes for their children.

#### *5.4.1.3 Recognising emotions as integral to participatory decision-making*

***'I have to say I have been pushed to physical and emotional exhaustion accessing the right support for my children through the EHCP process.'* (Dominique\_p Section19)**

The findings of this study illustrated that the experiences recounted were often deeply emotional and so it is really important to recognise it is likely this will impact on parents and professionals in different ways at different points in their journey, and will impact on their ability to engage in effective quality relationships or communication.

It is important to recognise the place of emotions in decisions and not to downplay this as something that should be avoided or something that is unnatural. The Appraisal Tendency Framework (Han, Lerner and Keltner, 2007) evidences emotions as being an essential aspect to decision-making and includes research on how emotional states affect our decision-making. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge how we might support those who are in highly emotional states or experiencing high levels of stress. Mearns and Thorne (2010: 76) ask: '[h]ow often has it been said in committee meetings or at important moments of decision-making: 'Let's leave feelings out of this', as if feelings were irrelevant or inaccessible to rational discourse instead of being, perhaps, the crucial factor in achieving a creative outcome?'

There needs to be recognition of emotions as integral in decision-making and not something which needs to be omitted. Instead, accepting the varying emotional conditions we might face and the conditions for participatory decision-making to take place could be conceptualised alongside Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. **Table 19** presents a possible way in which we can support higher or lower levels of engagement according to the physiological and psychological states of individuals. For example, we cannot expect a very vulnerable person to co-chair or co-lead a meeting without any preparation or support. The empowerment model (Appleton and Minchom, 1991) runs through all levels of decision-making in **Table 19** because this model recognises the right of the parent to choose to engage 'at a level which suits them personally' (Dale 1996: 13) and the recognition that this can change dependent upon the context and point in time. There is an understanding that the professional needs to 'consider what help the parent may need in order to take up a position as a *partner* i.e. how would they need to be empowered' (Dale, 1996: 14). Lastly, there is recognition that the Expert and Transplant models (Cunningham and Davis, 1985) are not viewed as deficit because some children and parents would benefit from a service delivered in this style, but with the caveat that they are presented as options and not as a default position. However, it is also important to recognise that with the Empowerment model (Appleton and Minchom, 1991) the professionals could still be perceived as being in a position of power because the responsibility is with them to ensure that parents are supported to engage as partners.



Suggested levels of decision-making	Conditions for decision-making	Existing models for partnership and participatory decision-making	Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs
Fully supported	Likely to require a high level of support with any decisions	Empowerment model (Appleton and Minchom, 1991)	Expert model (Cunningham and Davis, 1985)
Supported	Ensure a safe space		Transplant model (Cunningham and Davis, 1985)
Comfort zone	Sense of belonging and able to communicate freely		Negotiating model (Dale, 1996)
Lead on aspects	Confidence and ability to lead		Balanced decision-making (Herring <i>et al.</i> , 2017)
Co-production	Able to engage fully in co-production		Co-production (Roper, Grey and Cadogan, 2018)

**Table 19: Models of engagement according to physiological and psychological states (Maslow, 1943)**

#### 5.4.2 Normalisation of deviance

##### 5.4.2.1 Normalisation of deviance: A sub-standard education for children with SEND

**'He's just doing worksheets and things is, which is fine. We're lucky he's getting an education.'** (Amelia\_p – 12.09)

The term 'normalization of deviance' (please note the Americanised spelling) is attributed to Diane Vaughan who applied a sociological model to examining failures in decision making for the NASA challenger disaster in 1986. Vaughan (2016: xxx) argued that 'culture is invisible, embedded in organisational structure and hierarchy, rules, routines, and informal relations, and is enacted in taken-for-granted ways in everyday work.' Therefore, when practices might deviate from a starting point, this can be difficult to notice and address. Vaughan 'describes how deviance in organizations is transformed into acceptable behavior.' (2016: xxxvi). The deviant practices become part of the accepted day to day practices in an organisation which lead to failures, which are sometimes of a

catastrophic level.

Vaughan (2016: xxxi) noted that ‘the normalization of deviance is not a problem specific to NASA’ nationally in the USA, the ‘normalization of deviance has been identified with organizational system failures resulting in harmful outcomes in policing, health care, schools, prisons, foster care, and social work’ (*ibid.*, 2016: xxxi). It is therefore an issue to be aware of in wider sectors and although the concept of ‘deviance’ from the ‘norm’ has already been used in relation to labelling of difference and disability and how this becomes ‘normalised’ within cultures. I would argue the concept of ‘normalization of deviance’ could be more widely applied to describe what is happening in the current SEND system based on the findings in this study.

The findings in the research included evidence of direct and indirect disempowerment leading to elimination of choice and parents and SENCOs being forced to accept sub-standard education for children with SEN (Parent GET3: Sub-theme 2 - Barriers to parents being able to participate). The deviant, inadequate practices for SEND are becoming ‘invisible, embedded in organisational structure and hierarchy, rules, routines, and informal relations’ and worryingly normalised (2016: xxx). What was worrying from the findings in this study is that the low expectations and examples of an inadequate system, in some cases, was a dominant narrative and these issues were seen as typical within the system. Soan and Monsen (2023: 79) refer to the false hopes and expectations created by the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) in relation to ‘what and how parents/carers can really influence the EHC assessment and plan processes’ illustrating how the systemic cultural barriers and hierarchical structures hinder decision-making. As a result, disempowerment and the lack of choice and voice are becoming common narratives in the system and therefore normalised. The DfE/DoHSC (2023: 15) acknowledge a ‘vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence and inefficient resource allocation’ which in itself demonstrates the government declares the system is currently in a pernicious cycle. It could be argued that through the open identification of the inadequacies in the system, the presentation of the ‘vicious cycle’ would be a counter argument to the ‘normalization of deviance’ because government have identified their failings and highlight it as unacceptable. However, in openly sharing this information, it possibly desensitises and normalises the issue in society. In the findings SENCOs used language of the absurd to describe the system, openly acknowledging it is flawed yet from a position of being powerless to take action against the absurdities (see Section 4.3.7.1.2 A shared experience of disempowerment). It could be argued that the challenges are so common in practice now, with so many examples of poor educational opportunities for children with SEN, (HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009; HoCEC, 2019; National Audit Office, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022; DfE/DoHSC, 2023) it is ‘the norm’ even though the underlying narrative is that it is unacceptable.

#### 5.4.2.2 *The normalisation of power inequalities impacting on choice*

***'The current system does not work. The parents who shout the loudest, get what they want. It is a known fact that if you threaten to go to tribunal, the local authority will back down and give the parents what they want because it costs too much to go to tribunal.'* (SENCO Stage One)**

The findings of this study aligned to the literature (Reay, 2012) in identifying that parents who are able to draw on social, economic and cultural capital to effect some change, even if this is at an individual level, may be in a better position to take control, have some level of choice and influence outcomes (see Parent GET3: Sub-theme 1 - The Importance of decision making to parents). This is also recognised in the current system (HoCEC, 2019: 87) because parents 'without significant personal or social capital therefore face significant disadvantage.' However, I would argue, that knowledge, power and socio-economic status are not necessarily advantageous, but are actually a necessity to be able to navigate the system because currently this requires 'significant levels of legal knowledge and personal resilience' (HoCEC; 2019: 86). Parents who are not in a position to draw on wider resources are essentially excluded in their ability to engage in the system on any meaningful level and reinforces the position that '[f]or some, Parliament might as well not have bothered to legislate' (HoCEC, 2019: 87). Although parents are not a homogeneous group and diversity should be acknowledged, Vincent (2000: 32) refers to the common perception of parents' relationships with professionals as being 'positioned as [a] subordinate, less powerful group'. With the assumed position of society as generally passive, it may be the case that the majority of parents are passive in the approach to the EHC needs assessment process. If the default position is passivity, then possibly the only way parents and SENCOs are able to engage with the system, where their voice is heard, is by stepping out of this position of passivity. This is evidenced by Bryant, Parish and Kulawik's (2022:6) research that identified the 'Tribunal appeals were more likely to come from more affluent families.' With this evident disparity, it is important to consider if making a choice to step outside of a position of passivity is an action all parents are able to effect.

Parents are therefore essentially powerless in the current system, leading to situations where there is limited or no choice. Hodkinson (2010: 64) refers to the 'locus of the local education authority' and the way the LAs perform two main functions, firstly to create local policy but also to largely decide on the provisions in place for children with SEND. This results in a tension of being the 'assessors of need and paymasters' (Hellawell, 2019: 3). This tension highlights Garrett's (2009: 16) argument that the State is not neutral but complex and 'in the hands of ruling class'. The professionals and their reports are paid for by the local authority and so therefore it is a way in which the local authority maintain

control. The professionals employed by the State will undoubtedly be influenced by the system they are serving, and whether professionals in this situation can truly be independent has been an issue raised in the past (Armstrong, 1995). This level of control is reinforced by Vincent (2000) who notes social class divisions in citizenship in social democratic societies. The individuals in society 'able to gain economic independence can *contract* particular services. Those who cannot, can in theory gain access to state-provided welfare services' (Vincent, 2008: 8). However, it is noted that they then 'come under the *tutelage* of professionals' (*ibid.*, 2008: 8) who will make judgements over eligibility based on their criteria. This will include judgement over needs and if they can be met, which encapsulates the level of control the State has over the process and why parents who can, are paying to contract services. This will of course leave those parents who cannot pay to exit the system as being 'controlled' by it. That is if they are even able to access the system at all.

The parents finding other ways to educate their children or exiting the system by buying in the services of independent professionals, results in a two-tier system which perpetuates inequalities and is becoming the 'norm'. Yet, the system is not currently working (HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022), eliciting a sense of dissatisfaction, so seeking advice, support and professional or legal counsel outside of the system, for those who can, may be an expected response in the current climate.

#### *5.4.2.3 The normalisation of systemic inequalities impacting on choice*

***'now I understand why intergenerational poverty and, you know, intervention of social care. And deprivation perpetuates for families, because it's just totally disabling and disempowering. And it removes all your dignity and respect' (Carmen\_p 49.06)***

The findings supported that the overly complex system impacts on access, which in turn impacts on ability to participate and ultimately the level of choice. The years of patching up an inadequate system has led to layers of complexity which are unfathomable and inaccessible to most. The continual policy changes from successive governments to address 'identified problems and sometimes differing values' (Hellawell, 2019: 28) are therefore problematic and can provide the conditions for failures as Vaughan (2016: xxx) noted 'increasing system complexity increases the possibility of failure.' This can have a detrimental impact on professionals as they attempt to navigate the constant changes in policy and direction and was evident in the findings. Amber's experience illustrated the frustration: '*I wish they'd let SENCOs just get together and say, right, this is how we need to improve it, because oh, my goodness, this is bonkers'* (Amber\_s 22.04) .

Continued pursuits to 'fix' a system that has continually been identified as not fit for purpose (HoC, 2006; National Audit Office, 2019, HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023) could be related to the sunk-cost

fallacy (Thaler, 1980). This theory has primarily been applied to financial situations, yet Arkes and Blumer (1985) are psychologists who applied the sunk cost effect to the investment we make in endeavours etc. and the principle that it can be difficult to give up on something that has required so much effort. This could be, in part, a rationale for the perpetual patching up of the system and blindness to addressing the root cause. Vaughan (2016: xxxvi) refers to the 'sociology of mistake' and notes that mistakes, mishaps or disasters are 'socially organized and systematically produced by social structures. No extraordinary actions by individuals explain what happened' (2016: xxxvi). Therefore indicating a systemic issue in the failure. This is analogous to schools and local authorities, who have significant duties to uphold, but managing this has been identified as not working and requires a change at a systemic level to ensure that 'all policies are 'SEND proof'' (HoCEC, 2019: 87). Bryant, Parish and Kulawik's (2022:7) research identifying that '96% of [Tribunal] appeals are decided in favour of the appellant' considered whether this could be the result of 'poor quality decision-making that is open to legal challenge' as being widespread across LAs (*ibid.*, 2022:7). However, they concluded that 'the trends in disagreements and disputes are symptomatic of wider systemic issues within the SEND system' (Bryant, Parish and Kulawik, 2022:7).

It is important therefore to acknowledge that these wider systemic issues and the structural aspects can impact upon collaborative practices in the EHC needs assessment process. Hirokawa and Poole (1996: 116) refer to the 'structuration' of group decisions. This acknowledges the interactions of individuals as being influenced and impacted upon by structural features such as networks, institutions or organisations etc. This brings together the micro and macro influences upon collaborative interactions and decision making and so this aspect of the systemic and societal factors that come into play, serves to represent how the system itself can further exacerbate the issues. Ultimately this leads to further disempowerment of those who are already marginalised.

Systemic models that are well established make it very challenging to implement policy changes and to enable individuals to have an influence within the system. Change can be exciting and innovative, yet it can produce feelings of anxiety, stress or frustration and can create a resistant force if not managed well. Fullan (2020:1) refers to change as a 'double-edged sword. Its relentless pace these days runs us off our feet. Yet when things are unsettled, we can find new ways to move ahead and to create breakthroughs not possible in stagnant societies.' The changes to legislation (*Children and Families Act*, 2014), were heralded as a positive change for the SEND system (DfE and Teather, 2012) but this is not sufficient in itself, what is essential is how the changes are enacted in practice. Stewart (2009: 14) claims that '[p]oliticians often pretend that they can start anew with public policy, but the results of past choices are hardwired into the structures of the State'. Therefore, illustrating the

complexity of the process in developing and moving practices forward which will inevitably involve cultural as well as systemic change. It highlights the embedded institutional influence to set the 'rules that condition people's behaviour. These rules are as much implicit as they are explicit' (Stewart, 2009: 14) meaning it can be difficult to identify and effect progressive changes such as 'true' empowerment for individuals. Benhabib (1996: 7) refers to western society politics as 'domestication, containment and boundary drawing'. We are forcing people into a passive system, offering them democracy and collaboration but in a system that cannot facilitate this. Typically, society is passive; '[w]e live, in short, within a passive polity' (Vincent, 2000: 7). This may provide an illusion of opportunity to contribute to the system, yet, voice and autonomy are so restricted that they essentially do not exist due to the state's influence over EHC needs assessment. This is completely contrary to the values based, person-centred principles in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015).

It could be argued that bureaucracy can be effective as a system for production and 'functional division of responsibility' (Stewart, 2009: 17). However, this approach does not work effectively for systems involving more 'complex, multi-level negotiations that must be undertaken' (Stewart, 2009: 17) such as the EHC needs assessment. Processes that involve individuals with a range of interests, values and experiences may possibly prove resistant to the more 'traditional top-down, state-centred mechanisms and methods' by the nature of involving a range of stakeholders (Fung, 2006: 681). Therefore, if action is to apply, then it will need to be inclusive of those perspectives and 'inter-organisational' in order to resist these 'centralising tendencies' (Stewart, 2009: 18). This foregrounds the importance of collaboration because without this approach there is a lack of opportunity to acknowledge the values, position and voice of others.

It is important to recognise the current system is not the only way to support children with SEND, and especially because it is not working – there needs to be a change, reinforced by Fullan's (2020: 61) claims that the 'status quo – the way schools are – is no longer fit for purpose. Almost 4 out of 5 students are disengaged from school learning, inequality is rapidly on the rise, anxiety and stress among the young of all socioeconomic groups is steadily increasing. All signs point to change.' The necessity for a change to the system is strengthened by Soan and Monsen's (2023: 73) position to the question: 'Inclusion and inclusive practice – is this actually possible in our current system?' is 'a definite and loud 'no''. This reinforces the argument for a paradigm shift in focus for education, and in particular, how we conceptualise inclusion and SEN. Vaughan (2016: 197) refers to the paradigm shift of Kuhnian scientific thinking and how the issue at NASA was 'a scientific paradigm that persisted despite repeated challenges'. This can be related to the current SEND system whereby repeated challenges (Armstrong, 1995; HoC, 2006; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023) are part of the culture. It

could be considered that Warnock (DES, 1978) provided a paradigm shift with the move to a social model for conceptualising disability and learning needs over 40 years ago, however, further and more extreme change may now be needed. Slee (2011: 110) claims that 'Inclusive school cultures require fundamental changes in educational thinking about children, curriculum, pedagogy and school organisation, which is supported by Soan and Monsen (2023: 25) who call for a radical change in how the system is conceptualised and call for a move away from a separate 'shadow special education system'.

### 5.4.3 Enabling choice

#### 5.4.2.2 *Environments to enable choice*

##### ***'And you're stuck in that Limbo of what was the point of doing an EHCP' (Amelia-p 27.01)***

The findings illustrated challenges in environmental conditions in which parents and professionals are operating, such as limited time and resources. Creating the right conditions and safe spaces for dialogue is challenging in a performative driven environment, but this is essential to provide the foundations for some level of autonomy and influence. Based on the findings in this study and supporting literature, any changes in practice without addressing the system as a whole will inevitably be limited, but it is necessary to provide the first foundational steps and clear and specific guidance for enabling spaces for dialogue to be able to offer some level of choice.

Limited time, resources and performative requirements, as well as broader societal conditions, such as attitudes or the ethos of the setting or school can serve to set up the environment as a liminal space. Liminal spaces are spaces where there is uncertainty. Typically, humans crave homeostasis (Clancy and McVicar, 2009) and although this is typically applied to physiological states (e.g. controlling temperature etc.) maintaining balance and regularity to psychological functions is also beneficial. Liminal spaces mark out a point of transition from one phase to another and so could be representative of the process of applying for and gaining an EHC plan.

The liminal spaces associated with going through the EHC process impacted on levels of autonomy and ability to make choices in the findings. For example, the sense of instability of the liminal space was experienced by Amelia. She felt there would be an end to the educational insecurity with the issuing of the EHC plan and *'the key to the golden SEN door'* (Amelia\_p 27.01), yet when she reached what she anticipated as the end, she realises this is not the end, but continued to feel the uncertainty of a liminal space because *'you're stuck in that Limbo of what was the point of doing an EHCP'* (Amelia\_p 27.01). These aspects are influential in enabling a sense of autonomy and choice when we are faced with an unstable environment where expectations may differ from the reality. Central to Ryan and Deci's (2017: 10) theory of Self-Determination is the importance of 'autonomy' which is 'a

form of functioning associated with feeling volitional, congruent and integrated' therefore having the ability and right conditions to make choices is essential. Ryan and Deci (2017: 9) identified that 'need-thwarting environments' which are 'overly controlling, rejecting, critical and negative' will result in individuals becoming 'self-focused, defensive, amotivated, aggressive and anti-social'. This provides a destructive environment for 'autonomy' and '[i]ndeed, the presence of these more negative human capacities is typically indicative of social contexts that are thwarting of fundamental or basic psychological needs.' (*ibid.*, 2017:9). The environment can have the potential for a toxic perpetual cycle which results in detrimental surroundings serving to hinder the ability to form quality working relationships for shared decision-making to take place.

Based on the findings the EHC process is situated as an experience where parents feel deep uncertainty and stress, their inability to know the next steps or the outcomes can be deeply uncomfortable as they move through a process of change or uncertainty. Similarly, SENCOs felt uncertainty from the lack of information and variability in the system (SENCO GET3: Sub-theme 2 - External powers limiting the decision making of SENCOs). Furthermore, the findings illustrated the continual changes the SENCOs are navigating as a destabilising process for example: *'having a named SEN person, which is quite hard, isn't it to find out who your named SEN person is because they they keep restructuring'* (Bethany\_s 49.15). The context is one of perpetual changes, Soan and Monsen (2023: 57) claim that 'education is renowned for continual change and reorganisation depending on the current central government's ideological orientation, and its perception of wider public opinion and societal trends.'

Parents and SENCOs are on the threshold of something different or a new phase, but not quite there yet which can be deeply unsettling. It is important that professionals are able to negotiate these spaces and can sometimes step outside of restrictive processes to ensure children and families are central. Hammersley-Fletcher's (2015: 212) research related to headteachers foregrounds the importance of space, they argue that safe spaces 'enable staff to manage the tensions between performance regimes and creative endeavour. Intrinsic values about being child-centred had allowed these heads, on occasion, to make a stand in relation to extrinsically driven value agendas where the two came into clear conflict'. Arguably, an increased awareness of the current context and potential for disempowerment in the system might help to combat identified limits on choice. It may help to create a more positive environment offering psychological safe space rather than a 'need-thwarting environment' (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 9) which can place a part in the 'diminishment of people's inherent capacities to fully function' (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 10). More security and stability may come from improved clarity over the processes, which to some degree is planned with changes ahead, such



as the common approach planned for EHC plans (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). A shared understanding of what is possible in the system would provide a more stable starting point for conversations.

#### *5.4.3.2 Addressing power as a mechanism for control to enable choice*

***'I just think we need to abandon those thoughts, those thoughts and just keep it to, we all have needs, and they ebb and flow throughout our lifetime.'* (Carmen\_p 25.16)**

There needs to be a move away from the position of a deficit model which serves to reinforce the 'normalization of deviance' (Vaughan, 2018). The current system is based upon a 'needs' or deficit model where the State provides the resources to facilitate the child or young person's education, which places the individual in a position of subservience to the body issuing the provision. Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009: 200) refer to the language of current policy as being focussed on 'children who are "special" and in "need" [which] emphasises individual deficits, and therefore, plays a part in constructing and sustaining exclusionary practices.' What must be avoided is perpetuating this historic, culture of the passive, subservient, deficit model, which undoubtedly results in positioning of individuals as 'other' and sets up adversarial and defensive standpoints. This serves to disempower and restrict opportunity for choice and inhibits working in a co-productive or enabling way. Hellawell (2019: 120) refers to models for collaboration and the professional cultures that can shape professional identities. She notes the consequence of pessimistic models 'may be that services are shaped around powerful professions and professionals rather than focused on the needs of the service users.' In the findings, Carmen's quote on how this positioning serves to set up an intergenerational need within families illustrates the dangers of this cultural attitude persisting. If we ignore Cahn's (2000) warning of the dangers of looking at families from a 'needs' basis we will always disable them and limit their ability to make choices.

In the findings parents and professionals were often managing the systems and processes individually alongside each other rather than working together in a collaborative way (see Section 4.2.1.3 Decision making in isolation). This sets up the patterns of individualistic action and dissociation as opposed to a sense of belonging and feeling valued in the process. The system is adversarial (Armstrong, 1995; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023; Soan and Monsen, 2023) which undoubtedly leads to a position of defensiveness which is in opposition to an ethos to foster person-centred practice and the conditions for co-production. The distance created from parents and SENCOs working in isolation rather than together is an issue because it reduces opportunity for connections, and in particular in-person or face to face interactions which can assist with open, honest relationships. Lamb (2022) argues that 'the act of engagement itself builds trust'. Therefore, ensuring

there are opportunities for interactions will serve to support the initial steps towards building 'trust' and foundations for quality relationships to develop. Through the act of engagement it may combat the sense of 'other', being defensive and the adversarial positioning many experience.

Too often, power is used as a mechanism for control within the current system and by the nature of using power to influence an outcome, it is likely that this will impinge on others' abilities to have influence and make choices. From the findings of this study, it was very clear that parents do not feel respected and in many cases were feeling devalued and dehumanised within the process. SENCOs also experienced restricted choices and disempowerment which was evident in the findings (4.3.7.2.2 Conflicting perspective on power). *Therefore*, power may be being used or resorted to as a way to manage in the system because people are not valued to feel in control or able to make choices through using more collaborative approaches to working. Power relations impact on shared decision-making and the levels of agency for those parties involved. This is unavoidable, but different models of working together can influence the balance of power and level of agency. For example, the Expert model could be seen as led by professionals and therefore favours the SENCO as holding power, yet the Consumer model may enable a more equal balance of power between parents and professionals (Cunningham and Davis, 1985). However, the professional who is operating in the Consumer model could be perceived as more vulnerable because '[t]he defences of superiority, indispensability and infallibility are not so easily maintained. Their expertise is much more open to scrutiny' (Cunningham and Davis, 1985: 14). Arguably this defensiveness over professional status could be rooted in the notion of agency as 'solely lodged in an individual agent, who is working alone and intentionally' (Vande Putte et al., 2018: 898). This notion of professional agency is problematic in relation to co-production because co-production requires collaboration, therefore addressing this position would require a shift in thinking culturally from a traditional deficit model where the professional is the holder of expertise, knowledge and power and parents are viewed as subordinate.

Professional agency is impacted upon by a range of factors and is 'not entirely determined by their professional status' (Cunningham and Davis, 1985: 14). For example, Biesta and Tedder (2007: 137) note that 'the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural "factors" as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations'. Even the professionals who are practicing in good faith may be inadvertently influenced by the system in which they are operating, which impacts on their ability to be impartial, or to place the families they are working with as central. This is referred to by Hellawell (2019: 132) who claims professionals, with the best intentions for the child and families, follow a system where they construct themselves as the experts and in doing so undertake decisions or follow

guidance to avoid uncertainty, mistakes and failures. However, this results in professionals who 'accept being told what to do by a knowledge-producing system that guides their practice' rather than 'living an acting a relational, reciprocal, open, and inevitably uncertain professionalism (Urban *et al.*, 2012).' This has implications for parent-professional dialogue which is 'assumed to be democratic and equal, but which has to be managed and moderated by the professional [and therefore], remains a paradox' (Hellawell, 2019: 102). Consequently, these traditional perspectives on professional agency as individualistic in nature could well be deeply influenced by powerful, systemic structures which ostensibly continue to create distance and disempower. Lin *et al.* (2024: 609) argues for 'the need to conceptualise SENCo agency as a temporal, ecological process that involves engagement with culture, structure and resources in specific contexts.' Perhaps this sociocultural way of perceiving agency as interconnected and not 'solely lodged in an individual agent' (Van de Putte *et al.*, 2018: 898) is required to address these powerful, systemic structures, possibly enabling a shift towards more collaborative practices. Essentially if the ability to participate is reduced or removed, then consequentially making choices will be restricted.

Similarly, findings showed that children and families have to fit the system rather than the system flexing to accommodate them, such as Bonnie's comment: *'That way we get rid of this child that doesn't conform to our square box to a different school, but not indicate to the local authority that we're having problems'* (Bonnie\_p 43.10). This relies on parents being passive because when parents step outside of this position, they are perceived as 'problems' (Macleod *et al.*, 2013) as evidenced by the experiences of a parent in this study: *'At the point that they broke me and I was in the break-down, I was a risk. When I was coping, I was capable, and I wasn't someone for them to worry about. When I was well-informed, I was too knowledgeable. So what can I say? I mean, it's just there are many unhelpful labels'* (Carmen\_p 49.06). It is unsurprising that this results in parents being subservient, or exiting the system or by using the adversarial mechanisms which are rooted in power and control, such as the Tribunal. The only way some individuals can have voice or choice is by taking up these approaches, currently the system does not facilitate collaboration as supported by Byant, Parish and Kulawik (2022) who identified challenges in trying to decouple the dispute resolution from the wider system. They acknowledged that the Tribunal 'is a symptom of wider issues, not a cause of wider issues. The focus needs to be on preventing disputes' (*ibid.*, 2022: 41). Participation and shared decision-making combats the reliance on parents as passive and so could provide a foundation for encouraging and enabling improved levels of choice within the limits of the current system.

#### 5.4.3.3 *Courageous, autonomous professionals to enable choice*

***'And I think it takes is courage to work with families that's the other thing, it does take a lot of courage. And I think professionals all too quickly get quite burnt out because they're not used to getting uncomfortable.'* (Carmen\_p 39.27).**

There needs to be a culture that recognises the need for creative, responsive, courageous, autonomous professionals to work with children with SEND and their families, not a system which produces automatons limited in their ability to be responsive to complex, evolving and sometimes very sensitive situations. The findings in this study and reviews of services (Munro, 2011; Francis, 2013) evidences the need to create a culture for empowerment and supporting the decision-making of all stakeholders. Carmen's experience identified this issue when she shared that *'actually, it's down to culture and behaviour within services. And that actually, there are good people in all these systems coming up against shit people.'* (Carmen\_p 37.43). The performative drive within education is impacting on the culture and environment in which professionals are trained and then developed, as they embark on, and progress in their careers. Soan and Monsen (2023) argue that the drive for professionalization for national, political and economic gain is in opposition to developing autonomous professionals. This drive has served to deskill the teaching population and they cite Buyruk (2018: 3) as arguing that 'teachers have lost their autonomy and control over their own labour processes'.

The values and qualities of the professionals as well as their levels of autonomy were directly related to the key finding of how much influence SENCOs had in practice. It was clear that where SENCOs could be empowered by their experiences, knowledge and skills in co-production, they were still disempowered by the systemic limitations and restrictions on them to implement this approach in practice. This was evident in Bethany's account: *'I think if you if you did it as a case mapping, rather than the pace that the filling in loads of forms, that might be good. But that takes longer, doesn't it? And SENCOs don't have any time.'* (Bethany\_s 30:21). I would argue that this results in a professional tension because SENCOs are doing what they do not believe in which leads to dissatisfaction, frustration and disillusionment in the system. Hellowell (2019: 86) refers to the pressure created in '[d]eliberating the choice between 'should' and 'ought' [which] leads to feelings of stress' and how these 'tensions between vocational dispositions and organisational constraints' leads to moral stress. She cites Cribb's (2011: 123) reference to the 'grey area between conscious objection [...] and insufficient reason to step outside' which leads to everyday moral stress and the detrimental 'cumulative effect on motivation and wellbeing' (*ibid.*, 2019: 86). Boddison and Soan (2021) also refer to difficulties that arise from co-production when there is tension such as this in State policy and

procedures. Parents have ‘increased capacity for decision-making (DfE, 2011) whilst education professionals are limited in their flexibility as they have to follow prescribed LA procedures’ (*ibid.*, 2021: 99). Mearns and Thorne (2010: 214) support this position arguing that ‘[p]rofessionalism with its creeping tendency towards institutionalisation has created a prevailing climate of where many practitioners are fearful rather than courageous.’ Therefore, the demanding national and local authority bureaucratic, siloed systems and processes are negatively impacting upon SENCOs’ professional agency and their ability to work with parents in effective participatory ways, even if they have a very good understanding of co-production.

Van de Putte *et al.* (2018) reconceptualised professional agency and challenged the traditional view of the SENCO as the ‘change agent’ aligned to individualistic accountability and neoliberalism. They argue that ‘individual agency is entangled with multiple enlivening agencies that are simultaneously at play and that affect each other’ (Van de Putte *et al.*, 2018: 898). This premise embraces collaboration and the idea of ‘assemblages’ (Bennett, 2010: 24) because ‘agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation or intra-active effect of many agents’ (Van de Putte *et al.*, 2018: 889). The idea of assemblages means there is no central control or accountability, each part (or person) within an assemblage can retain their autonomy from the whole. Importantly, this view values the contribution of all, because ‘no one of the multiple acting agents has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. Each member of the vital assemblage has a certain force’ (Bennett, 2010: 24). This is a much more inclusive positioning of agency and helps to understand a different perspective of professional agency where ‘SENCOs are no longer separate individual humanist subjects but part of the intra-active entanglement of multiple agencies through which schools for all children might be constituted’ (Van de Putte *et al.*, 2018: 888). This more balanced position of agency is aligned to Cahn’s (2000: 34) claim that co-production ‘validates individual worth and contribution with a mix of psychological reward and extrinsic confirmation. Absolute self-sufficiency in total isolation is not feasible. Individuals are embedded in larger contexts.’

Cahn’s position is that co-production is empowering for all, so this would serve to ensure those who typically hold less power as having more influence, but with this model it would also enable the professionals, such as SENCOs, to hold more power and autonomy over their choices. Indeed, ‘expertise is not bad; specialized knowledge and commitment are not necessarily destructive of local initiative. Co-Production provides a way in which the professional’s knowledge can be converted into a catalyst that empowers’ (Cahn, 2000: 34).

Findings evidenced that the interpersonal skills and the emotional intelligence of professionals were just as essential as supporting quality training and continuing professional development (GET2

Relationships: Sub-theme 2 - Professional Requirements for relationship). These aspects can support professionals in fostering a culture for autonomous decision-making that is right for individuals, rather than being constrained by rigid policies and practices. Hellowell (2019: 132) claims that professionals are 'required to act decisively in uncertain situations that are beyond their control.' This is supported by Daniels *et al.* (2007: 534) 'Rule-bending' has occurred in cases where staff have identified the need for nonroutine, partially improvised decision-making in order to meet highly personalised client needs and/or rapidly changing situations. In such cases professionals have sought to ensure that local authority processes and routines do not unduly constrain their responses to clients' needs.' Therefore, the confidence and ability to take calculated risks, think flexibly, and respond in emotionally intelligent ways when managing ethical dilemmas are interpersonal skills that need to be prioritised and developed rather than providing a training offer that is rigid and reduces creativity and autonomy.

One practical way to address this is by adopting practices of integrated opportunities for collaboration across professions as part of the core training programmes for teachers and wider public service professions in their university courses. McAuliffe (2014) acknowledged that traditionally professional education takes place in disciplinary silos. She presents an argument for teaching ethics across the professions at tertiary level, claiming that 'knowing the perspectives of others on points of ethical interest will give us a more rounded appreciation of the collaborative care environment' (*ibid.*, 2014: 19). Hellowell (2019: 116) supports this position in her recognition that '[w]hat appears to have been neglected is an exploration of ethical dimensions of professional relationships, as well as structural inhibitors and injustices.' Some professional bodies have adopted policies for training across professions, for example the Health and Care Professions Council have built interprofessional practice into their requirements for education and training for health professionals, stating '[t]he programme must ensure that learners are able to learn with, and from, professionals and learners in other relevant professions' (HCPC 2017: 7). An example of the positive impact interdisciplinary training can have is demonstrated through the work of Action for Collaborative Transformation (ACT) initiated from the work from a doctoral thesis (Soan, 2013). ACT has included a range of initiatives in collaborative training opportunities for pre-service and in-service professionals across the public sector services to increase the knowledge of other professions and reduce misconceptions in practice. One example of their work included an event for in-service teachers in managing medical conditions in school (Hughes *et al.*, 2016). The group aims to undertake further projects to develop their interdisciplinary community of learning and research (Delahunt *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, simulation based-learning (Mulholland *et al.*, 2023) is a powerful way to provide meaningful learning opportunities for professionals. It can be a way to utilise approximations of practice as a safe space for professionals to

attempt to engage in, and then reflect on, the ethical dilemmas they will encounter in practice. It can never encompass all the scenarios professionals might face, but it is a way to develop the essential underpinning virtues and experience to help professionals to have confidence and to develop autonomy in managing similar scenarios when it occurs in real life.

Arguably the current performative context in education does not adequately prepare professionals to be empowered and autonomous. Professionals need to be in a position to effectively review and reflect on the work they are completing with children and families to be able to evaluate what is, and is not working and why, so they can be responsive and flexible. Carmen identified this in the qualities she valued in a professional as: *'mutual respect, and, and, but most importantly, curiosity. So I think where professionals go wrong, is they come in with their qualification, their training, and they forget to be humbled and curious'* (Carmen\_p 48.24). The findings in this study suggest that appropriate training, support and development of professionals is required to enable the pathway for co-production to be understood and applied in practice.

## 5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter was framed on the re-conceptualisation of the original research question into three more specific research questions. These questions, which focused on valuing individuals, developing working relationships and enabling decision-making, were discussed in relation to the findings of my study and the wider policy, legislation, political context, theory and current research in the field. The discussion led to the following areas being identified as having an impact on the working lives of SENCOs, and parents' experiences of the system:

1. Caring educationalist – SENCOs needs to be viewed in this way and not detached from the challenges, complexities and vulnerabilities families face. Without support positioned in this way, a genuine values-based approach is not possible
2. Communication – Working together will only come from dialogue. Co-production is underpinned by relationships and the requirement to manage 'difficult conversations' effectively (Stone, Patton and Heen, 2010: xii)
3. Choice – Individuals need a level of choice and autonomy in decision-making in the process. This will be limited within the confines of the system, but both professionals and parents need to be able to affect some control over the educational situations they are navigating together.

The constant references to the need for culture change in legislation (HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009; DfE, 2011; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023), but without any clear guidance on what this actually means in practice or the ways in which it might happen, is problematic. Burke, (2018: 255) claims that '[y]ou

don't change culture by trying to change the culture'. Therefore, adopting the principles of *care*, *communication* and *choice* in practice consistently could provide foundations towards culture change. It is posited here that it is practical solutions to the unworkable SEND system that are required now rather than further calls, or words written in legislation, for culture change. In other words, I suggest that for culture change to take place, the SEND system needs to actively enable collaborative working between all partners including SENCOs and parents. So, the suggestions in Chapter 6 will not necessarily address systemic issues but will address humanistic issues by providing a practical approach for parents and SENCOs to initiate preliminary changes and the foundations for developing a path towards co-production. All participants in my study shared heartfelt experiences of the injustices in the system and so it is essential to take concrete actions (explored further in Chapter 6) because, '[e]very year that passes without a well-functioning SEND system is another year of a child's education that is failing' which cannot continue (House of Lords, 2022: 92).



## 6. Chapter 6 - Conclusions

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter commences with reference to the aims of the research, then outlines the main contributions to knowledge followed by implications for policy and practice and the resultant recommendations. There have been reflections throughout the thesis, to represent the ongoing nature of the researcher's reflexive process, however in this section there is a fuller reflection on the research journey and positionality of the researcher. Limitations of the study are considered followed by a final consideration of future research in this field.

#### 6.1.1 Addressing the research question

Exploration of the original research question of: **'What are parents' and SENCOs' experiences of co-production when they are making decisions during the EHC needs assessment and planning process?'** led me to realise that currently, there is much confusion over co-production. In some cases co-production is an illusion (Boddison and Soan, 2021). There is no standardised training, frameworks, or guidance from the government despite the requirement for co-production in current policy (DfE, 2023a; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). The findings in the study highlighted how the current performative system limits the time and resource to enable investment in co-production in practice. Therefore, even if there is knowledge of how to work in person-centred ways to illicit co-production, the current system and societal priorities thwart endeavours. Co-production should be empowering and enable greater influence over decision-making for stakeholders (Cahn, 2000; Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012; Roper, Grey and Cadogan, 2018), yet giving the illusion of choice when there is no choice on some aspects of practice leads to dissatisfaction.

Participants in this research have clearly indicated that the lack of choice in the current system and the evident co-production confusion identified in this research continues to compound persistent issues, such as the lack of confidence and mistrust already embedded in the system (HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Hammersley and Traianou (2012: 78) refer to the 'fallacy of freedom-in-general' with reference to ethics in research and note the challenges in providing choice and that this must be meaningful choice provided within a specific frame. They claim: 'one cannot be free from all constraint, nor would most people believe that anyone should act in a way that is free from all restrictions' (*ibid.*, 2012: 78). This position is applicable to ethics more generally, but is also a realistic position in relation to the process of decision-making and sets boundaries for working together. With this premise, individuals have a level of choice, but this is within boundaries. However, the findings of this study identified that too frequently, the bare minimum tokenistic practice is in place for

participation in decision-making and, in some cases, this legal requirement is not even being met. Therefore, embedding co-production in practice is far from being realised and in fact unachievable in the current SEND system. The following contributions to knowledge outline a new approach on how to address this issue and the rationale for the suggested approach, which aims to build the foundations for enabling co-production.

## 6.2 Contributions to knowledge

This study has built on the existing knowledge as outlined in the literature review to address the challenges identified with parent and SENCO experiences of participatory decision-making in the management of Education, Health and Care plans. Hammersley and Traianou (2012: 51) refer to academic relevant knowledge as relating to ‘what is required to make a contribution to a body of disciplinary knowledge’. The main contributions from this study to the body of knowledge in the discipline are noted below.

### 6.2.1 The safe space for co-partnership model

The increasing political drive to adopt co-production into practice (DfE/DoH, 2015; DfE/DoHSC, 2022; DfE, 2023a; DfE/DoHSC, 2023) may be a response to the calls for culture change (HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009; DfE, 2011; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2022). Yet a change to policy without the appropriate systems in place or training and support arguably may have contributed to the ‘vicious cycle’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 15) and a worsening of the situation for children with SEND (HoCEC, 2019). This study was focused upon co-production but findings in this study, have led to a model for co-partnership, which is underpinned by the core principles of *care*, *communication* and *choice*. Co-production is still referred to in this chapter because it is essential for professionals to have a good level of knowledge of this concept, however co-production should be undertaken through choice and not as a default requirement for parents and SENCOs working together.

#### 6.2.1.1 Care

Co-production can be enabled through *care*. The findings illustrated that pressures from the current performative system limits the time and resources to enable investment in co-production. The neoliberal, performative drive impacting upon care within services and society is not new (Robertson, 2007; Hart, 2012; Reay, 2012), but the introduction of *care* as an explicit aspect of the SENCO role and education more broadly (education-care) presents **a new way** to conceptualise how we position the SENCO in school. The governmental direction for co-production cannot be embedded without a values-based approach where people are central, as opposed to focusing on processes and paperwork.

### 6.2.1.2 Communication

Co-production can be enabled through *communication* and equitable relationships. The findings illustrated that pressures from lack of standardised training, frameworks, or guidance from the government is leading to co-production confusion. Co-production is not simple but is rooted in relationships. The varied experiences and knowledge SENCOs and parents held in relation to co-production led to widely disparate understanding and practises. The requirement for trusting relationships between parents and SENCOs is not new (Lamb, 2009), but the requirement for communication training to be central and prioritised first is a **new approach**. Quality relationships are fundamental (**Table 16**) and dialogue is the tool by which we build and maintain these quality relationships. How can we co-produce if we struggle to effectively manage difficult conversations? Co-production is, after all, a series of difficult conversations that when managed well by all stakeholders will lead to a solution focused positive outcome (Stone, Patton and Heen, 2010).

### 6.2.1.3 Choice

Co-production can be enabled through providing individuals with *choice*. The findings illustrated that the pressures from the illusion of choice when there is no choice on some aspects of practice leads to dissatisfaction. Power inequalities evident from direct and indirect disempowerment served to perpetuate acceptance of an inequitable, poor system and limit voice and choice for both parents and SENCOs. Parental participation in decision-making is not new (*Children and Families Act, 2014*), but it **is new** to recognise decision-making as an ongoing process, which is dependent on quality relationships and effective communication. Often decision-making is perceived as a singular action, something we 'do', but 'how' we enable participatory decision-making can be a complexity which is overlooked, illustrated by the lack of clear parameters within policy and guidance. The limited choice and autonomy for many parents and SENCOs illustrated persistent hierarchical structures and power differences which need to be addressed.

### 6.2.1.4 Co-partnership

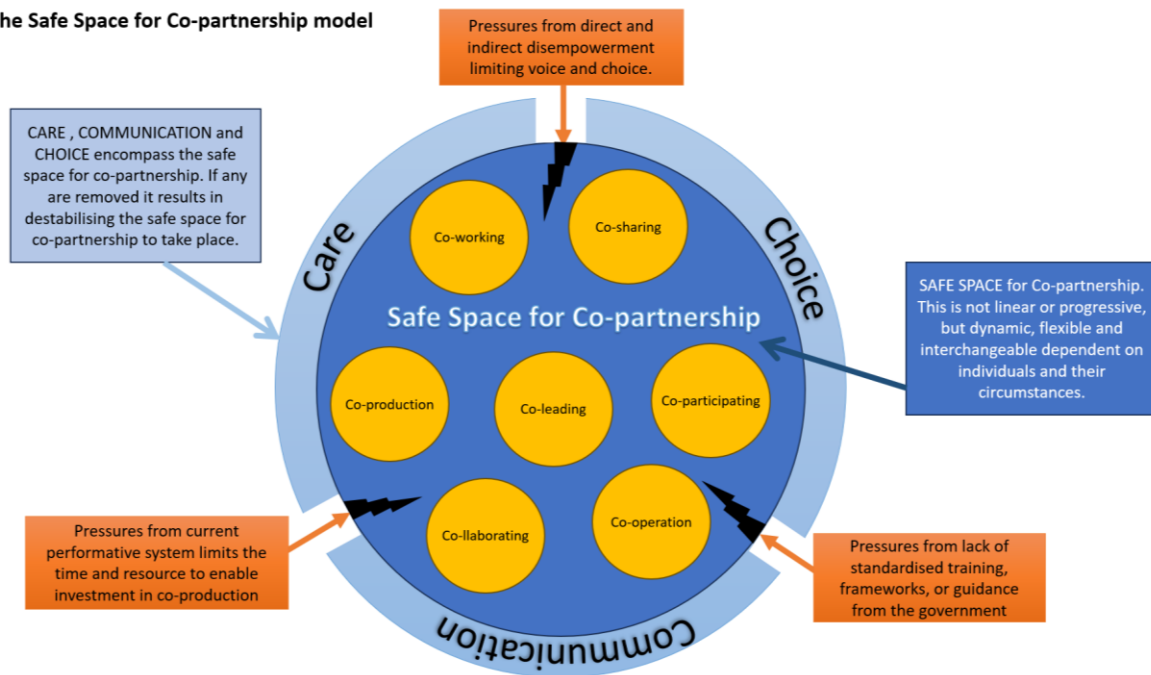
The Safe Space for Co-partnership model (**Figure 13**) therefore not only represents the foundations for co-production but also includes the ways in which a parent can on one day be leading a meeting (co-leading) and then the following week step into a position of being led by professionals (co-operation). Most importantly, the parent should have *choice* over how they work with the professionals. Life does not run in a smooth trajectory, and so the ways in which we work with each other must facilitate systems and processes to acknowledge this aspect. Progressive, linear models such as Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation fail to realise the 'messy web of interactions' which occur in working together (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 400). Parental partnership working is 'not a straight pathway' progressively up or down a ladder and it is not a 'one size fits all' approach (Goodall

and Montgomery, 2014: 400). Yet, based on the findings in this study, there does need to be an aspiration for improved ways of working together and a model can be a way to conceptualise this for practice.

Despite Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) commitment to a move away from linear models of engagement, in their paper, they still produce a model which has progressive levels of engagement. My model is genuinely different to traditional models in the way it reconceptualises partnership working because it doesn't require the movement up or down levels, it represents the changeable nature of working with individuals in different ways for different situations. The central, circular safe space for co-partnership is not linear or progressive, but enables a dynamic, flexible and interchangeable movement between ways of working dependent on individuals and their circumstances.

The prefix 'co' has been chosen for different representations of working together in the model because based on the etymology of the prefix 'co', the 'general sense is 'together', 'in company', 'in common', 'joint, -ly', 'equal, -ly', 'reciprocally', 'mutually'' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023a: np). This ensures alignment to the principles of *care*, *communication* and *choice* which underpin the model. To have used the word 'partnership' alone as the title for the model would have aligned to the definition as the: 'fact or condition of being a partner; association or participation; companionship' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023b: np), which does not provide the same sense of parity and reciprocity and could therefore perpetuate the power differentials evident in the past and still persistent today. Indeed, the definition of co-partnership reinforces this position as the 'relation of copartners; the possession of a joint share in any business, office, or interest.' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023c: np).

### The Safe Space for Co-partnership model



**Figure 13: The safe space for co-partnership model**

Burke (2018: 255) states '[v]alues, norms, deeply held beliefs, and attitudes, as well as long standing historical precedence, constitute primary aspects of culture' and argues that it is easier to change behaviours than it is to change values and attitudes. He questions why we would often attempt to start from this position because, 'we spin our wheels when we attempt to change at the outset espoused beliefs and values and basic underlying assumptions we cannot see, much less understand' (Burke, 2018: 259). To address this, Burke presented stages in addressing change in organisations when there is an ultimate goal to challenge the persistent attitudes and beliefs that may have become embedded in the culture. He referred to identifying the relevant behaviours required to realise the new culture, introduce the new practices and then measure the degree of adoption of the new practices. Essentially, the focus is shifted away from changing culture or persistent embedded assumptions in an organisation, to move to a focus on an approach which can be practically applied. Of course, this will still have its challenges, such as those individuals who are resistant to change, but it presents a starting point after determining 'what you want the new culture to be' (Burke, 1994: 157). This approach of setting values and applying it to behaviours is supported by the study conducted by Godoy *et al.*, (2022) which was driven by the need to reduce the disproportionate inequitable outcomes for children within the domain of social work. They claimed '[p]rior studies in other professions have shown that identifying and communicating agency values and applying these principles to behavior has led to myriad benefits, such as greater program coherence and improvement' (Godoy *et al.*, (2022: 2). They go on to reinforce their position by claiming that the

‘deliberate use of values-based decisions can lead to successful outcomes that are aligned with an organization’s values and principles (Barrett, 2006). Moreover, research has found that the most successful and longest lasting organizations live by their values (Barrett, 2006).’ Arguably, then, we must ‘identify the behaviors that when practiced will lead us to the new vision’ (Burke, 2018: 259) as the first steps and a pragmatic approach to implementing the intangible culture-change that has been called for repeatedly.

The safe space for co-partnership model identifies underlying principles of *care*, *communication* and *choice*, yet these are closely linked to changing behaviours. Broadly speaking, *care* is aligned to adopting person-centred practices, *communication* is aligned to improving dialogue and working relationships, and *choice* is aligned to recognising and addressing expectations and reality for clear parameters on what can be effected or challenged in the system. The aim of the model is to provide the basis for a pragmatic approach to inform changes in practice which is outlined in more detail in the recommendations (Section 6.4). However, despite this pragmatic approach, attempting to change culture ‘is complex, takes time and requires leadership’ (Holbeche, 2011: 195). The proposed model can only support culture change if it is actually adopted in practice. The underlying principles of *care*, *communication* and *choice* encompass the central, circular safe space for co-partnership; if any are removed it results in destabilising this safe space. This vulnerability of the model is represented by the external pressures which have been identified from the findings in this study as threatening to the safe space in which co-partnership can take place. Implementation of the model can therefore only be successful if the identified systemic issues are also addressed, such as addressing power differentials impacting on choice, and providing standardised training and flexible frameworks that are rooted in a values-based approach. The model is designed to support practice from the bottom up, but also requires a top-down movement to reduce the risks from these external pressures threatening the *care*, *communication* and *choice* encircling the safe space for parents and SENCOs to work together.

### 6.2.2 Multiperspectival design

The literature illustrated the adversarial positioning of parents and professionals as systemic in the SEND system and processes, both in the past and currently (Armstrong, 1995; National Audit Office, 2019; HoCEC, 2019; Bryant, Parish and Kulawik, 2022; DfE/DoHSC, 2023; Soan and Monsen, 2023), so by designing a study which looks at just one perspective over another, to some degree, perpetuates this difference. This study utilised a multiperspectival design (Larkin *et al.*, 2019) to bring together the perspectives from both parents and SENCOs to consider if there are common challenges in the experiences or if they are quite differently positioned.

Typically studies in this field have only looked at the SENCOs' or parents' perspectives separately, so consideration to both parents and SENCOs experiences of the EHC needs assessment process and management of the subsequent EHC plans was a new approach. By designing a study that considered the similarities and differences of both parents and SENCOs experiences of the same phenomenon it enabled new insights to be gained. Such as insights on shared experiences as well as points of conflict, which came to light in section 4.3.7 where the data was explored for convergence and divergence across the groups. It became clear there were aspects both groups had in common, for example the shared experiences of disempowerment, which was not an aspect which had been previously explored in the literature across both groups simultaneously.

### 6.2.3 Member checking model for IPA

The development of the member checking model for IPA studies (Section 3.3.3.2) was devised as an approach to ensure that the voice of the participant remains central in the study and aligned to the central focus of person-centred approaches to this research. Member-checking has typically been adopted in qualitative studies for the purpose of validating the researcher's analysis and providing a level of robustness by justifying the credibility through returning to the participants to verify the findings.

However, based on my review of the literature (**Table 4**), a model specifically for IPA studies has not been devised. Typically approaches have been adopted or adapted from qualitative research studies. I would propose the new model I devised (**Table 5**) is specifically aligned to the principles of IPA to provide a method for member checking. However, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of IPA studies and note that member-checking may not be suited to all IPA studies. The model provides a new approach which can be selected as an option to adopt should the IPA study include a participatory design which requires a return to the participants and in particular, studies that 'seek to pursue notions of social justice, empowerment, and equity' (Doyle, 2007: 906).

### 6.3 Implications for future policy and practice

The principles of adopting co-production could be argued as fundamentally correct (Cahn, 2000; Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012; Roper, Grey and Cadogan, 2018). If implemented well, co-production should build confidence in the system. Yet, due to the lack of appropriate training, support and resources, identified in this study, there is confusion over what should be in place. There is no standardised understanding of co-production, no frameworks to support this in practice and even if there is knowledge it cannot be realised because professionals do not have the time or resource to implement. Parents are experiencing wide disparities, which may be in part, due to the varying knowledge, experiences and resources available to professionals. Additionally, the '[g]rowing demand on

statutory SEND services reduces capacity for high-quality casework and co-productive, person-centred planning’ (Bryant, Parish and Kulawik, 2022:8) and serves to perpetuate the ‘vicious cycle’ (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 15). This has led to unsustainable costs where local authorities are using reserves accumulated from underspending on the dedicated schools grant, or borrowing from this fund to meet the high-needs funding demands. This is not a sustainable approach (National Audit Office, 2019). The way in which the current SEND system is operating is incredibly costly, ‘in ‘2017-18, 122 of 150 local authorities (81.3%) overspent against their high-needs budgets’ (National Audit Office, 2019: 29), resulting in reduced funds for quality, inclusive education at source. Additionally, in the current wider context of spending pressures, ‘[o]ne in 10 county councils in England is facing effective bankruptcy’ (Forsyth and Bentley, 2023: np) impacting on wider supportive and preventative services that might have been available to children and families. The financial costs are not being managed effectively, but worse are the cost to children’s life chances. Too many children are not able to access appropriate education. These exclusions may increase the likelihood of unemployment or even entering the penal system. The figures below highlight some of the recent resources and costs which, if there were better processes in place, could possibly be redirected to more effectively fund and support quality education for children with SEN:

- a. increase in EHC needs assessments: 517,049 EHC plans at January 2023. Up from 473,300 (9%) in 2022 (DfE, 2023b)
- b. increase in tribunals based on 2020-2021 figures: £59.8 million, but could be as high as £80 million based on withdrawn or conceded cases (Jemal and Kenley, 2023)
- c. increase in independent special school places: estimated costs £480 million per year (Staufenberg, 2017)
- d. increase in suspensions and permanent exclusions: 2021-22 exclusions for pupils with SEND were four times higher than peers without SEND (DfE, 2022)

It is important to question the cost of a system which currently does not lead to positive outcomes for learners (DfE/DoHSC, 2023), and to question as to whether the money supporting this system could be used more effectively. For example, Jemal and Kenley (2023: 5) claim the money wasted on SEN tribunals alone could have funded ‘9,960 additional SEN unit places, for children with SEN taught in separate classes for at least half of their time within mainstream schools.’

Culture change within the SEN system has been called for over a period of many years (HoC, 2006; Lamb, 2009; DfE, 2011; HoCEC, 2019; DfE/DoHSC, 2023) but, when this is referred to as a way forward to improve the system, there is not always the clear, practical guidance and support provided as to how this can be implemented. Indeed Fullan (2020 :1) argues that implementing cultural change is



‘one of the hardest things that humankind faces.’ The findings in this study illustrated that changing an embedded, normalised, historic culture of applying the deficit model and subservient position of need when working with children with SEN and their families, requires specific and practical guidance on ways in which to make a difference in behaviours and approaches. It is proposed that adopting the position of a caring education professional, ensuring there is time and resource allocated for the SENCO role to work with children and families in a person-centred way, is essential. Additionally, foregrounding the skills and personal attributes alongside training in effective communication and utilising shared flexible frameworks for working co-productively could be ways to make a change in addressing persistent inequalities from the bottom-up. The question is whether change from a grassroots level would work without the wider systemic changes to address the complex, adversarial, restrictive processes hindering opportunities to work co-productively. It is likely that any change from a practice-based position without the support of a change to the system within which it takes place will be much more difficult and limited in its impact. However, focusing on *care*, *communication* and *choice* as the starting point may provide the foundations for change and could be the first steps to combat the dominant cultural challenges and external pressures identified in the findings of this study as posing risks to parents and SENCOs enabling the safe space for co-partnership to be realised (**Figure 13**).

#### 6.4 Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are presented as providing the foundations to enable co-production (should this be appropriate for individual circumstances), but the intention is not to impose co-production as a way of working upon all stakeholders. Imposing co-production undermines the principles of co-production as a person-centred endeavour, which needs to be recognised in the current government agenda for SEND (DfE/DoHSC, 2023). Parents need *choice* on the ways in which they engage in the EHC needs assessment and management of the resultant plans, as well as how they might choose to be involved in wider strategic initiatives related to the SEND system and processes. Additionally, SENCOs need support to fully understand co-production and how this can be realised in practice, such as the *care* required for working relationships, the complexities surrounding co-production as a concept and knowledge of effective *communication* strategies.

There needs to be clear steps in moving practice forward due to being at a pivotal moment for SEN as changes to the system take place. An amended version of the SEND Code of Practice, with the consultation on this aligned to the introduction of the new National Standards (DfE/DoHSC, 2023), means change is happening and so ensuring the policy and legislative changes really do offer the ‘right support, right place [and] right time’ is crucial (DfE/DoHSC, 2022: 1).

Reports often include valid recommendations which, in some cases are undoubtedly required and necessary, but with too much complexity already in the system this can then become an obstacle for professionals trying to interpret and enact policy changes on the ground. Therefore, the recommendations that follow are focused on the three foundational principles of enabling *care*, *communication* and *choice*. Arguably, if embedded and applied consistently across practice, there would be an improvement in parents and SENCOs experiences of working together.

#### 6.4.1 SENCO as a caring educationalist

To be in a position to value people in the process, the SENCO needs to be reconceptualised as a ‘caring educationalist’ and recognised as a distinct profession in order to provide appropriate support for SENCOs to enable this in practice. It was clear from this study that the EHC needs assessment process and resultant management of the EHC plan includes deeply emotional experiences and in the worst cases accounts of trauma, exclusionary and illegal practices for children and parents. Qualities such as compassion and empathy are essential when working in highly emotional contexts, but it was evident from the findings of this study that opportunities for care is forced out of the system by performative demands. A person-centred offer to children and families is required to redress the balance, and to enable this, the SENCO role needs to be considered as a distinctive profession, similar to other professions which have recognised professional bodies (Richards, 2022).

#### Recommendations

- Policy and guidance needs to recognise the requirement for ‘education care’ within the SEND system and reconceptualise the SENCO role as a caring educationalist. The distinctiveness of the role as providing wider aspects of care beyond a typical teacher’s role (Sharpe, 2020) is taking place in practice and needs to be acknowledged.
- Ensure the SENCO role is recognised as a distinctive profession in the ways in which other professions with professional bodies are recognised (Richards, 2022).
- Time and resources to be allocated to the SENCO to enable care (person-centred practice). It is likely this will include a reduction in the performative requirements on the role such as the heavy administrative and bureaucratic demands (Curran *et al.*, 2020).
- Ensure there is appropriate care for the SENCO in practice by providing a system such as supervision which is established for professionals in health and social care settings.
- Draw on models from health and social care, such as case-mapping or draw on the new guidance planned for the SEND proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) to offer a supportive SEND

casework service to families to enable more effective ways to implement person-centred practice.

- Prioritise *care* for parents and SENCOs through application of the safe space for co-partnership model.

#### 6.4.2 Enabling Communication

To ensure parents and SENCOs can participate in quality working relationships, we need to recognise that co-production is complex and impossible to elicit without effective communication to help build strong relationships. It was clear from the findings that the interpersonal skills of the professional and their ability to communicate effectively, even in the most challenging situations, is essential. Therefore, appropriate training to enable this in practice and implementing shared flexible frameworks across the professions may support consistency when professionals in health, social care and education are working together with parents.

#### Recommendations

- Relevant and appropriate standardised training for SENCOs (and other professionals where appropriate) who are working with parents to be able to develop the communicative repertoire and interpersonal skills needed for effectively managing conversations; this includes training related to 'difficult conversations' (Stone, Patton and Heen, 2010: xii).
- Standardised training in co-production, which is mentioned 21 times in policy, (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) and three times in the new SENCO NPQ framework (DfE, 2023a) but there is no mention of specific training for co-production. Appropriate training in co-production is essential because it is complex involving, investment in relationships, managing different values, trust and power relations, and an understanding of political agendas.
- Ensure the new National Standards for SEND (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) provide a basis for shared flexible frameworks across professions working with children and families who are proceeding through the EHC needs assessment process.
- Enable effective *communication* between parents and SENCOs through application of the safe space for co-partnership model.

#### 6.4.3 Enabling Choice

To improve on the parents' and SENCOs' levels of decision-making in the process, we need to understand that decision making is not a singular decision at a point in time, but a process and so understanding how we enable parents in participatory decision-making through quality relationships

and effective communication is key. Choice is impacted upon by complexities such as power differences and the hierarchical systemic structures the SEND system sits within. Currently, this leads to an illusion of choice, when for many, there is no choice, and this leads to dissatisfaction. It was clear from the findings that the environment in which professionals are working with parents needs to provide more security and stability, so people can feel they are in a safe space which fosters the conditions for empowering individuals and encouraging autonomous and courageous professionals.

### **Recommendations**

- Review initial teacher training and continuing professional development for teachers (as identified in the *SEND and AP Improvement Plan* (DfE/DoHSC, 2023)) to ensure this provides the foundations for developing autonomous, courageous professionals who are provided with opportunities to learn how to be a collaborative partner.
- Embed cross disciplinary training for professionals to foster more effective working relationships across public services (Soan, 2013). This is also likely to increase the success of implementing a shared framework because early career professionals will already be exposed to working together.
- Provide real scenarios in training using Simulation Based Training (Mulholland *et al.*, 2023) to replicate some of the complexity professionals are likely to experience in practice, but within a safe space to trial and reflect on how they manage more pressurised situations.
- The proposed clearer processes for EHC needs assessment (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) need to reduce uncertainty and the gap between expectations and reality regarding the process and what children and families can access with an EHC plan. Clear parameters on what can and cannot be accessed or chosen will serve to reduce insecurity. It may also reduce a sense of dissatisfaction in situations where parents may believe there is a choice, and then realise this is not possible.
- Ensure policy and practice moves away from seeing families from a 'needs' basis because this will always disable them and limit their ability to make choices.
- Provide *choice* for parents and SENCOs through application of the safe space for co-partnership model.

## 6.5 Reflections on research journey and positionality

### **Reflection on positionality**

On reflection, at the start of the research, my positionality was possibly more aligned to the perspective and position of the professionals due to my experience of being a SENCO and feeling more akin to the experiences of the role of the SENCO. Smith (2004: 45) refers to the 'biographical presence' of the researcher as being required to make sense of the data, but also provides a layer of resistance because the researcher balances 'a dynamic tension' of these past influences, as well as preconceptions which may not be apparent from the outset of the research (Cassidy *et al.*, 2011: 266). I recognise now that I really did not fully understand the experience of trauma related to the process of applying for and managing an EHC plan that some parents experienced. I was shocked when one of the responses in the questionnaire referred to PTSD as an outcome of engaging with the process. Respondents to the questionnaires were provided with access to information on support services should they need emotional help based on sharing their experiences. However, this also made me carefully consider the interview stage and sensitivities regarding the support parents might need to access. Additionally, I reflected on my emotional response to the experiences being shared. It tended to make me angry over the injustices being experienced and gave me determination and drive to ensure that I share these very important findings of the research to possibly have some influence over the inequalities which seemed to be riddled within the system. I also felt greater respect for the professionals working within the sector. Although I was a SENCO in practice, I left this role shortly after the SEND reforms (2014) and did not fully realise the increased challenges and pressures SENCOs face since these changes had been implemented. Similarly, I gained a huge sense of admiration for parents and how they continue in the face of adversity, but also recognising some parents do not or cannot continue.

### **Reflection on research journey**

I was continually mindful of the interpretative nature of IPA, especially with a focus on a subject so sensitive as the EHC process which has deeply impacted on parents and SENCOs emotionally. I was very conscious at all times to try not to misrepresent or misinterpret the data, which on occasions I found quite challenging. I attempted to address this issue by incorporating member checking, but due to the nature of interpretative analysis, it will always be an amalgamation of the participant

and researcher's interpretation and so being as respectful as possible in the presentation of the analysis was important to me.

My use of reflective journal throughout the research journey enabled me to capture some of the key moments and areas of development for the research and for me as a researcher (Smith and Nizza, 2022). This process of recording reflections over time informed the way in which I chose to present the reflections in the thesis. I decided to include reflexive boxes to capture the development at different stages in the process, rather than provide one reflection at the end. I feel this approach assisted with illustrating the iterative nature of the reflective process as ongoing, as it should be for the methodology chosen.

## 6.6 Limitations of this research

As well as reflecting on the researcher's journey, it is important to reflect on the research, the methods used and if anything could be improved should the study be replicated. There were areas identified which could have been refined, which include further consideration of the methodology, but also consideration of the context in which the study was conducted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, despite the identified limitations outlined in this section, I felt assured in the robustness of this study and that appropriate, useful findings were obtained which have contributed to the field.

### 6.6.1 IPA

For some, the focus on the lived experience of a small number of participants could be viewed as a limitation of selecting the IPA approach because it is not a methodology concerned with explaining nomothetic or generalisable 'truths'. Yet, I would argue that there was real value in this methodology to explore the perceptions in much greater depth after drawing out the broad themes from Stage One of the study. IPA provided detailed, in depth and valuable accounts which is of particular importance when recognising the individual (idiographic) personal experiences, which can also speak to the universal. Cassidy *et al.*, (2011: 267-8) referred to how IPA adopts the 'ability to enhance understanding, enlarge insight, and contribute to existing theories and the generation of new hypotheses'. Through the cross-case analysis 'a picture is built up of the general as well as the particular experiences of individuals' (Cassidy *et al.* 2011: 267). So, although IPA is not a methodology suited to generalisability, the IPA analysis has arguably enabled a deeper understanding of the issues to inform practice and recommendations for the future.

### 6.6.2 A representative sample

It needs to be acknowledged that the participants who contributed to Stage One of the research may be individuals who have experienced more challenges with the system. By recruiting participants

through Facebook groups, it may be the case that these are the parents who have reached out to social networks for support or to provide support for others. However, arguably this is less likely to be the case for the professional groups of SENCOs recruited through social media. The responses from both parents and SENCOs were more critical of the system than complimentary and so it is important to acknowledge that the issues identified may be representative of the wider issues and not skewed by the recruitment of participants or specific to just a small number of individuals.

The participants for Stage Two of the study were all women. However, based on Dobson's (2023) research women vastly outnumber men in the SENCO role with 1,853 men in state-funded schools in England in 2020 compared with 19,504 women. Additionally, the employment rate for fathers was 92.1% April to June 2021, whereas this was 75.6% for mothers (Office for National Statistics, 2021), which could be an indication that mothers may have more caring responsibilities for the family, or that they may have been better placed to engage in the research. Within Stage One of the study 87% (n.66) were mothers, 1% (n.1) was a father and 12% (n.9) did not respond to the question. Of the SENCOs, 75% (n.63) were female, 5% (n.4) were male and 20% (n.17) did not complete this section of the survey. Although, an all-female sample may be proportionally representative for the participants invited to interview, it is important to recognise the entirely female narratives which may have to some degree influenced the diversity of perspectives within this study.

Another limitation of the data collected in Stage One was that the sample was disproportionately representative of parents from a higher socio-economic and education background. Parents income as less than £15k accounted for 16% (n.12) of participants, and between £15k and £25k was 22% (n.17), whereas 25% (n.19) of parents' income was more than £55K. Additionally, 52% (n.40) of participants held a qualification higher than A levels, whereas nationally this was 33.8% in the 2021 census (Office for National Statistics, 2021). These statistics could represent a skewed sample, but this difference could also represent the fact that the system already disadvantages those from a lower socio-economic or education background as acknowledged in the House of Commons Education Committee Report (2019). However, even if the data points to marginalisation through not being able to access the system, it is important to note that these voices are not clearly represented. Therefore, if I am to continue research in this area it will be useful to consider in more depth 'research justice' and methodologies for social change (Jolivet, 2015). As a positive consideration, the use of social media was a more inclusive strategy for Stage One of the study, and may have attracted more diversity than attending more formalised parental forums.

The decision to exclude Local Authorities from the sample could be viewed as a limitation to the study. However, the focus of this study was specifically on the working relationship between SENCOs and

parents and so the decision was made to gather data from these two groups of participants only. Due to the central role local authorities take in the EHC needs assessment process, and the prominence of the local authority references which were evident in the data from the participants, it may have provided a further perspective on co-production by including a third sample group of SEN Case Workers. Although this was not a main focus for this study, future consideration of how SEN Case Workers' perspectives relate to the parents' and SENCOs' perspectives on the phenomenon may provide a further dimension to advance the findings of this study. Larkin *et al.* (2019: 186) refer to 'directly related groups' as 'immersed in the same experience, but are likely to have different views on it'. Including this element in the multiperspectival design of a future study could provide an improved understanding of the Local Authority position and SEN Case Workers' lived experiences as a point of comparison. This is especially relevant now the process is in a state of change and requiring collaboration across all groups (DfE/DoHSC, 2023).

### 6.6.3 Timing and relevance

Conducting the research during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic presented delays to gathering and analysing the data. This also may have influenced perceptions because parents and SENCOs were speaking from a context of living through the pandemic at the time of the interviews. There were some comments which related to this experience, but in most cases parents and SENCOs were recalling past experiences and so this did not notably influence the data that was collected. The study is otherwise timely and relevant with the new planned changes and political direction laid out to address issues directly related to the research (DfE/DoHSC, 2023).

## 6.7 Future Research

The current context for SEN developments is key. We have been in a situation for a number of years where the system is not leading to appropriate outcomes for children and families. Before the SEND reforms in 2014 it was identified that 'families are made to put up with a culture of low expectations about what their child can achieve at school and about what young people's futures hold' (DfE, 2011: 15). From the findings in my study, it could be argued this is the same today and so action needs to be taken to address the inequalities. The proposals (DfE/DoHSC, 2023) and their implementation are important to consider for any future research related to the SEND system. Therefore, developments that are proposed link directly with this study and possible future research include the following:

1. Research on trialling the safe space for co-partnership model alongside a practical training offer which addresses managing difficult conversations and education on co-production. This will align to the new leadership level SENCO National Professional Qualification for schools (DfE, 2023a).



2. Research to explore if new National Standards (commenced in 2023, with the initial publication planned for 2025) are suitable as a values-based framework which can be shared across the professions working with families during the EHC needs assessment and in the management of the resultant EHC plan.
3. Research into the evidenced-based local inclusion plans, which commenced in 2023 and will be agreed by the end of 2024, as a way to monitor and more effectively assign resources. The cost of the system currently illustrates a mismanagement of the resources which could be used proactively to provide preventative measures to support children more directly.
4. Research into core training programmes across professions which involve simulation-based training for managing more complex decision making. This approach aligns with the 'joint Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care approach to SEND workforce planning' (DfE/DoHSC, 2023: 52).
5. Research into the impact of the implementation of the digital system and standard EHC plan template in 2025 on the experiences of parents and SENCOs working together.

## 6.8 Concluding comments

I am grateful to all the parents and SENCOs who have taken the time and effort to share their experiences for my research. I feel very privileged that they entrusted sharing their experiences with me. I hope things will change for the better for parents, SENCOs and children where the system is not working. We cannot face another reform which does not address the central challenges as was the case in 2014. Throughout my time working on the thesis, I have attempted to keep the parents and SENCOs as central to the study and I hope I have been just and fair in the interpretations of their experiences. As Cahn (2000: 35) stated, there can be '*No more throw-away people*'. Addressing the confusion over co-production must be the next 'imperative' for both parents and SENCOs.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A - Outcomes of the literature search

Searches conducted on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020

- Date range (post 2014)
- Specific to England
- Not focused on specific needs or professionals outside SENCO

Using the inclusion terms 'SENCO' or 'Special Educational Needs Co\*' and 'parent\*' resulted in the following results:

Database	Number of results	Excluded sources	Post 2014
ERIC	21	5 autism focus 1 SEMH focus 1 Speech and Language focused 1 Irish context 1 Greek context	9
British Education Index	11	1 Greek context 3 autism focus	7
Child Development and Adolescent Studies	6		1

Using the inclusion terms 'EHCP' or 'Education Health and Care Plan' and 'parent\*' resulted in the following results:

Database	Number of results	Excluded sources	Post 2014
ERIC	37	1 specific needs focus 2 Health focus	
British Education Index	11	1 Greek context 3 autism focus	7
Child Development and Adolescent Studies	6		1

## Appendix B - Definition of SEN and disability

### Definition of SEN

#### **20 When a child or young person has special educational needs**

(1) A child or young person has special educational needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

(2) A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she—

(a) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or

(b) has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.

(3) A child under compulsory school age has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she is likely to be within subsection (2) when of compulsory school age (or would be likely, if no special educational provision were made).

(4) A child or young person does not have a learning difficulty or disability solely because the language (or form of language) in which he or she is or will be taught is different from a language (or form of language) which is or has been spoken at home.

*(Children and Families Act, 2014: 19)*

### Definition of disability

A person (P) has a disability if—

(a) P has a physical or mental impairment, and

(b) the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on P's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

*(Equality Act, 2010: np)*

## Appendix C - Frost (2005) Continuum of partnership working

Defining terms related to working together in children's services can be challenging due to nuances of meaning. Frost's (2005) continuum for partnership working is outlined here as a way to conceptualise the terminology used in the *SEN and Disability Code of Practice* (DfE/ DoH, 2015). Frost's continuum has been referred to because the definitions are rooted in legislation which this model draws on explicitly for the terms 'co-operation' and 'co-ordination'

no partnership	uncoordinated, free-standing services
level one	<b>co-operation</b> – services work together toward consistent goals and complementary services, while maintaining their independence
level two	<b>collaboration</b> – services plan together and address issues of overlap, duplication and gaps in service provision towards common outcomes
level three	<b>co-ordination</b> – services work together in a planned and systematic manner towards shared and agreed goals
level four	<b>merger/ integration</b> – different services become one organisation in order to enhance service delivery

(Frost, 2005: 13)

## Appendix D – The SENCO role guidance (DfE, 1994)

In all mainstream schools a designated teacher should be responsible for:

- the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy
- liaising with and advising fellow teachers
- coordinating provision for children with special educational needs
- maintaining the school's SEN register and overseeing the records on all pupils with special educational needs (see paragraph 2:25)
- liaising with parents of children with special educational needs
- contributing to the in-service training of staff
- liaising with external agencies including the educational psychology service and other support agencies, medical and social services and voluntary bodies.

(DfE, 1994: 20-21)

## Appendix E - The SENCO role guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015)

The key responsibilities of the SENCO may include:

- overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy
- co-ordinating provision for children with SEN
- liaising with the relevant Designated Teacher where a looked after pupil has SEN
- advising on the graduated approach to providing SEN support 109
- advising on the deployment of the school's delegated budget and other resources to meet pupils' needs effectively
- liaising with parents of pupils with SEN
- liaising with early years providers, other schools, educational psychologists, health and social care professionals, and independent or voluntary bodies
- being a key point of contact with external agencies, especially the local authority and its support services
- liaising with potential next providers of education to ensure a pupil and their parents are informed about options and a smooth transition is planned
- working with the headteacher and school governors to ensure that the school meets its responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) with regard to reasonable adjustments and access arrangements
- ensuring that the school keeps the records of all pupils with SEN up to date

(DfE/DoH, 2015: 108-9)

## Appendix F - Interview Schedules

### Parents: Interview Schedule

**Please note the prompts and types of question in red font were not shared with participants**

This research project is about Education, Health and Care plans and the parents' and SENCO's roles in working together as the plan is created. To take part in this interview you would need to be a parent who has been through and completed the statutory assessment process to obtain an Education, Health and Care plan for your child between September 2014 and August 2019.

#### **Key terms which may be useful during the interview:**

**Statutory Assessment:** The process in gaining an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. This includes the initial stages of requesting an EHC plan through to the final EHC plan being issued.

**Working together:** There are different ways 'working together' can be viewed and different levels of participation from those involved. The term 'working together' has been used in the interview schedule in a broad way to identify any ways in which parents and professionals have worked together. However, please do use the term you are most comfortable with in your responses e.g. partnership, collaboration, cooperation etc.

**Collaborative Decision-making:** Being involved in, and having the opportunity to contribute to, the decisions made alongside other professionals throughout the statutory assessment process. This would include the initial request for assessment, through to the final EHC plan being issued.

#### **Interview Questions:**

My questions are based on the Children and Families Act (2014: 19), which mandates 'the importance of the child and his or her parent, or the young person, participating as fully as possible in decisions relating to the exercise of the function concerned'

1. What does 'participating as fully as possible in decisions' mean to you? **(describe)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: Why do you think that? What is the source of your expectations?**
2. In your opinion, can you tell me what place working together should have in the statutory assessment process? **(narrative / structural?)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: Why do you think that? What is the source of your expectations?**
3. Can you tell me about a time when you were involved in (or could have been involved in) decision-making during the statutory assessment process? **(narrative)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel?**
4. Can you describe how your involvement in decision-making affected (or could have affected) your relationship with the SENCO? **(circular)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel? What is your relationship now? Is this different to before the statutory assessment process?**
5. How has going through the process of statutory assessment impacted on your views on how parents and professionals work together? **(Evaluative)**



- a. Possible prompts: In what ways? Did you learn anything from the process? How do you feel about these changes?
- 6. How would you change the statutory assessment process so that collaborative decision-making is given more attention by those involved in the process? (comparative?)
  - a. Possible prompts: In what ways? Does anything make it better? Does anything make it worse? How do you feel about these possible changes?
- 7. How do you think others involved in the statutory assessment process saw you? (evaluative)
  - a. Possible prompts: SENCO, school staff, other professionals, child, family
- 8. How did the statutory assessment process impact on you as a person? (evaluative)
  - a. Possible prompts: Did you learn anything from the process? Would things be different if you had not progressed with statutory assessment? In what way?

Please contact me before the interview if you would like further details or clarification on any of the questions in this interview schedule.

**Name:** Lorna Hughes

**Telephone:** 01227 921866

**Email:** [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

#### SENCOs: Interview Schedule

**Please note the prompts and types of question in red font were not shared with participants**

This research project is about Education, Health and Care plans and the parents' and SENCO's roles in working together as the plan is created. To take part in this interview you would need to be a SENCO / Inclusion manager, who has completed the statutory assessment process in order to obtain an Education, Health and Care plan for a child or children in your setting between September 2014 and August 2019.

#### **Key terms which may be useful during the interview:**

**Statutory Assessment:** The process in gaining an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. This includes the initial stages of requesting an EHC plan through to the final EHC plan being issued.

**Working together:** There are different ways 'working together' can be viewed and different levels of participation from those involved. The term 'working together' has been used in the interview schedule in a broad way to identify any ways in which parents and professionals have worked together. However, please do use the term you are most comfortable with in your responses e.g. partnership, collaboration, cooperation etc.

**Collaborative Decision-making:** Being involved in, and having the opportunity to contribute to, the decisions made alongside other professionals throughout the statutory assessment process. This would include the initial request for assessment, through to the final EHC plan being issued.

#### **Interview Questions:**

My questions are based on the Children and Families Act (2014: 19), which mandates ‘the importance of the child and his or her parent, or the young person, participating as fully as possible in decisions relating to the exercise of the function concerned’

1. What does ‘participating as fully as possible in decisions’ mean to you? **(describe)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: Why do you think that? What is the source of your expectations?**
2. In your opinion, can you tell me what place working together should have in the statutory assessment process? **(narrative / structural?)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: Why do you think that? What is the source of your expectations?**
3. Can you tell me about a time when you were involved in (or could have been involved in) decision-making during the statutory assessment process? **(narrative)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel?**
4. Can you describe how your involvement in decision-making affected (or could have affected) your relationship with a parent? **(circular)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel? What is your relationship now? Is this different to before the statutory assessment process?**
5. How has going through the process of statutory assessment impacted on your views on how parents and professionals work together? **(Evaluative)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: In what ways? Did you learn anything from the process? How do you feel about these changes?**
6. How would you change the statutory assessment process so that collaborative decision-making is given more attention by those involved in the process? **(comparative?)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: In what ways? Does anything make it better? Does anything make it worse? How do you feel about these possible changes?**
7. How do you think others involved in the statutory assessment process saw you? **(evaluative)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: SENCO, school staff, other professionals, child, family**
8. How did the statutory assessment process impact on you as a professional? **(evaluative)**
  - a. **Possible prompts: Did you learn anything from the process? Would things be different if you had not progressed with statutory assessment? In what way?**

Please contact me before the interview if you would like further details or clarification on any of the questions in this interview schedule.

**Name:** Lorna Hughes

**Telephone:** 01227 921866

**Email:** [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

Appendix G - Stage One: Staged sequence for planning a questionnaire (Cohen et al., 2018)



Appendix H - Stage One: First version of parent questionnaire

## PILOT Parental Questionnaire on Education, Health and Care plans

### Page 1

Please watch the following video which explains the research and then complete the grid below. Please note if you select 'no' for any of the statements, your information will not be used in the research. [CLICK HERE FOR VIDEO](#)

	I agree to the statements * Required	
	Yes	No
I have watched the video and I understand the aims of the research.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that any personal information (for example, name and family information) that I give will not be given to anyone else. Information will be anonymised and 5 years after the research is complete, this will be destroyed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that I do not have to take part if I do not want to and that I am free to stop doing the research at any time. I do not have to give a reason to stop.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I agree to take part in the above study and agree that my anonymised, completed survey can be used in this research.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Should you need to contact me, my details are:

Name: Lorna Hughes

Telephone: 01227 921886

Email: [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

1 / 13

**Address:**

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education

Canterbury Christ Church University

North Holmes Road

Canterbury

Kent

CT1 1QU

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## General information

Please provide the following information so that we can identify your survey if you change your mind and no longer want to be part of the research. Please give your first and last initial for your name (e.g. Mary Smith would be MS)

Which month were you born?

- January
- February
- March
- April
- May
- June
- July
- August
- September
- October
- November
- December

What is your age range?

- 24 years of age and below
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54

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- 55-64
- 65 years of age and above

What is the first part of your postcode? For example Canterbury could be CT1 etc.

What is your job?

What type of school does your child go to?

- mainstream (local authority school)
- academy
- free school
- special school (local authority school)
- independent school
- independent special school
- grammar school

If you selected Other, please specify:

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What is the age range for your child (who has an Education, Health and Care plan)?

- 0-4
- 5-7
- 8-10
- 11-13
- 14-16
- 17 years of age and above

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## Questions on applying for a plan

How did you find out about applying for an Education, Health and Care plan? Please tick all that apply.

- through the school
- parental services and groups
- local authority information
- social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc.)
- newspapers
- television
- professionals outside of school (e.g. doctor, social worker, speech and language therapist etc.)
- through other parents at school
- through friends and family
- other

If you selected Other, please specify:

How easy or hard was it to find out information about applying for Education, Health and Care plan? (1 being very easy and 5 being very hard).

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very easy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very hard

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Who made the request for an Education, Health and Care plan?

- Me (parent / carer)
- school
- another professional outside of school
- other

If you selected other, please specify:

## Questions on the process

Was the request for an Education, Health and Care plan agreed first time by the local authority?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Which professionals did you speak to during the process of applying for an Education, Health and Care plan?

- SENCO
- class / form teacher
- other staff in school
- Educational psychologist
- medical professionals (doctor, paediatrician, speech and language therapist etc.)
- social care worker
- other

If you selected other, please specify:

Did you feel supported during the process and if so by whom?

How in control of the process did you feel? (1 Not in control and 5 Completely in control)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not in control	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Completely in control

## Questions on the outcomes

Did the Education, Health and Care plan lead to the outcomes you hoped for your child?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Did you contact any independent parental advisory groups or parent forums before or after the Education, Health and Care plan was issued?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

In what ways could the process be better for the future?

Please indicate if you are happy to be contacted for the next stage of the research. This will include an interview to discuss your experiences of gaining an Education, Health and Care plan for your child. \* *Required*

- Yes I would like to be contacted
- No I do not want to be contacted



## Stage two of the research

Please provide your details below if you are happy to be contacted for the next stage of the research. This will include an interview to discuss your experiences of gaining an Education, Health and Care Plan for your child.

Please provide your name:

Please provide a contact phone number

Please provide a contact email

As part of the research, we would like to interview the SENCO who supported your request for the Education, Health and Care plan. If you agree to us contacting the SENCO, please provide name of your SENCO and the name of the school below:

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## Additional Information

Please provide any further information you would like to share about gaining a plan for your child that you have not had an opportunity to do so.

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## Final page

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Lorna Hughes

[lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

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## Appendix I - Stage One: Final Scoping questionnaires

**Video link (in both questionnaires) providing information for the participants on the research:** [https://youtu.be/i\\_P84TdU4y0?si=7LjPA40ySYPX89LP](https://youtu.be/i_P84TdU4y0?si=7LjPA40ySYPX89LP)

### Parents Final Questionnaire

## Parent / Carer Questionnaire on Education, Health and Care plans

### Page 1

Thank you so much for your interest in my research. Please watch the following video which explains the research and then complete the grid below. [CLICK HERE FOR VIDEO](#)

**Please note if you select 'no' for any of the statements, your information will not be used in the research.**

If you prefer to read the details of this research rather than watch the video, please [CLICK HERE](#)

	I agree to the statements * Required	
	Yes	No
I have watched the video (or read the information) and I understand the aims of the research.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that any personal information (for example, name and family information) that I give will not be given to anyone else. Information will be anonymised and 5 years after the research is complete, this will be destroyed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that I do not have to take part if I do not want to and that I am free to stop doing the research at any time. I do not have to give a reason to stop.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I agree to take part in the above study and agree that my anonymised, completed survey can be used in this research.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Should you need to contact me, my details are:

1 / 17

Name: Lorna Hughes

Telephone: 01227 921866

Email: [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

Address:

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education

Canterbury Christ Church University

North Holmes Road

Canterbury

Kent

CT1 1QU

2 / 17

## General information

Please provide the following information so that we can identify your survey if you change your mind and no longer want to be part of the research. Please give your first and last initial for your name (e.g. Mary Smith would be MS)

What is the first part of your postcode? For example Canterbury could be CT1 etc.

Please note that if you have more than one child who has an Education, Health and Care plan, this questionnaire should be completed for just one child. You can chose to complete the questionnaire again for other children.

What type of school does your child go to?

- mainstream (local authority school)
- academy
- free school
- special school (local authority school)
- independent school
- independent special school
- grammar school
- further education college
- other

If you selected Other, please specify:

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What is the age range for your child (who has an Education, Health and Care plan)?

- 0-4
- 5-7
- 8-10
- 11-13
- 14-16
- 17 years of age and above

What is the primary need recorded on the Education, Health and Care plan for your child?

- Cognition and Learning
- Communication and Interaction
- Physical and Sensory
- Social, Emotional and Mental Health
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

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## Questions on applying for a plan

How did you find out about applying for an Education, Health and Care plan? Please tick all that apply.

- through the school
- internet search
- parental services and groups
- local authority information
- social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc.)
- newspapers
- television
- professionals outside of school (e.g. doctor, social worker, speech and language therapist etc.)
- through other parents at school
- through friends and family
- other

If you selected Other, please specify:

How easy or hard was it to find out information about applying for Education, Health and Care plan? (1 being very easy and 5 being very hard).

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very easy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very hard

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Who made the request for an Education, Health and Care plan?

- Me (parent / carer)
- school
- another professional outside of school
- other

If you selected Other, please specify:

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## Questions on the process

Was the request for an Education, Health and Care plan agreed first time by the local authority?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Which professionals did you speak to during the process of applying for an Education, Health and Care plan?

- SENCO
- class / form teacher
- other staff in school
- Educational psychologist
- medical professionals (doctor, paediatrician, speech and language therapist etc.)
- social care worker
- other

If you selected Other, please specify:

Did you feel supported during the process and if so by whom?

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How were you kept informed during the process?

How in control of the process did you feel? (1 Not in control and 5 Completely in control)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not in control	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Completely in control

Please explain anything you experienced that made you feel **in control** during the process?

Please explain anything you experienced that made you feel **out of control** during the process?

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## Questions on the outcomes

What was the main outcome you hoped for your child by gaining the Education, Health and Care plan?



How far do you feel this main outcome has been met? (1 No progress towards the outcome and 5 Fully achieved the outcome)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
No progress towards the outcome	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fully achieved the outcome

Please indicate if you are happy to be contacted for the next stage of the research. This will include a telephone interview to discuss your experiences of gaining an Education, Health and Care plan for your child. \* Required

- Yes I would like to be contacted
- No I do not want to be contacted

Did you contact any independent parental advisory groups or parent forums before, during or after the Education, Health and Care plan was issued?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

What was the most useful or positive aspect of the process in applying for and gaining an Education, Health and Care plan?

## Stage two of the research

Please provide your details below if you are happy to be contacted for the next stage of the research. This will include a telephone interview to discuss your experiences of gaining an Education, Health and Care Plan for your child.

Please provide your name:

Please provide a contact phone number

Please provide a contact email

As part of the research, we would like to interview the SENCO who supported your request for the Education, Health and Care plan. If you agree to us contacting the SENCO, please provide the name of your SENCO and the name of the school below. If you prefer they were not contacted, please leave the box blank:

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## Optional Background Information

This is an opportunity to provide some background information about yourself, for example your gender, age, occupation etc. You do not have to complete this section if you prefer not to provide these details

- I would like to complete this section
- I would not like to complete this section

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## Information about you

What gender do you identify as?

- male
- female
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

What is your age range?

- 24 years of age and below
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 years of age and above

**What is your ethnic group?** Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background

- White - British or Irish
- Any other White background
- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian

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- Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background
- Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British
- Any other Black/African/Caribbean background
- Arab
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

What is your highest level of education?

- No qualifications
- School qualifications e.g. GCSE / CSE / O Level
- Post 16 qualifications e.g. A levels / BTEC / NVQ
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Ph.D. or higher
- Prefer not to say

How many children do you have?

- 1

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- 2
- 3
- 4
- More than 4

What is your employment status?

- Employed Full-Time
- Employed Part-Time
- Self-employed
- Seeking opportunities
- Retired

If you are working or volunteering, what is your current job?

What is your annual household income?

- Less than £15,000
- £16,000 - £25,000
- £26,000 - £35,000
- £36,000 - £45,000
- £46,000 - £55,000
- More than £55,000
- Prefer not to say

## Additional Information

Please provide any further information you would like to share about gaining a plan for your child that you have not had an opportunity to do so.

## Final page

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Should you feel you require any support based on the content of this questionnaire, the following link provides information on services available to you:

<https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources-and-help/im-parent>

Please be aware that all information will be kept anonymous and you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. You may like to write my contact details down in case you want to contact me in the future.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Lorna Hughes

[lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

Tel: 01227 921866

---

SENCOs Final Questionnaire

# SENCO Questionnaire on Education, Health and Care plans

Page 1

Thank you so much for your interest in my research. Please watch the following video which explains the research and then complete the grid below. [CLICK HERE FOR VIDEO](#)

**Please note if you select 'no' for any of the statements, your information will not be used in the research.**

If you prefer to read the details of this research rather than watch the video, please [CLICK HERE](#) Please feel free to pass this information on to your headteacher so they are aware of the research. I am happy to provide further details in the form of a letter for your school / headteacher if this is required.

	I agree to the statements * Required	
	Yes	No
I have watched the video (or read the information) and I understand the aims of the research.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that any personal information (for example, name and family information) that I give will not be given to anyone else. Information will be anonymised and 5 years after the research is complete, this will be destroyed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand that I do not have to take part if I do not want to and that I am free to stop doing the research at any time. I do not have to give a reason to stop.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I agree to take part in the above study and agree that my anonymised, completed survey can be used in this research.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I understand I can ask for a letter for my headteacher to explain this research if this is required	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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Should you need to contact me, my details are:

**Name:** Lorna Hughes

**Telephone:** 01227 921866

**Email:** [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

**Address:**

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education

Canterbury Christ Church University

North Holmes Road

Canterbury

Kent

CT1 1QU

## General information

Please provide the following information so that we can identify your survey if you change your mind and no longer want to be part of the research. Please give your first and last initial for your name (e.g. Mary Smith would be MS)

What is the first part of your postcode? For example Canterbury could be CT1 etc.

The following questions are related to your setting and your role in education.

What is your role in your setting?

Are you the named SENCO in your setting? \* Required

- Yes
- No
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

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## Questions on applying for a plan

Please answer the following questions with your general impressions based on all the Education, Health and Care plans where you have been involved in the process from September 2014 to August 2019.

When you have applied for an Education, Health and Care Plan, has this usually been supported by the parent? (1 being never supported and 5 being always supported)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never supported	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Always supported

When the parent/s have applied for an Education, Health and Care Plan, did you usually feel there has been enough evidence to support the request? (1 being no evidence and 5 being well-evidenced)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
No evidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Well-evidenced

How easy or hard was it to find out information about applying for Education, Health and Care plan? (1 being very easy and 5 being very hard).

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very easy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very hard

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Please indicate below the number of applications for Education, Health and Care plans you have been directly involved in:

	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Number of statutory assessment requests	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Please tick if this is approximate or actual figures: \* *Required*

- Approximate  
 Actual

## Questions on the process

Have you found that the request for Education, Health and Care plans, has usually been agreed first time by the local authority? (1 being never agreed first time and 5 being always agreed first time)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never agreed first time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Always agreed first time

Which professionals have you consulted with during the process of requesting Education, Health and Care plans?

- Other SENCOs  
 class / form teacher  
 other staff in school  
 Educational psychologist  
 medical professionals (doctor, paediatrician, speech and language therapist etc.)  
 social care worker  
 other

If you selected Other, please specify:

Did you feel supported during the process and if so by whom?

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How were you kept informed during the process?

How in control of the process did you feel? (1 Not in control and 5 Completely in control)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not in control	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Completely in control

Please explain anything you experienced that made you feel **in control** during the process?

Please explain anything you experienced that made you feel **out of control** during the process?

## Questions on the outcomes

For these final questions, consider one child or young person where you have been most involved in the process of them gaining an Education, Health and Care plan.

What was the main outcome you hoped for the child or young person by gaining the Education, Health and Care plan?

How far do you feel this main outcome has been met? (1 No progress towards the outcome and 5 Fully achieved the outcome)

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	
No progress towards the outcome	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fully achieved the outcome

Were any independent parental advisory groups or parent forums involved in supporting the parent/s before, during or after the Education, Health and Care plan was issued?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

What was the most useful or positive aspect of the process in applying for and gaining an Education, Health and Care plan?

Please indicate if you are happy to be contacted for the next stage of the research. This will include a telephone interview to discuss your experiences of gaining Education, Health and Care plans for children or young people in your setting. \* Required

- Yes I would like to be contacted
- No I do not want to be contacted

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## Stage two of the research

Please provide your details below if you are happy to be contacted for the next stage of the research. This will include a telephone interview to discuss your experiences of gaining Education, Health and Care plans for children or young people in your setting. Please be aware that your headteacher will need to consent to you participating in this next stage of the research. An information letter will be provided for you to pass on to your headteacher for their consent.

Please provide your name:

Please provide a contact phone number

Please provide a contact email

As part of the research, we would be interested in the parents views on gaining an Education, Health and Care plan. If you have parents who have been through and completed the statutory assessment process to obtain an Education, Health and Care plan for their child between September 2014 and August 2019 who may be interested in participating in this study, please pass on my contact details:

Lorna Hughes on **01227 921866** or [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk) Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education at Canterbury Christ Church University.

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## Optional Background Information

This is an opportunity to provide some background information about yourself, for example your gender, age, occupation etc. You do not have to complete this section if you prefer not to provide these details

- I would like to complete this section
- I would not like to complete this section

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## Information about you

What gender do you identify as?

- male
- female
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

What is your age range?

- 24 years of age and below
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 years of age and above

**What is your ethnic group?** Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background

- White - British or Irish
- Any other White background
- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian

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- Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background
- Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British
- Any other Black/African/Caribbean background
- Arab
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

How many years have you been teaching / working in education?

- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-20 years
- More than 20 years

## Additional Information

Please provide any further information you would like to share about gaining Education, Health and Care plans for children or young people in your setting that you have not had an opportunity to do so.

## Final page

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please be aware that all information will be kept anonymous and that you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. You may like to write my contact details down in case you want to contact me in the future.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Lorna Hughes

[lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

Tel: 01227 921866

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## Appendix J - Stage One: Questionnaire Data Collection Tracker

Group	Contact	Date	Y/N	Posted	Re-posted	Posted by	Parents / SENCOs / Both
SENCO / SENDCo support Group	XXX	20/10/20	Y	24/10/20		Admin	SENCOs
Parent and Carer support group	XXX	20/10/20	Y	24/10/20	20/12/20	Me	Parents
Support Group for Parents of Special Needs Children	XXX	24/10/20					
ADHD Autism & Special Needs Support Group UK	XXX	28/10/20					
Autism and Special Needs support group	XXX	28/10/20					
Autism and Special Needs support Group	XXX	28/10/20					Parents
ADHD. Autism and Special Needs Support Group	XXX	28/10/20					Parents
EHC Plans Support Group	XXX	29/10/20	Y	29/10/20	20/12/20	Me	Parents
Education, Health and Care Plans	XXX	29/10/20	Y	29/10/20	20/12/20	Me	Parents (possibly SENCOs)
Education Equality	XXX	13/11/20	Y	13/11/20	20/12/20	Me	Parent (possibly SENCOs?)
Primary SENCOs	XXX	13/11/20					
Supporting SEN parents in XXX	XXX	13/11/20					
SENCO/SENDCO Early Years Support	XXX	13/11/20					

SEN Advice and Support (Official)	XXX	13/11/20					
SEN Parents Support XXX	XXX	13/11/20	Y	13/11/20		Admin	
Sensible SENCO	XXX	13/11/20	Y	14/11/20	20/12/20	Me	
SESCO Network Group	XXX	13/11/20	Y	14/11/20	20/12/20	Me	
SESCOs Professional Forum	XXX	13/11/20					
UK SENCO and inclusion managers	XXX	13/11/20	Y	13/11/20		Admin 14 Nov	
EHCP/SEND Help	XXX	13/11/20	Y	13/11/20	20/12/20	Me	Parents and SESCOs
SESCO forum XXX	XXX	23/11/20	Y	23/11/20		Admin (emailed SESCOs )	SESCOS
Training Providers website	XXX	16/11/20	Y	16/11/20		Admin	SESCOs
Alumni	XXX	19/11/20	Y				

#### Responses tracker

Date	SESCO Responses	Parent responses	Total
28/10/20	14	1	15
13/11/20	14	3	17
27/11/20	59	18	77
11/12/20	63	18	81
21/12/20	81	47	128
4/1/20	85	76	161

Appendix K - Ethical approval for study (including amendment request)  
Education Faculty Research Ethics Review

Application for full review

<b>For Faculty Office use only</b>	
<b>FREC Protocol No:</b>	<b>Date received:</b>

Your application **must** comprise the following documents (please tick the boxes below to indicate that they are attached):

*Application Form*

X
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*Peer Review Form*

X
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**Copies of any documents to be used in the study:**

*Participant Information Sheet(s)*

X
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*Consent Form(s)*

X
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*Introductory letter(s)*

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*Questionnaire*

X
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*Focus Group Guidelines*

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## Education Faculty Research Ethics Review

### Application for full review

#### 1. PROJECT DETAILS

MAIN RESEARCHER	Lorna Hughes
E-MAIL	<a href="mailto:Lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk">Lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk</a>
POSITION WITHIN CCCU	Senior Lecturer
POSITION OUTSIDE CCCU	
COURSE (students only)	
DEPARTMENT (staff only)	Faculty of Education
PROJECT TITLE	Parents and SENCOs as co-producers in navigating the Statutory Assessment Process.
TUTOR/SUPERVISOR: NAME	
TUTOR/SUPERVISOR: E-MAIL	
DURATION OF PROJECT (start & end dates)	March 2019 to March 2024

OTHER RESEARCHERS	
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#### 2. OUTLINE THE ETHICAL ISSUES THAT YOU THINK ARE INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT.

**Informed consent** – It is important to ensure all participants are fully informed of the research and what this entails as well as how to obtain further information / clarify any questions.

**Anonymity** - Confidentiality and anonymity for the participants from local authorities is important because there may be political and ethical considerations related to the position they hold. Additionally, possible researcher bias could be an issue having worked with colleagues in one of the selected local authorities. The researcher has taught and been a SENCO in the local authority of Kent and continues to maintain contact with Kent Local authority in relation to delivering the National Award for SEN Coordination whereby colleagues from the Local Authority provide input on specific areas such as budgets devolved to schools and the Early Help procedures.

All participants will need to be reassured that information will be anonymised for the purposes of the research. Prior to the interview there will be clear parameters for the discussion such as avoiding any personal details (e.g. professionals' names etc.) There will be reassurance that should any information be divulged in error, this will be removed from the data collected.

**Right to withdraw** – It is important that all participants are aware of their right to withdraw as well as how to make this request. The information sheet will include details on the right to withdraw from the research and participants will be reminded of this again at the start of the interviews.

**Confidentiality and data protection** - Effective communication in school is key to successful working relationships (Lamb, 2009) and so it is important to negate the risk of a breach to confidentiality by participating in the study because this may adversely affect existing working relationships. Information provided for the research will be held in the strictest confidence following Data Protection regulations (GDPR, 2018). Additionally, ensuring interpretations realistically reflect the participants' position to try and avoid misinterpretations and ensure the data is presented as intended by the parties involved.

**Protection from harm** - Parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) may be at risk of distress or discomfort in discussing personal experiences related to the process of statutory assessment for their child. Furthermore, it is important that there is no risk to the statutory assessment process itself or that the research could affect outcomes of the procedure.

**Vulnerability of participants** - Some participants may have special educational needs and require more support in overcoming barriers to participating in the research.

**Equity** - It is important the research does not advantage or be 'perceived to advantage one group of participants over others' (BERA, 2018: 20) because it will be exploring relationships between the parents, the school and SENCOs (or possibly other professionals). Some individuals may have specific agenda's or strong political viewpoints and so the research design would need to ensure that individual voices do not dominate.

Some parents and SENCOs may feel strongly about contributing to the study depending upon their experiences of the statutory assessment process. However, only a limited number of participants can be selected for Stage Two though dimensional sampling. Ways



for participants who are not invited to Stage Two to have their voice heard would need to be considered.

**Dual role of researcher** - Due to holding the position of Programme Director for the National Award for SEN Coordination, it is important that students do not feel obligated to participate in the research or that their participation might advantage or disadvantage them in relation to the professional award that they are studying for.

3. GIVE A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT in no more than 100 words. (*Include, for example, sample selection, recruitment procedures, data collection, data analysis and expected outcomes.*) Please ensure that your description will be understood by the lay members of the Committee.

It is acknowledged that lack of values-based approaches and consumerism impact negatively on professional relationships (Herring *et al.*, 2017). This study aims to explore how the most recent changes in statutory processes and reduced resources due to austerity have impacted on professional and parent working relationships.

Four local authorities have been identified to explore the extent parents and SENCOs are co-producers in the statutory assessment process. Parents and SENCOs will be identified through forums, advisory services, professional networks and alumni, using purposeful sampling. Questionnaires and interviews will be utilised within a qualitative design.

4. How many participants will be recruited?

**Parents:** Approximately 20 for questionnaires and four for interviews

**SENCOs:** Approximately 20 for questionnaires and four for interviews

**LA Officers:** Interview with the Head of SEN Services at the four identified local authorities.

**Parental Advisory Groups:** Interview with representatives in the four identified local authority areas.

	<b>Other professionals:</b> Approximately 20 participants to complete questionnaires.
5. Will you be recruiting STAFF or STUDENTS from another faculty?	<b>NO</b> If yes, which Faculty?  <b>IMPORTANT:</b> If you intend to recruit participants from another Faculty, this form must be copied to the Dean of the Faculty concerned, and to the Chair of that Faculty's Research Ethics Committee.
6. Will participants include minors, people with learning difficulties or other vulnerable people?	<b>NO</b> If yes, please add details.

7. Potential risks for participants:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotional harm/hurt*</li> <li>- Physical harm/hurt</li> <li>- Risk of disclosure</li> <li>- Other (please specify)</li> </ul> *Please note that this includes any sensitive areas, feelings etc., however mild they may seem.	Please indicate all those that apply.  <b>YES</b>  <b>NO</b>  <b>YES</b>
8. How are these risks to be addressed?	<b>Informed consent</b> – an information and consent sheet will be provided for the research which outlines the details and process for the research. The researcher's contact details will be provided should further clarification be required during the process (Appendix D)  <b>Anonymity</b> -  Although local authorities follow the national legislation and guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015) the ways in which this is implemented differs.

	<p>Therefore, large Local Authorities with similar characteristics have been identified for the research to explore similarities and differences of approach (Appendix A).</p> <p>Access to gatekeepers in the local authorities is an area to consider. I would contact the Strategic Lead for SEND in each authority as the gatekeeper, they may decide it needs authorisation from Local Authority Council meeting. Links with professional networks in the field will help to facilitate contact with relevant parties. In addition, the research could be viewed as beneficial to a Local Authority because the evidence from the research may support good practice for improvement as well as preparation for a Local Area SEND Ofsted CQC visit and so this may help to secure participation. Should a local authority refuse to participate and further data is required then the criteria (Appendix A) would be reviewed to select other Local authorities with shared characteristics.</p> <p>Confidentiality and anonymity for the participants from local authorities is important because there may be political and ethical considerations related to the position they hold. Involving more than one local authority will provide greater security to participants that this study will present a broader view of the issues across geographical areas. Additionally, having worked with colleagues in one of the selected local authorities, by including four different areas, it will mean the researcher is able to challenge possible researcher bias and maintain a more balanced perspective overall.</p> <p>All participants will need to be reassured that information will be anonymised for the</p>
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	<p>purposes of the research. Prior to the interview there will be clear parameters for the discussion such as avoiding any personal details (e.g. professionals' names etc.) There will be reassurance that should any information be divulged in error, this will be removed from the data collected.</p> <p><b>Right to withdraw</b> - It is important that all participants are aware of their right to withdraw as well as how to make this request. Participants will be provided with a unique code for their response to the questionnaire so their information can be located and withdrawn if requested. The information sheet will include the details on the right to withdraw from the research and participants invited to interviews will be reminded of this again at the start of the interviews.</p> <p>Information on the research will be provided by email to alumni and existing SENCOs through professional networks. All participants will be made aware their involvement is voluntary, that they are fully informed and understand they have the right to withdraw at any stage during the process.</p> <p><b>Confidentiality and data protection</b> - Effective communication in school is key to successful working relationships (Lamb, 2009) and so it is important to negate the risk of a breach to confidentiality by participating in the study because this may adversely affect existing working relationships. To address this, SENCOs and parents will not at any time meet together with this researcher so there is no pressure that other parties will be present. There will be assurances that no information will be shared with other parties. Information provided for the research will be held in the strictest confidence following</p>
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	<p>Data Protection regulations (GDPR, 2018), with the exception of any safeguarding issues should these be disclosed. Additionally, follow-up interviews will be offered to share and discuss the interpretations of the data from the first interviews so participants can freely edit, retract comments, make adjustments or clarify their position ensuring interpretations more realistically reflect their position (Hycner, 1985). This may help to avoid misinterpretations and provides another opportunity for participants to consider their contributions to the study prior to completion of the research.</p> <p><b>Protection from harm</b> - Parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) will be invited to participate through independent parental advisory services and parental forums. Parents may be at risk of distress or discomfort in discussing personal experiences related to the process of statutory assessment for their child, therefore only parents who have completed the process will be invited to be part of the study. Furthermore, it is important that there is no risk to the statutory assessment process itself and so by only inviting parents who have completed between the years September 2014 to August 2019 will mean there is no possibility that the research could affect outcomes of the procedure.</p> <p>There is a limited risk of disclosure, should this happen the policies and procedures for the organisation (e.g. school, university, local authority) would be followed. The researcher would seek information on safeguarding procedures for the organisations where interviews will be conducted. Prior to any work in any of the authorities the publicly available information will be accessed to ensure the contact details and referral</p>
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	<p>procedures are in place should any disclosure be made.</p> <p>Telephone interviews will be offered with the option of 'face to face' if preferred because telephone interviews may be less intrusive (Cohen <i>et al.</i>, 2018). Additionally this reduces further risks associated with lone working for the researcher in conducting home visits. Prior to interviews, the local area SENDIASS details will be provided in the information sent to parents. In addition to this, information on services the participants can contact for support will be provided if they find the content in anyway challenging in relation to emotional well-being.</p> <p>In a face to face interview participants will be advised that if they experience any difficulty with emotions during the interview they can absent themselves in order to manage and compose themselves.</p> <p><b>Vulnerability of participants</b> - Some participants may have special educational needs and require more support in overcoming barriers to participating in the research. Information will be provided in an accessible format as well as providing space for participants to disclose if they have any individual needs to further reduce or remove barriers to participation and facilitate 'freedom from prejudice' (BERA,2018: 6). Questionnaire and interview questions will be piloted prior to distribution. Cohen <i>et al.</i> (2018:496) state 'the wording of questionnaires is of paramount importance and that pretesting is crucial to their success', the pilot will aim to avoid language misleading language or language that is unduly negative or positive.</p> <p><b>Equity</b> - It is important the research does not advantage or be 'perceived to advantage one</p>
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	<p>group of participants over others' (BERA, 2018: 20) because it will be exploring relationships between the parents, the school and SENCOs (or possibly other professionals). Therefore equal voice will be provided to the SENCOs and parents as data will be collected simultaneously and constant comparison will be used to analyse data (See Appendix C). The researcher will also be conscious to present findings in a balanced way by conducting a concurrent analysis of the data. Additionally, the information sheet will include a statement which highlights that any specific information on individuals, heavily politically biased or derogatory information will be omitted from the study.</p> <p>Some parents and SENCOs may feel strongly about contributing to the study depending upon their experiences of the statutory assessment process. However, only a limited number of participants can be selected for Stage Two of the research. Therefore, the questionnaire will include an 'open-ended' question at the end to capture the views of parents or SENCOs who are not selected for interview, which will place the 'responsibility for, and ownership of, the data much more firmly into respondents' hands' (Cohen <i>et al.</i>, 2018: 475).</p> <p><b>Dual role of researcher</b> - Due to holding the position of Programme Director for the National Award for SEN Coordination, it is important that only alumni will be invited and not any existing students so as to avoid them feeling obligated to participate in the research. SENCOs currently studying with CCCU will not be involved in the research as they may be under the false belief that by not participating it will impact upon their ability to complete the course successfully.</p>
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<p>9. Potential benefits for participants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved services</li> <li>- Improved participant understanding</li> <li>- Opportunities for participants to have their views heard.</li> <li>- Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply.</p> <p><b>YES</b></p> <p><b>YES</b></p> <p><b>YES</b></p>
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<p>10. How, when and by whom will participants be approached? Will they be recruited individually or en bloc?</p>	<p><b>Parents:</b> Approximately 20 participants identified through parent advisory groups and forums. Clear guidance will be provided to the service providers on which parents to invite for the study e.g. (all parents with surnames beginning with the letters A through to H who completed the statutory assessment process from September 2014 to August 2019) to avoid any selective sampling by the organisations.</p> <p>Information will be provided to the identified groups in electronic (and paper if required) format to support accessibility (Mertens, 2015).</p> <p>Also, the SENCO questionnaire will include the researcher's details to pass on to interested parents. From this First stage, four parents will be identified for Stage Two based on dimensional sampling. Frameworks such as Herring <i>et al.</i> (2017) will be used to explore if categorisation of parents emerges from Stage One (Appendix B).</p> <p><b>SENCOs:</b> Approximately 20 participants identified through professional networks and alumni who have completed the National Award for SEN Coordination (and still practice as SENCOs). In the second phase of the research SENCOs will also be invited to</p>
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	<p>participate through the parents who are participating in the interviews.</p> <p><b>LA Officers:</b> Interview with the Head of SEN Services at the four identified local authorities. Contact will be facilitated by existing contacts and professional networks.</p> <p><b>Parental Advisory Groups:</b> In each local authority, representatives from the parental advisory group will be invited to participate in an interview. This will be based on the service and how it is used by parents in relation to progressing Statutory Assessment requests.</p> <p><b>Other professionals:</b> Approximately 20 participants to complete questionnaires. The professions will be identified based on the responses from the parent and SENCO questionnaires.</p>
<p>11. Are participants likely to feel under pressure to consent / assent to participation?</p>	<p>There is the risk the SENCO participants may feel obligated to participate because information on the research will be provided by the Programme Director for the National Award for SEN Coordination they completed with CCCU. Therefore it will be made clear that participation is voluntary and there will be full transparency owing to the past relationship with participants and dual role of the course tutor and researcher (BERA, 2018).</p> <p>There is a risk that some SENCOs may not want to participate even though the parents' they have collaborated with may be willing to participate. If this is the case then it may be necessary to conduct further interviews</p>

	to ensure there is representation across the dimensional sampling.
<p>12. How will voluntary informed consent be obtained from individual participants or those with a right to consent for them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introductory letter</li> <li>- Phone call</li> <li>- Email</li> <li>- Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply and add examples in an appendix.</p> <p>NO – provided through an email and the information and consent sheet (see below)</p> <p><b>YES – for interviews if requested</b></p> <p><b>YES</b></p> <p><b>Information Sheet and Consent form (See Appendix D)</b></p> <p>Shared through parental forums and professional networks (closed groups only)</p>

<p>13. How will permission be sought from those responsible for institutions / organisations hosting the study?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introductory letter</li> <li>- Phone call</li> <li>- Email</li> <li>- Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply and add examples in an appendix.</p> <p>NO</p> <p>YES</p> <p>YES</p>
<p>14. How will the privacy and confidentiality of participants be safeguarded? (Please give brief details).</p>	<p>Publications resulting from the research project will protect anonymity including any specific examples provided which could be directly linked to individuals. This will be made clear on the Information and Consent Sheet (Appendix D).</p>

<p>15. What steps will be taken to comply with the Data Protection Act?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safe storage of data</li>   <li>- Anonymisation of data</li>   <li>- Destruction of data after 5 years</li> <li>- Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	<p>Please indicate all those that apply.</p> <p><b>YES:</b> all data stored securely and electronic data will be stored within a password protected area to ensure that confidentiality is maintained in line with in line with the General Data Protection Regulations (2018).</p> <p><b>YES:</b> all data will be anonymised – a code system will be used to identify participants’ questionnaires</p> <p><b>YES:</b> data will be destroyed at the end of the project to ensure anonymity and protect students’ rights to privacy. Practices will be in line with the General Data Protection Regulations (2018).</p>
<p>16. How will participants be made aware of the results of the study?</p>	<p>Information will be available to participants when they consent to the research. A summary of the main findings and outcomes will be provided – there will be details on the information sheet on how to make contact with the researcher to access this overview. At the end of the study the information will also be shared with the local authorities, parental advisory groups / forums who participated so they can distribute this to interested parties / stakeholders if they see fit.</p>

<p>17. What steps will be taken to allow participants to retain control over audio-visual records of them and over their creative products and items of a personal nature?</p>	<p>Interview recordings will be the only audio record kept. These audio recordings and any information of a personal nature within the data collected (e.g. on questionnaires) will be kept securely and destroyed after 5 years.</p> <p>Participants will retain control over their data through the follow-up interviews which will facilitate discussion on the interpretations of the data. Participants can freely edit, retract comments, make adjustments or clarify their position ensuring interpretations more realistically reflect their position (Hycner, 1985). This may help to avoid misinterpretations and provides another opportunity for participants to consider their contributions to the study prior to completion of the research.</p> <p>Should participants want access to their information after they have participated, this can be made available to them (through a unique code to identify their questionnaire). Should they wish to withdraw from the research at any time, their data that would have been utilised for the purposes of the research would be destroyed.</p>
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<p>18. Give the qualifications and/or experience of the researcher and/or supervisor in this form of research. (Brief answer only)</p>	<p>Lorna Hughes: MA in Enabling Learning, Inclusion and Institutional Development.</p> <p>Programme Director for the National Award for SEN Coordination.</p>
--	---

<p>19. If you are NOT a member of CCCU academic staff or a registered CCCU postgraduate student, what insurance arrangements are in place to meet liability incurred in the conduct of this research?</p>	
---	--

*Attach any:*

*Participant information sheets and letters*

*Consent forms*

*Data collection instruments*

*Peer review comments*

## DECLARATION

- I certify that the information in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I certify that a risk assessment for this study has been carried out in compliance with the University's Health and Safety policy.
- I certify that any required CRB/VBS check has been carried out.
- I undertake to carry out this project under the terms specified in the Canterbury Christ Church University Research Governance Handbook.
- I undertake to inform the relevant Faculty Research Ethics Committee of any significant change in the question, design or conduct of the study over the course of the study. I understand that such changes may require a new application for ethics approval.
- I undertake to inform the Research Governance Manager in the Graduate School and Research Office when the proposed study has been completed.
- I am aware of my responsibility to comply with the requirements of the law and appropriate University guidelines relating to the security and confidentiality of participant or other personal data.
- I understand that project records/data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes if required in future and that project records should be kept securely for five years or other specified period.
- I understand that the personal data about me contained in this application will be held by the Research Office and that this will be managed according to the principles established in the Data Protection Act.

**Researcher's Name:** Lorna Hughes

**Date:** 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019

## FOR STUDENT APPLICATION ONLY

I have read the research proposal and application form, and support this submission to the FREC.

**Supervisor's Name:** Sue Soan

**Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019**

**CONDITIONS ATTACHED TO APPROVAL BY THE COURSE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

--

	NAME	DATE
Approved by Course Committee		
Checked by Faculty Committee		

**CONDITIONS ATTACHED TO APPROVAL BY THE EDUCATION FACULTY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

--

	NAME	DATE
Approved by Faculty Committee		

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19/EDU/005

18<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Dear Lorna,

*Project title: Parents and SENCOs as co-producers in navigating the Statutory Assessment Process.*

Thank you for your ethics application which was reviewed by the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (FREC). At the meeting amendments were required by the panel and communicated to you by the chair.

We have subsequently received your amendments and all the points of concern raised by the committee have been assiduously addressed and your application has now been approved by Chairs Action.

Please do let us know when you have completed the work so we can update our records.

Good luck with the study.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted name]

Chair, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee.

[Redacted contact information]

Name of Researcher:	Lorna Hughes
Email address:	Lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk
Title of Project:	<b>Parents and SENCOs as co-producers in navigating the Statutory Assessment Process.</b>
Project Number:	
Study Start Date:	March 2019
Length of Study:(in original submission)	5 years

**1. Change(s) to the original protocol submitted to the ethics committee**

Please detail as follows:

**1.1 The nature of the change(s).**

In addition to the methods of data collection outlined in the research proposal, this amendment proposes the use social media (Facebook – private groups) as another way to distribute the online questionnaires to parents, professionals and SENCOs in Stage One and Stage Two of the research.

**1.2 The reason(s) for the change(s).**

In addition to contacting professional groups and forums for the targeted local authorities (as outlined in the original proposal), social media will be used to facilitate reaching a wider demographic across England for the scoping questionnaire. This could provide more diverse responses because it will include participants who may not attend formal

professional groups and forums and could provide data that will be relative to a wider national context in taking forward the study.

This approach will also make the process more accessible for parents, professionals and SENCOs. Often times people will engage with social media when they have more leisure time and so the likelihood of them completing a short questionnaire during this leisure time is more probable than if they were emailed during working hours.

The online questionnaire includes a video explaining the research and so by utilising more 'user friendly' approaches, this could also make the questionnaire more accessible to a wider audience (See video text – Appendix A) .

### **1.3 How the change(s) affect the project.**

The original proposal included the plans to create an online questionnaire using [www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk](http://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk) (with a paper version available on request). This will still be sent to professional groups and parent forums / services. However, the proposed change is to also use social media as a way of distributing the questionnaires more effectively.

The use of Facebook (private groups) is the most appropriate form of social media because the groups are managed to ensure only relevant content is shared and only suitable members are allowed to join (e.g. only parents, professional or only SENCOs). The following Facebook private groups have been identified as examples of the types of group which could be contacted regarding the research:

- SENCo/SENDCo Support (Professionals) – Private group
- Support Group for Parents of Special Needs Children – Private group

These groups are managed by administrators and there are also Group Rules which all members sign up to to ensure that the group is conducted appropriately. Consent to upload the questionnaire will be sought from the administrator/s for these private groups so that this is agreed and conducted within the guidelines of their Group Rules and also any other policies or protocols.

In some cases, when using social media there can be questions over the principles of gaining informed consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, especially if data is collected from public sources. However, 'informed consent becomes necessary to obtain when data is collected from private or closed online platforms or websites' (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017: 58). The only data collected would be from the questionnaire after informed consent has been gained. Any other data provided on the social media site by the participants would not be used in this research and will therefore not present further

ethical issues regarding informed consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017: 63) noted that when participants actively complete research online, such as in forums or focus groups etc. there is less concern over the legitimacy of the researchers because ‘they interact with the researcher rather than being a passive bystander to the research.’ The research will be conducted in this way with clear information on how to contact the researcher, how data will be managed and information on how to withdraw from the research if the participants decide they do not want to participate.

Social media provides the ‘ability to transcend boundaries – social, geographical, methodological’ (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017: 59). The change will not only reduce geographical boundaries, but also social boundaries and could provide access to a wider group of individuals, including those who may not have access to the more formalised professional groups and parental forums originally planned in the proposal.

**1.4 The effect on the project timetable.**

This will not impact on the timescales of the project overall, however the timeline has been adjusted slightly to include a later start for data collection to allow for the reconsideration of this change through the ethics committee.

**2. Other issues**

**YES NO**

Are there any other issues that may affect the conduct or course of the project?

*If “Yes”, please describe these below:*

	X
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Issues related to using social media as a method for data collection have been addressed above. There are no other issues to consider in relation to this change.

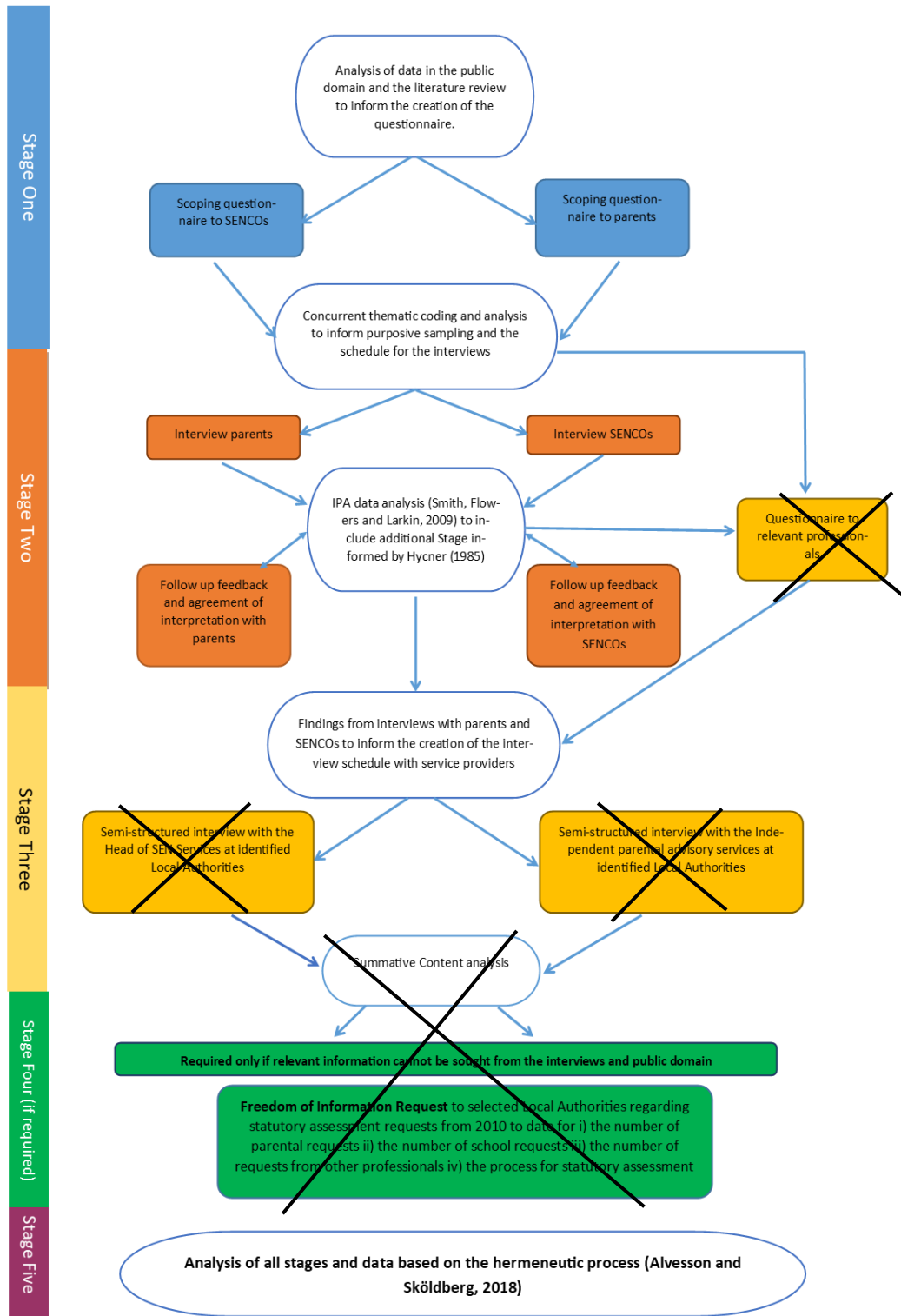
Signature of researcher:

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> January 2020

**References:**

Sloan, L. and Quan-Haase, A. (2017) *The Sage handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. London; Sage Publications Limited

Appendix L - Original design for study



## Appendix M - Stage One: Examples of data analysis

### Initial coding of all data – main spreadsheet

### Coding led to the main themes for each comparative question

## A summary of the rank order for the themes across both groups

Rank	Parents in control (Description)	Parents out of control (Rank)	SENCOs in control (Description)	SENCOs out of control (Rank)
1	Initiating or leading the process (I)		Poor quality actions / reports / assessment (P)	
2	Knowledge of law or process / enforcing legal rights (K)		Lack of communication (C)	
3	Seeking independent separate advice (S) / Funding assessments and process (F)		Lack of information (I) / Lack of support / knowing where to get support (L)	
4	Being listened to (B) / Provided with information (P)		Unlawful practice mentioned (U)	
5	Effective Communication (C)		Intimidation / Manipulation / Accusations towards parents (M)	
6			Time / Delays (D)	
7			Lack of inclusive practice / appropriate provisions (A)	
8			Refusal (R)	

## Identification of common themes across the groups

Section	Parents	Shared themes	SENCOs	Out of control themes related to [Section]
In control themes related to power	Knowledge of law or process / enforcing legal rights (2)		Knowledge / Experience in role (3) Well-evidenced submission (5)	Refusal to assess (7) Time / Delays (P6, S3) (do I put this here or in Choice?) Unlawful practice (P4, S6)
	Self-funding assessments and process or seeking independent / separate advice (3)			Poor quality actions / reports / assessment (P1, S2)
	(do I put this here or in Relationships?)	Initiating or leading the process (P1, S1)		Time / Delays (P6, S3) (do I put this here or in Power?) Lack of inclusive practice / appropriate provisions (7)
				Variability or inconsistency in the process (5)

## Appendix N - Stage Two: Data analysis steps 1-8

Seven steps of IPA analysis adapted from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022)

### Steps 1 to 3

#### Step 1: Starting with the first case: Reading and re-reading

Through reading and re-reading the transcript, the researcher produces notes reflecting initial thoughts which can help identify research assumptions. Initial comments were added to the column on the right of the transcript in BLACK font to identify any initial impressions / thoughts / assumptions.

#### Step 2: Exploratory noting

Textual analysis of the transcript taking the approach of noting descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments. Exploratory noting was added to the column on the right of the transcript. Colour coding was used for each of the transcripts to differentiate between the descriptive (BLUE), linguistic (GREEN) and conceptual (RED) comments

#### Step 3: Constructing Experiential Statements

Identification, and concise summary, of the most important features in the data based on the participant's experiences. The resultant experiential statements were added to the column on the left of the transcript.

#### Full analysis of anonymised IPA transcripts available at:

[https://cccu-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/person/lh267\\_canterbury\\_ac\\_uk/EnSqAHe6U7IGqFKAF5SbvvEBC9jX5rP9Kms9XAaxki3MFlg?e=Re52ZY](https://cccu-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/person/lh267_canterbury_ac_uk/EnSqAHe6U7IGqFKAF5SbvvEBC9jX5rP9Kms9XAaxki3MFlg?e=Re52ZY) (please note this is a time limited link)

#### Extract of analysis:

Parent 1 -Amelia

Key

R = Researcher

Black = initial responses

blue = descriptive

Green = linguistic

Red = conceptual

**Bold / Underlined** – Quotations related to Personal Experiential Statements

Experiential Statements	Time	Script	Exploratory noting
	R 0:02	Recording now or it should be in a moment. <u>So</u> my first question was actually around participation because in the Children and Families Act, it mandates that the importance of the child and his or her parent or young person in participating as fully as possible in decisions. <u>So</u> I just wondered what you felt participating as fully as possible meant, what that means to you?	



1. Mistrust in the system leads to greater responsibility on parents	Parent1 0:29	Well, I think as having an open role and being listened to with it, and having my views as the parent, obviously, <b>I have to advocate for my son, he hasn't got the capacity to understand the questions.</b> And he can't have, he hasn't got the words to express what he means. <u>So</u> I have to advocate and to know that I've been advocated and listened to, and my decisions are respected.	'open role' – transparency? Parents' need to advocate for child - responsibility 'listened to' mentioned twice 'open' mentioned Can the system be trusted? Have to advocate – system may not sufficiently support children with SEN? Are decisions respected?
	R 0:52	Yeah, I know that that does make perfect sense. And in your opinion, can you tell me what place working together should have in that statutory assessment process when applying?	
2. 'Done to' Lack of choice / autonomy in decision-making. 3. 'same room' links to notions of same space (physically) but does this link to notion of same standing / values etc. 4. Pain / psychological impact	Parent1 1:05	I think all the meetings that should be done, you know, whether it's with the school, working for the education psychologist, everything like that, it should all be that we should be all together to do it. That <b>it shouldn't just be a decision made, they have a meeting, and then come back to me,</b> it should be an open area where we all like on a zoom, where we can all talk. And <b>we're all in the same room kind of thing.</b> (R - Have you found that has been part of your experiences?) Yeah, I would say so I think school wise, and all that sort of thing. We've always been included with the SENCO and everything. <b>We're really lucky with the support that he's got,</b> because he is in mainstream still. His EHCP says otherwise. But trying to get a	'should' be all together to do it' - typically they are not all together – limits opportunity to be 'listened to' and to collaborate on decisions 'shouldn't just be a decision made' lack of choice / autonomy in the system 'open' mentioned gain 'open area' – transparency 'same room' links to notions of same space (physically) but does this link to notion of same standing / values etc.

experienced from the process. 5. Normalises the inferior provision (lucky / used to waiting /take on chin - acceptance) indicates low expectations of system / state control. 6. Additional responsibility beyond what is expected of parents typically 7. Tokenistic engagement		school elsewhere. It's just been <b>two years of hell so far.</b> But with XXX (reference to local authority), it's definitely been, it's a lot. Once you've got EHCP started. It wasn't so bad. But sometimes there was a lot of having to chase up with them, and sort of say, well, what's happening next? Or then they want to turn around and go, we haven't received this report yet. We haven't received that, you know, we like Well, I'm sort of going in between, but really it shouldn't you should just be going to the NHS side. <b>I shouldn't have to be doing your secretary work.</b> And yeah, but again, that means that it means that they're getting the stuff done and they're getting the EHCP put together, then sometimes <u>you</u> just you're just so <b>used to waiting anyway.</b> So with a diagnosis, with an EHCP, with everything, you just sort of <b>take it on the chin and get on with it.</b> But as long as you know that we're all included, and we know what's happening between each outgroup with it all.	'lucky with the support' - is it luck to have the right support for your child? Expectations that SEN provisions are inferior to the common education offer – low expectations of system 'two years of hell' emotive language / psychological impact Requirement on parent to chase the process - them and us? State control / onus on parents / additional responsibility beyond what is expected of parents typically 'used to waiting anyway' normalising an inferior provision for child normalising the wait for processes to take their course - low expectations of system / state control 'take it on the chin' make do / pain of the process? Inability to do anything – loss of power / control / autonomy / voice 'we're all included' are they all included? Irony that this statement follows the preceding statement – tokenistic engagement
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	R 2:48	Yeah, no, that that makes sense. And can you tell me at a particular time when you felt that you were involved, or maybe a time that you felt you could have been involved in decision making in the process that you went through?	
8. Parents views less important than professionals - Power differential – them and us  9. Lack of information / inaccessibility of the system to those that need <u>access</u> - lack of knowledge = delays and restricts parents (and therefore children's ) access to support	Parent1 3:01	At the beginning we thought he would need an <u>EHCP</u> and we did discuss it with the school and I wasn't aware at the time that I could have applied just by myself. I didn't need the school involvement. And it wasn't until he'd had his meeting, his <u>outpatients</u> appointment with a paediatrician that she said, we'll need an EHCP. We'll need it. <b>And that's only when the school seemed to listen</b> and go, Oh, okay. Now we'll start the ball rolling. It was only after that point that I actually found out. I could have done it on my own. But there was no, I didn't realise <b>there was no information</b> , it was just <u>seem</u> to be that the school had to do it. <u>So</u> there's not enough information out there. I feel that, but anyone to know that if your child is struggling and needs support at school, that you can just do it without the school support. (R- Was it the paediatrician that made you aware of that? Or was it after that you found out?)  Oh, yeah, it was the <u>the paed...</u> , because I said to the school <u>oh will he need an EHCP?</u> And they said Oh, we'll at the moment we have a one to one in place. They weren't concerned. They're	Parents unaware they can initiate the <u>application</u> Paediatrician advised parents to apply for <u>EHC plan</u>  'that's only when the school seemed to listen' - parents views less important than professionals? Power differential  Lack of information on EHC process - barriers to parents – not transparent - <u>inaccessibility of the system to those that need access</u>  Delays to the support for the child due to the lack of knowledge of the process (that parents can apply for EHC plan) - <u>inaccessibility of the system to those that need access</u>  What are other professionals' understanding of EHC plans? References to movement / action e.g. 'ball rolling' once other professionals are <u>involved</u>
10. Longer term view – child's future needs		like, we're meeting his needs. But for us <b>as parents, we knew that he wouldn't ever be able to stay mainstream</b> , he would,, he needed to.. he needs a smaller school. And it's only when we said to the paediatrician, she said, <u>Oh</u> , have you got an EHCP? We said, <u>No</u> , the school don't want to go for it. She's like, no, he'll need one. And it's only then we started the ball rolling that I spoke to the case manager at the time, but she said, <u>Oh</u> , you could have applied, you didn't need the school to do it. You know, when you're like <b>that's six months that we weren't told</b> , but maybe we should have asked but we just assumed that it was had to be the school that started it. (R- Yeah) It's frozen (R - I can still see you). Oh, there we go. You froze. But yeah, it is once the school started it and the paediatrician had said he'll need one that's when you know, things started to move with it all. But it's only <b>the school didn't listen to what we said. They listen to what the paediatrician said, though.</b>	Parents and Paediatrician looking at support for the future rather than need <u>now</u> Response indicates the lack of autonomy / influence over decision <u>making</u> Reinforced the <u>parents</u> views / values as less important than the paediatrician - power differential Is this a perception? Maybe this was coincidental that the child was at the right stage / appropriate evidence to support the application at this stage?
	R 5:03	And can you describe how your involvement in that decision making affected or could have affected your relationship with the SENCO? Did you find that that had an impact at all?	

Step 4

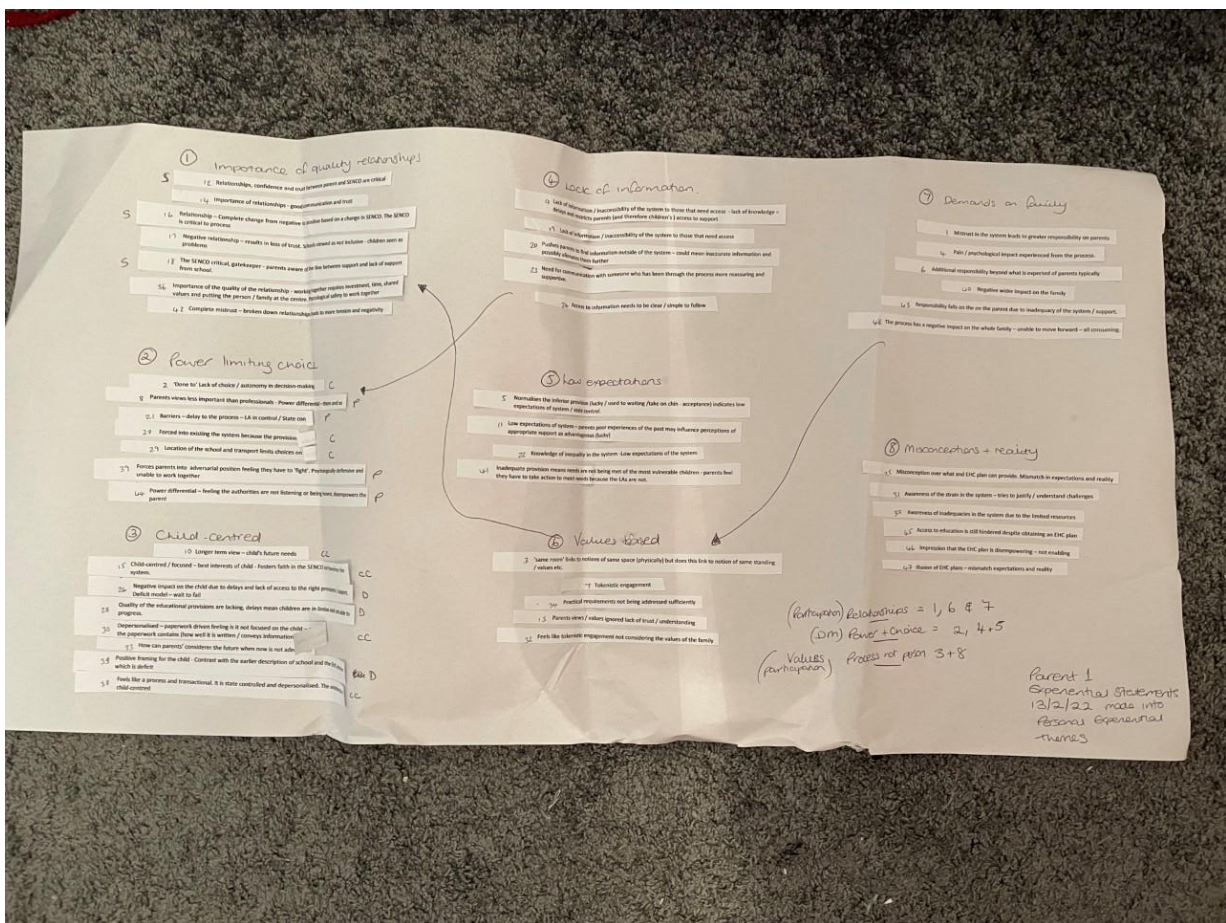
**Step 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements**

Mapping of the experiential statements into clusters which relate to the research question and represent the most important aspects of the participant's account

**Development of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant available at:**

[https://cccu-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/personal/lh267\\_canterbury\\_ac\\_uk/Documents/Documents/PhD/Developing%20PETs?csf=1&web=1&e=G0iN8p](https://cccu-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/personal/lh267_canterbury_ac_uk/Documents/Documents/PhD/Developing%20PETs?csf=1&web=1&e=G0iN8p) (please note this is a time limited link)

Example of development of PETs:



## Step 5

### Step 5: Naming the Personal Experiential themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them in a table

Each cluster of experiential statements are given a title to describe its characteristics. These titles become the Personal Experiential themes.

	GET1 - Process not person	GET2 – Relationships	GET3 -Power and choice
<b>Amber PETs (SENCO)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child centred</li> <li>System and Process issues</li> <li>Misconceptions and reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conflicting views and values</li> <li>External forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SENCO identity and voice</li> <li>Perceived parental power</li> </ul>
<b>Bethany PETs (SENCO)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Person centred</li> <li>Process driven</li> <li>Lack of training</li> <li>Expectations and reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships</li> <li>Investment required for collaboration</li> <li>Beyond the role of SENCO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systemic issues</li> <li>Parents disadvantaged / disempowered</li> <li>SENCO identity</li> <li>SENCO restricted</li> </ul>
<b>Clara PETs (SENCO)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child-centred</li> <li>Systemic issues</li> <li>Expectations and reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Power and choice limitations</li> <li>Socio-economic status / advantage</li> <li>Independent sector consideration</li> <li>SENCO identity</li> </ul>
<b>Amelia PETs (Parent)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child-centred or dehumanised?</li> <li>Misconceptions and reality over the EHC plan</li> <li>Delays and deficit model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of Quality Relationships</li> <li>Demands on the Family</li> <li>Values Based or Tokenistic?</li> <li>SENCO as Critical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Power differentials</li> <li>Lack of information</li> <li>Limited choices</li> <li>Low expectations</li> </ul>
<b>Bonnie PETs (Parent)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate provision</li> <li>Child-centred</li> <li>Dehumanised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working together</li> <li>Adversarial relationships</li> <li>Mistrust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclusion</li> <li>Choice and autonomy</li> <li>Accountability</li> <li>Disempowerment</li> <li>Knowledge</li> </ul>
<b>Clara PETs (Parent)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inequity in the system</li> <li>Needs not being met</li> <li>Person-centred versus paperwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive co-working</li> <li>SENCO is key / pivotal</li> <li>Training for co-working</li> <li>Interpersonal qualities for co-working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal and State control</li> <li>Disabled despite education and socio-economic status</li> <li>Professional power (mistrust)</li> </ul>
<b>Dominique PETs (Parent)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Issues in the system / process</li> <li>Detrimental impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positives of co-working</li> <li>Valuing parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional power</li> </ul>

**Table 20: All participants Personal Experiential themes (PETs) across the Group Experiential themes (GETs)**

## Steps 6 and 7

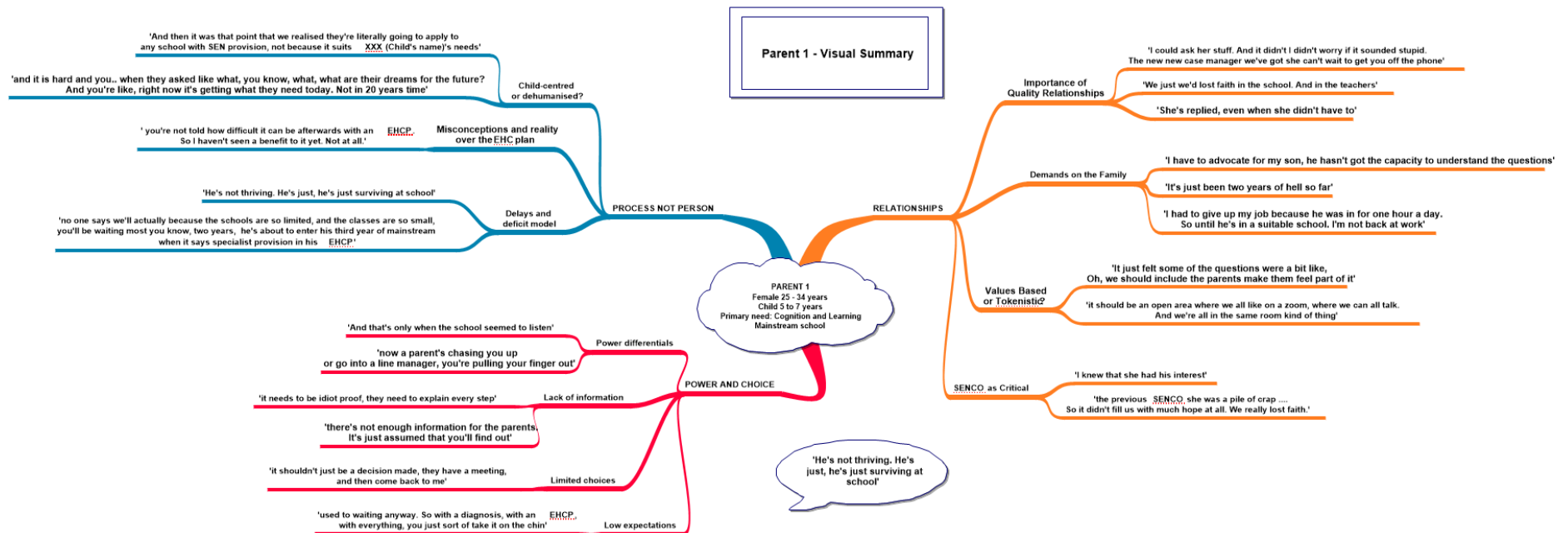
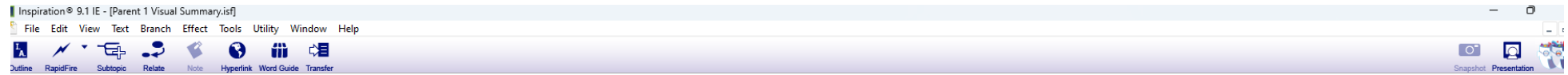
### Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases

Move to the next transcript and repeat the process. It is important to manage the data sequentially to treat each case separately - in-keeping with idographic commitment

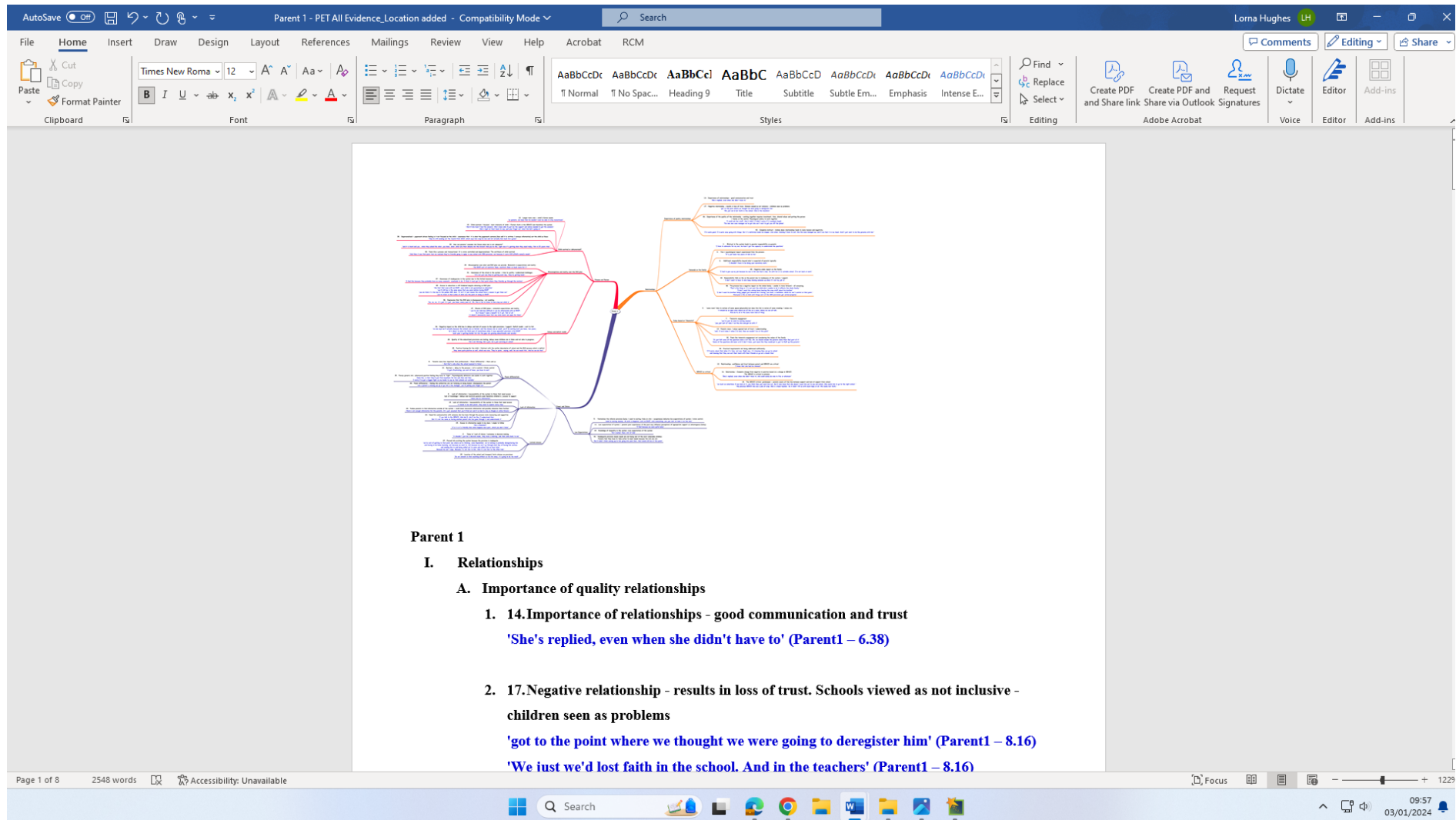
### Step 7: Working with Personal Experiential themes to develop Group Experiential themes across cases

Look for similarities and differences across the Personal Experiential Themes to create a set of Group Experiential Themes

Inspiration 9 <https://www.inspiration-at.com/> Software was used as a way to organise the data in to mindmaps for each of the participants as outlined in the screen shot below:



The data was then converted into word documents to organise the data within the individual PETs and the associated GETs as outlined in the screen shot below:





**Tables of data:**

Frequency tables are sometimes used in IPA to identify the most common themes across the participants; however, this was not practical in this study due to the small sample. Instead, the tables below identify when themes have featured across the whole sample. Themes were still explored even if they did not feature in the whole sample, because it is important not to ignore the experiences of individuals just because they do not align to the wider data set. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022: 105) claim '[i]mportant themes may also sometimes speak to smaller patterns of convergence'.

<b>SENCOs GET 1: Process not Person</b>	<b>Amber (PETs)</b>	<b>Bethany (PETs)</b>	<b>Clara (PETs)</b>	<b>Sub-theme present in all the sample?</b>
<b>Sub-theme 1: The importance of person centred practice to SENCOs</b>	Child centred	Person centred	Child-centred	Yes
<b>Sub-thee 2: Systemic barriers to SENCOs effecting person centred practice</b>	System and Process issues	Process driven  Lack of training	Systemic issues	Yes
<b>Sub-theme 3: Misconceptions and reality restricting person centred practice</b>	Misconceptions and reality	Expectations and reality	Expectations and reality	Yes

**Table 21: SENCOs GET1 – Process not person**

<b>SENCOs GET 2: Relationships</b>	<b>Amber (PETs)</b>	<b>Bethany (PETs)</b>	<b>Clara (PETs)</b>	<b>Sub-theme present in all the sample?</b>
<b>Sub-theme 1: The Importance of relationships</b>		Relationships	Relationships	No
<b>Sub-theme 2: Investment required for working together</b>	Conflicting views and values  External forces	Investment required for collaboration  Beyond the role of SENCO		No

**Table 22: SENCOs GET2 – Relationships**

<b>SENCOs GET 3: Power and Choice</b>	<b>Amber (PETs)</b>	<b>Bethany (PETs)</b>	<b>Clara (PETs)</b>	<b>Sub-theme present in all the sample?</b>
<b>Sub-theme 1: The importance of decision making to SENCOs</b>	SENCO identity and voice	SENCO identity	SENCO identity	Yes
<b>Sub-theme 2: Impact from external powers</b>		Systemic issues SENCO restricted	Power and choice limitations Independent sector consideration	No
<b>Sub-theme 3: Parental Power</b>	Perceived parental power	Parents disadvantaged / disempowered	Socio-economic status / advantage	Yes

**Table 23: SENCOs GET3 – Power and Choice**

<b>Parents GET – 1. Process not person</b>	<b>Amelia (PETs)</b>	<b>Bonnie (PETs)</b>	<b>Carmen (PETs)</b>	<b>Dominique (PETs)</b>	<b>Sub-theme present in all the sample?</b>
<b>Sub-theme 1: The Importance of person-centred practice</b>	Child-centred or dehumanised?	Child-centred Dehumanised	Person-centred versus paperwork		No
<b>Sub-theme 2: Inadequate provision and practice</b>	Delays and deficit model	Inadequate provision	Needs not being met	Detrimental impact	Yes
<b>Sub-theme 3: Systemic issues impacting on person-centred practice</b>	Misconceptions and reality over the EHC plan		Inequity in the system	Issues in the system / process	No

**Table 24: Parents GET1 – Process not person**



Parents GET – 2. Relationships	Amelia (PETs)	Bonnie (PETs)	Carmen (PETs)	Dominique (PETs)	Sub-theme present in all the sample?
<b>Sub-theme 1: The Importance of relationships</b>	Importance of Quality Relationships Values Based or Tokenistic?	Working together	Positive co-working	Positives of co-working Valuing parents	Yes
<b>Sub-theme 2: Professional requirements for relationships</b>	SENCO as Critical		SENCO is key / pivotal Training for co-working Interpersonal qualities for co-working		No
<b>Sub-theme 3: Wider impact on relationships</b>	Demands on the Family	Adversarial relationships Mistrust			No

Table 25: Parents GET2 - Relationships

Parents GET – 3. Power and choice	Amelia (PETs)	Bonnie (PETs)	Carmen (PETs)	Dominique (PETs)	Sub-theme present in all the sample?
<b>Sub-theme 1: The Importance of Decision making to parents</b>	Limited choices	Choice and autonomy Knowledge	Disabled despite education and socio-economic status		No
<b>Sub-theme 2: Barriers to parents being able to participate</b>	Lack of information Low expectations	Exclusion Accountability	Legal and State control		No
<b>Sub-theme 3: Professional power</b>	Power differentials	Disempowerment	Professional power (mistrust)	Professional power	Yes

Table 26: Parents GET3 - Power and Choice

## Step 8

### **Step 8: Member checking (Hycner, 1985)**

Step 8 was a return to the participants through follow-up meetings which included discussion on interpretations of the data from the first interviews. The participants could freely edit, retract comments, make adjustments or clarify their position ensuring interpretations more realistically reflected their position (Hycner, 1985).

### **Email to participants**

Thank you for participating in my research project on Education, Health and Care plans and the parents' and SENCO's roles in working together. Your contribution has been valuable to my research.

I promised to contact you to arrange a feedback and agreement session to discuss the information I collected. This email is to provide you with details on how to book a meeting if you would like to take up this offer.

### **What will happen in the next stage of the research?**

I have included a summary of the main themes and some key quotations from your interview on the attached page. Please remember that the information you have given has been anonymised. This means that it will not include your name or anything about your life that could mean that someone would know that you took part. Your contribution is therefore noted as 'Parent 3'.

The feedback and agreement session will provide you with the opportunity to tell me if you do not agree with something. If this does occur, you can tell me why and we will agree how we can change it. The meeting timescale is flexible, but I would expect this to take between 45 minutes to 60 minutes. In this meeting we will:

1. Discuss the summary of the themes (attached)
2. Discuss your views and make sure you are happy with the information presented
3. Discuss any changes that might need to be made if you do not agree with something

When you book the meeting, I will provide you with a link to the interview transcript and analysis so you can review this before we meet.

### **What happens afterwards?**

After all the data for this research has been reviewed, I will write a summary which can be shared. Please contact me if you would like a copy. Anonymised information from the research may be published or shared with local authorities and groups and forums who were involved in the research.

### **How do I book a meeting?**

Please confirm you would like to take part by **Friday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2023** by clicking on the link below to confirm your details and book a date and time for the meeting:

<https://zcal.co/i/jP8Rk9S8>

Thank you again for the valuable contribution you have already made to my research. It is your choice if you would like to take part in this follow-up meeting. You can decide at any time that you do not want to take part in the research, and you do not need to tell me why you have decided to stop. My contact details are at the bottom of this letter should you need to contact me for any reason.

Kind regards and best wishes for the festive season

Lorna

Contact details:

Name: Lorna Hughes

Telephone: 01227 921866

Email: [lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.hughes@canterbury.ac.uk)

**Address:**

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education

Canterbury Christ Church University

North Holmes Road

Canterbury

Kent

CT1 1QU

## Appendix O - SENCO and parent participant summaries

### SENCO Participant summaries

Amber:

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Conflicting views and values	'there's a very fine line between, you know, thank you for your opinion, and we want to work with you. But actually, that idea is not going to work'  'I feel like they listened and they accepted. And now they don't, they don't listen, and they don't accept.'
	B. External forces	'where statutory told a parent that they hadn't received my annual review yet. So rather than checking with me first, they told the parent they hadn't received it'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Child-centred	'children are supposed to be at the heart of it'
	B. System and Process Issues	'quite a few parents are upset, not because of what I've done, but because they don't agree with what is the process or what is the situation'  'they had creative engagement facilitators who are supposed to work with the parents, but support the school, and that I've never seen one. So I have no idea what they do or where they exist'  'I wish they'd let SENCOs just get together and say, right, this is how we need to improve it, because oh, my goodness, this is bonkers'
	C. Misconceptions and Reality	'this is where I've clashed with quite a few because it doesn't mean a one to one'  'your child will be out of the classroom for four hours a week, like, do you really want that? They were like, Yeah, we do'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. SENCO Identity and Voice	'the EP is obviously above me in terms of qualifications and assessment ideas'  'then I ended up rewriting the EHCP. And I was like, that's not a SENCOs' remit. And that worries me, because then the EHCP published is based on me'
	B. Perceived Parental Power	'it feels like the parents' ones get priority, because if it fails, then they simply appeal.'  'creating random situations where I've got two EHCP in the school now that I wouldn't have put in myself, but they've gone through and they've been awarded'

Bethany:

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Investment Required for collaboration	'we had a guy come in and actually facilitate a proper person-centered process. And it took two and a half hours. It was lovely' 'they just want to fight you. Yeah. Because you are the system aren't you. So it's about building trust. And sometimes that takes quite a long time'
	B. Relationships	'in my experience, parents will give you their voice if they trust you.' 'a lot of parents who've come to us having battled. And therefore they come in really defensive,'
	C. Beyond the SENCO role	'I keep in touch with quite a lot of those parents, you know, some of those kids are like 28 by now.' 'parents and carers, they see you as advocate on their behalf. But that's how I feel almost, you know, a potential Saviour'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Person Centred	'get the child to do a cup of tea for their parents or carer or whatever beforehand, so that they could be part of facilitating, and have actually had children chair, their own meetings in the past' 'in terms of fully participating if we start with the children, so it would be having their voice in reviews'
	B. Process Driven	'whoever does the most work, you'll get to the next level, it's a bit like that. And if you're going to make it, co-production you need to take that out.' 'I think the application process itself is quite bizarre, isn't it, because when you do the application, you're doing an application as if it was going to panel as opposed to just what it should be. This child's got special needs, and they need special provision'
	C. Lack of Training	'social care have had a lot more training, I think, than SENCOs in doing that, co-production' 'you do NASENCO, don't you? So if there could be some proper training about structured conversations listening, empathic listening, how how to have I did some tricky conversation training'
	D. Expectations and Reality	'I don't think I don't think pupils and parents are at the heart of the process at all. I've been a SENCO for over 20 years. I, I personally don't see that much difference. In fact, probably it's even more of a battle now.' 'early on, when the SEN Code of Practice came out, and there was this Nirvana of how we're going to do the model.'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. Systemic issues	'all local authorities are interpreting the law in a different way, aren't they?' 'And they vary don't know, between counties, there's no set template' 'at the moment, it's absolutely ridiculous how much money is being wasted on tribunals'
	B. Parents Disadvantaged / Disempowered	'in terms of EHCPs, I think they, they're so full of jargon.' 'although they feel they can ask, you know, they have a voice. The meeting is more about the school telling them stuff, and them just kind of absorbing'
	C. SENCO identity	'I quite enjoy the process, because I feel it's a very detailed, tangible piece of work, that if you do it well, and you pass it on, and it gets through, if you like, you feel a bit of a sense of achievement, and pride'
	D. SENCOs Restricted	'having a named SEN person, which is quite hard, isn't it to find out who your named SEN person is because they they keep restructuring' 'So I feel the whole system is created to to put barriers, to see almost how serious you are. You know, you want to apply for this. All right, we're gonna make you do some work beforehand.'

Clara:

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Relationships	'the triangle almost with parents, child and staff, the closer that triangle can be, the more, the better it is.' 'parents that I've gone through the EHCP process with, you get to know them so well, because you're meeting with them such a lot. And see, I think it does enhance a relationship. Yes. Even if, even if it's a negative outcome at the end.' 'annual reviews that have taken a year to get the new EHCP back. You know, I've got, so it doesn't help the communication and the liaison and the relationship between the local authority and the parents. But I don't really blame the local authority. I think it's just ridiculous.'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Systemic issue	'I think it would make much more sense if there's one form for applying for an EHCP.' 'And so parents withdrew him and sent him to a state school. And he got his EHCP in less than half a term. And yet we'd applied and been told no.' 'some children on my SEN register probably wouldn't be on the register, if they were in mainstream school'
	B. Expectations and Reality	'parents are desperate for an EHCP. And I have to explain to them, we can apply, but our local authorities 68% get turned down first time.' 'But we had a, we had real problems with that, because the parents didn't want him to have an EHCP because they felt it was a stigma. They felt it would affect where he went in the future.'
	C. Child-centred	'we are really, really nurturing, we're... I mean, our heads very into Mental Health, First Aid and his main thing he wants the to school to be is a happy school. Children to be happy.' 'My paperwork I've produced for panel is trying to, you know, create a portrait of a child.' 'when it comes to the annual review, I always ask them to the parents, you know, contribution. And then and then they attend the meeting.'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. Power and Choice limitations	'Money, I think it's just completely money.' 'So I feel I have no control once it goes out of out of my hands once I apply even the children that they are.'
	B. Socio-economic status / advantage	'in our policy makes it very clear that money has to be paid, paid for by the parents' 'and even if they're going to mainstream, that they may well end up being excluded. And also, I think some parents are quite scared of mainstream if their child's not coping in a class of 12.'
	C. Independent Sector considerations	'I can see exactly why the panel would say, well, they're in a class of 11 to 12. And they got a teaching, they've got a class teacher, they got a class teaching assistant and you're putting a one to one in. Why should we provide any funding?'
	D. SENCO identity	'these kids matter, do you know what I mean? They become part of your family' 'I'm a professional. I'm a teacher, I'm a SENCO. But actually, my opinion is not, I don't think my opinion matters when it goes to panel'

## Parent Participant summaries

Amelia:

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Importance of Quality Relationships	'I could ask her stuff. And it didn't I didn't worry if it sounded stupid. The new new case manager we've got she can't wait to get you off the phone' 'We just we'd lost faith in the school. And in the teachers' 'She's replied, even when she didn't have to'
	B. Demands on the Family	'I have to advocate for my son, he hasn't got the capacity to understand the questions' 'It's just been two years of hell so far' 'I had to give up my job because he was in for one hour a day. So until he's in a suitable school. I'm not back at work'
	C. Values Based or Tokenistic?	'It just felt some of the questions were a bit like, Oh, we should include the parents make them feel part of it' 'it should be an open area where we all like on a zoom, where we can all talk. And we're all in the same room kind of thing'
	D. SENCO as Critical	'I knew that she had his interest' 'the previous SENCO she was a pile of crap .... So it didn't fill us with much hope at all. We really lost faith.'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Child-centred or dehumanised?	'And then it was that point that we realised they're literally going to apply to any school with SEN provision, not because it suits XXX (Child's name)'s needs' 'and it is hard and you.. when they asked like what, you know, what, what are their dreams for the future? And you're like, right now it's getting what they need today. Not in 20 years time'
	B. Misconceptions and reality over the EHC plan	'you're not told how difficult it can be afterwards with an EHCP. So I haven't seen a benefit to it yet. Not at all.'
	C. Delays and deficit model	'He's not thriving. He's just, he's just surviving at school' 'no one says we'll actually because the schools are so limited, and the classes are so small, you'll be waiting most you know, two years, he's about to enter his third year of mainstream when it says specialist provision in his EHCP'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. Power differentials	'And that's only when the school seemed to listen' 'now a parent's chasing you up or go into a line manager, you're pulling your finger out'
	B. Lack of information	'it needs to be idiot proof, they need to explain every step' 'there's not enough information for the parents. It's just assumed that you'll find out'
	C. Limited choices	'it shouldn't just be a decision made, they have a meeting, and then come back to me'
	D. Low expectations	'used to waiting anyway. So with a diagnosis, with an EHCP, with everything, you just sort of take it on the chin'

Bonnie:

**Key** – Bonnie font colour **black** Bonnie's Advocate font colour **red**

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Working together	'sometimes these families need a mediator, somebody to say, 'Now come on, (indistinguishable) we need to sort this out. We can do this together.' 'She was fully with us to begin with'
	B. Adversarial Relationships	'So me and the SENCOs relationship used to be good to begin with. But the more you fight, the more it becomes hostile, basically, there's no other word for it.'
	C. Mistrust	'they don't tell you everything. They actually keep a lot away from you that you are entitled to ask for.' 'The lies they tell, yeah. It makes you feel like they're pulling you to shreds. You feel deflated every time you deal with them'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Inadequate Provision	'treatment that these children are getting is disgraceful.' 'And they don't listen to parents, about those those ways of dealing with children. They don't listen.'
	B. Child-centre	'this is my son, you are here to provide him an education. You are here to support him suppose to make him understand what the world supposed to be like. Once you go through these doors to give him the best chance.' 'Not being judgmental to either parent or child, you know, because even parents get it wrong sometimes.'
	C. Dehumanised	'it is a business at the end of the day' 'None of the EHCP actually reflects those needs' 'I am looked at like, I have horns on my head.'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. Exclusion	'That way we get rid of this child that doesn't conform to our square box to a different school, but not indicate to the local authority that we're having problems.' 'I did say it's illegal, but I thought well, I'll go pick him up because they don't want the argument'
	B. Choice and Autonomy	'in the end they was trying to take the decision away from me' 'many people, many people, many parents aren't sure.. aware that they can appeal' 'I felt like I was left with no choice anyway but to send him there'
	C. Accountability	'the LA's are willing to put up their legal teams at great expensive public money to fail. And I think that's something that they should be held accountable for.'
	D. Disempowerment	'a lot of the council use a lot of jargon words to lots of parents that don't understand' 'it's really important that parents do understand, but for parents to gain that knowledge. There's nowhere where you can go'
	E. Knowledge	'We should, right from the beginning, be able to understand what we can access what we can claim for our children. All this is kept away from us.' 'I had to literally become a solicitor with the help of my mum' 'the more knowledge you have, the better the outcomes for your child'



Carmen:

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Positive Co-working	'Front and centre front and centre. It's absolutely at the heart of it.' 'they have embedded co-production through the whole of the development of the service at all levels, to ensure that it's fit for purpose.'
	B. SENCO is key / pivotal	'so I think SENCOs have a massive, massive part to play.' 'a head teacher who empowers his SENCO, and gives her a budget, and a team of assistant SENCOs to do what's needed..'
	C. Training for Co-working	'we're trying to upstream training within the system, to ensure that it really is embedded within person centred practice, holistic.' 'there's a massive problem with teacher training, and, and SENCO training' 'And I think it takes is courage to work with families that's the other thing, it does take a lot of courage.'
	D. Interpersonal qualities for co-working	'it's not always a massive solution. There's sometimes something really fundamental there, but you only get there through relationships.' 'then to listen to those conversations and understand that actually, it's down to culture and behaviour within services. And that actually, there are good people in all these systems coming up against shit people.'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Inequality in the System	'I was a volunteer for myself, but it is not an appropriate offer to rely on voluntary sector entirely.' 'lots of people can't and don't or give up. And I think that the numbers game I see strategically in XXX1 (reference to local authority) at the moment, they're actively relying on parents giving up.' 'it has criteria, which is so high that only a tiny percentage of children can access or enter or have an entitlement to access that service.' 'the assessment process is inherently part of the problem. Because it, it sets up a power imbalance.'
	B. Needs not being met	'the idea of catching up is ridiculous. You can't catch up for lost time. It's just you may as well except that the time is gone. And start from ground zero.' 'increasing numbers of children and not having their basic needs met in education, full stop.' 'What is most damaging is that parents are told, oh, you know, they're fine, they don't have a problem.'
	C. Person-centred versus Paperwork	'the whole problem with an assessment framework is that it puts, it then tries to homogenise someone's experience and set it on rails. You know, there's not, there's not enough individualization.' 'the only thing the only thing that galvanised systems into action was not non-attendance at school. The only only thing that people started caring about even though I was raising problems for years.'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. Legal and State Control	'this is what should be happening. Okay, so and then I would cross reference it with local policy realise that local policy was entirely in breach of the legislation.' 'school refused twice, to support. And that's because they will believe in local policy. He won't qualify, she won't qualify, she's not eligible.'
	B. Disabled despite Education / Socio-economic Status	'now I understand why intergenerational poverty and, you know, intervention of social care. And deprivation perpetuates for families, because it's just totally disabling and disempowering. And it removes all your dignity and respect.'
	C. Professional Power (mistrust)	'he destroyed our family but he sees, he's told himself a narrative that's that SEND is his thing.' 'many professionals feel like they've done their training, and therefore their opinion is more valid'

Dominique:

Main theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quotations
I. Participation in working relationships	A. Positives of Co-working	'Working together should be a process undertaken when a draft plan is being drawn up,. This would prevent so many appeals if parents feel their children have what they needed from the beginning.'
	B. Valuing Parents	'As parents we know our children best.'  'I believe there should be more parental influence over what is shared.'
II. Valuing People in the Process	A. Issues in the system / process	'none of this was shared with me until a refusal to issue a plan was determined.' 'It infuriated me because things were being shared without consent or checks and I had no knowledge of this and no way to have it amended.'
	B. Detrimental Impact	'Again, unfounded, gaslighting, retaliatory and malicious.'
III. Levels of decision making in the process	A. Professional Power	'They then tried to discredit me and my application because of my mental health "concerns".'  'I know I am seen as difficult, pushy and actually I know I was branded as crazy to everyone who saw the letters /spoke with her or the school. (By the SENCO sharing inaccurate data).'  'broken my trust in the services that are supposed to be there to support CYP and parents'

## Appendix P - Member checking: follow up meeting communications

### **Follow up email**

Thank you for booking a date and time to participate in the next stage of my research on Education, Health and Care plans. I appreciate you taking time to speak to me again.

The link to the full transcript for your interview is here: [Parent2 Interview - Transcript.docx](#)  
(hyperlink disabled)

The link to the analysis of themes and supporting quotations for your interview is here: [Parent 2 - All Evidence in themes](#) (hyperlink disabled)

I will send you the password to open the documents in a separate email.

I have noted that you have requested a telephone call. The telephone number I have for you is XXXXXXXXXXXX. If you prefer me to call you on another number, please do let me know.

I look forward to speaking to you at 4.00pm on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2023, but please do not hesitate to get in contact with me if you have any queries beforehand.

Kind regards

Lorna

### **Final follow up email**

Happy New Year, I do hope you are well. I missed you when I phoned today, but wonder if something might have cropped up.

I would be very happy to reschedule at a time that suits you. Please do feel free to re-book a slot if you would still like to meet to discuss the research on EHC plans. The link to book a meeting is below:

<https://zcal.co/i/jP8Rk9S8>

Kind regards