Author Details for:

'You have to find the right words to be honest': Nurturing relationships between teachers and parents of children with Special Educational Needs.

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Abstract

This article explores the views of a small group of teachers who specialise in supporting children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Frequently literature exploring the relationship between parents and teachers of children with SEN uses language which is confrontational, even aggressive. This research, based within a specialist school in England, portrays the voices of the teachers themselves, presenting their perspective on creating relationships with, and supporting the parents of, children with SEN. Far from the language of antagonism portrayed in so many articles, the rich descriptions elicited through focus group discussion demonstrate relationships that are established upon sensitivity, understanding, kindness and care. Our data paints a picture of teachers who feel deeply for the emotional turmoil that many of their parents have suffered before reaching their door; and do all that is possible to hold them safely, whilst they acclimatise to the new 'normality' of their child accessing specialist provision.

Key words: Special Educational Needs, SEN, parents, partnership, kindness

Introduction

Whilst a number of articles highlight the lack of parent voice where educational partnerships with the parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are concerned and endeavour to redress this imbalance (Hess, Molina & Kozleski, 2006; Hartas, 2008; Sedibe & Fourie, 2018; Truss, 2008), it is far more difficult to find research which specifically considers the specialist SEN practitioner's perspective. The field of SEN literature appears to be largely dominated by academics vying for the rights of the parent. When partnership between teachers and parents of children with SEN *is* explored, the language used can be negative and even aggressive. In just one research article by Hess et al (2006), the terms: frustration, unhappiness, lack of understanding, conflict, struggles, dissatisfaction, resistance, and power imbalance were used to depict the parent and practitioner relationship. The aim of this article is to take a moment to celebrate, rather than problematize the SEN practitioner and the efforts made to forge positive and meaningful relationships with the parents of the children in their care.

The concept of empathy is increasingly apparent in literature concerning Early Childhood Education and Care (Stefan & Avram, 2018; Hodgkins, 2019; Lynch, Newlands & Forrester, 2019), but it remains relatively underexplored in the literature investigating partnerships between schools and parents of children with SEN. This seems strange considering the high emotions that come in to play when children and families are struggling with a need beyond the parameters of what is generally considered 'the norm' (Wolfendale, 2013). Orphan (2004, p. 98) adeptly summarises this situation:

Children have a habit of making you aware of feelings inside yourself that you had no idea existed, such as uncontrollable rage, sorrow or a deep sense of joy. This is true for all parents. For parents of children with disabilities the feelings we experience are even more intense and can be fairly constant.

What we present in this paper is the perspective of a small group of SEN teachers in England, UK who are acutely aware of these emotions and who do their utmost to respect them in their sensitive and respectful dealings with parents.

Understanding SEN and Establishing Parent Partnerships

The Department for Education (DfE) (2015, p. 15) in England (UK) describes a child with Special Educational Needs as having 'a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her'. It should be acknowledged that different nations of the UK use different terminology to describe those children recognised as having additional needs, but as this research took place in England, SEN is used throughout this discussion. In England, the presumption is that provision will be found for children with SEN within a mainstream school; however, parents of children with an Education Health and Care Plan (an individual plan that is drawn up for the child's specific needs) have the right to seek a place at a special school or similar specialist setting (ibid). In 2019 the House of Commons stated that around 14.9% of pupils in England were identified as having a special need of some description. These statistics in themselves do not mean much, what is of more significance is the implications of this assessment for the children and families involved. In 2006 (p. 366) Truss explained how 'the life and educational experiences of children with SEN are

substantially less positive than those of other children', providing, as an example, that within England '87% of primary permanent exclusions are of children with SEN'. The destructive impact that an assessment of specific need can have upon a child and their family makes positive working relationships between SEN specialists and parents a crucial part of the provision.

The SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) in England describes the partnership between teaching professionals and parents as central to the assessment, review procedures, and educational setting choice of each child with SEN. All parent partnerships can be fragile when there are conflicting views about what is in the best interest of the child, but where children with SEN are concerned emotions are frequently heightened. Wolfendale (2013) describes parents of children with SEN feeling harassed that teachers do not have time to listen to them. Turnbull and Turnbull (2002) and Galloway, Armstrong and Tomlinson (1994) attribute much of the negativity that parents perceive from teachers as being rooted in the poor behaviour of their child; the perception that teachers believe it is a result of their ineffective parenting.

Broomhead (2013) argues that trainee teachers are not adequately prepared for the complexities involved in dealing with the families of children with SEN. Yet creating a productive teacher-parent relationship is vital, because, as Sedibe and Fourie (2018, p. 433) explain: 'Parents take up the role of primary teachers at the conception of their children and this lifelong commitment makes them experts with respect to the needs of their children'. Clearly a productive dialogue between practitioners and parents is crucial for the wellbeing of the child, but it is important to consider some of the obstacles that SEN teachers are likely to face whilst developing this.

The Emotional Terrain of SEN Parent Partnership

Shame

Sedibe and Fourie (2018) found, through their discussions with parents of children with SEN, that the parents commonly felt that they were somehow to blame for their child's diagnosis. As a result, they frequently felt deep shame. Orphan (2004, p. 101-2) explains where this feeling of shame might originate from:

> The society we live in is a blame culture; everyone has high
> expectations of everyone else, so when things go wrong it has to be
> someone's fault…cultures from many parts of the world have a view
> that bad things happen to bad people; the diagnosis makes you feel this
> is bad and it's your fault.

Speaking from her own experience, Orphan (2004) adds that this can make social interactions, in particular, difficult; because what you actually want to do is to hide away at the same time as having to deal with a wide raft of professionals. Truss (2008) recorded dealing with 57 different professionals and 10 charitable organisations during the period of her own son's diagnosis. It is because of these challenges that Hartas (2008, p. 149) highlights the need for professionals to be active in 'valuing the strengths that families bring and removing blame' for productive partnerships to be developed.

In addition to a sense of shame, several authors discussed how *incompetent* parents can feel post-diagnosis, wanting to help their children holistically, but not being sure where to start (for example Nojaja, 2002; Bauer & Shea, 2003). Wolfendale (2013) shared her own experience of wanting to help her daughter but finding that it was counterproductive if they tried to work on school tasks together,

because they quickly became frustrated with one another. She felt under pressure, as a result of what she perceived to be the judgement of others, explaining that: 'It gets you down when you want to help her and you can't' adding 'it's upsetting when people think I'm not helping her' (p. 62).

Sadness

Orphan (2004, p. 103) frankly explains that as the parent of a child with SEN, upon receiving a diagnosis 'expectation is lost. At the root of our sadness is that loss.' Blamires, Robertson and Blamires (1997) compared the process of accepting the actuality of having a child with a learning disability as akin to the grieving process. Hess et al. (2006, p.148) recognise and expand on this, explaining that it is grieving the loss of the child who had every chance of success within school, employment and the wider community. Truss (2008, p. 375) highlights the lack of support that exists for parents whilst their 'emotional burden verges on the intolerable'.

Anger and Exhaustion

The outcome of the shame and sadness mentioned above can often be stress and anger. A "discourse of fighting" (Truss 2008, p. 372) can arise from feeling helpless. Truss (ibid) goes on to explain how inherent in the SEN assessment system is a need for "children to fail over an extended period of time before any help can be secured" and how painful an experience this can be. Parents can feel talked down to, blamed for their child's problems (Tucker, 2009; Broomhead, 2013) and alienated (Truss, 2008). Orphan (2004, p. 103) described her "perfected smile" for the benefit of those around her (including her other children) as a parent of a child with specific needs and how it masked deep

misery. She also adds that what is not so well documented is the exhaustion resulting from the struggle. Orphan (2004, p. 112) paints a vivid picture of this when she shares how she watched her husband struggling into work having not had enough sleep and struggling to function'; but that it was 'still easier than being home'.

What can SEN teachers do?

Orphan (2004, p. 106) describes Britain as 'a society that is not very good at managing feeling', there is a tendency to keep emotion tightly reined. Perhaps as a result, Sen and Yurtsever (2007) discuss how the pastoral needs of families are often neglected by SEN schools, and schools should become more aware of and sensitive to families' emotional states. Petr's (2003) research found that parents of children with SEN needed ongoing emotional support and that they often turned towards the school for counselling. But is this a reasonable expectation of those teachers with responsibility for *children* and if so, what should this counselling 'look like'?

Wolfendale's (2013, p. 62) research concluded how important it was that parents and teachers develop an open and honest relationship with one another based upon clear, shared expectations. The unifying factor in any parent partnership should be the best interest of the child, regardless of any other areas where discrepancies may exist (Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang, 2020). One of the parents in Wolfendale's (2013, p. 65) research commented that if parents felt that the teacher genuinely cared about the child, then their relationship was 'made'. What is disconcerting about this comment, is whether we should conclude that the many negative statements made about poor parent partnerships, from the

likes of Hess et al., (2006) and Laluvein (2010), are, therefore, based upon a perceived lack of genuine care.

It is important to note that many of the negative instances mentioned above refer to partnerships that exist between parents of children with SEN and their teachers *within mainstream schools*. In contrast, Parsons et al. (2009) found that amongst the most satisfied parents were those with children attending special schools. The basis of this success appeared to be underpinning values and objectives. Parsons et al. (ibid) explore how rather than attempting to fit children within the rigid, normative expectations of academic achievement, the most successful provision for children with SEN focused upon personal and social aspects of support and delivery.

Listening to Practitioners

This small-scale interpretive research emerged from previous research carried out by the first author in 2019 (Solvason et al., 2020). This research, whilst investigating maintained nursery schools in England, discovered the extraordinary lengths that teachers often went to, to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with the disadvantaged families that they worked with. This raised the question of whether a different approach was needed when creating positive partnerships with parents of children with SEN.

The second author of this paper holds a teaching post in a specialist SEN school, which caters for over 300 children aged 2 – 16 years, with severe learning difficulties or profound and multiple learning difficulties. Many of the children at this school have additional complex needs including

autism spectrum disorder, speech language and communication difficulties, sensory integration difficulties and challenging behaviour. His role at the school enabled him to arrange a focus group interview with a small group of three colleagues from the early years and primary department. None of these teachers had received specific training in the field of SEN and their experience of teaching in this area ranged from 2 to 12 years. There were advantages to these dynamics of insider research; participants could be open and honest in front of a colleague that they knew and trusted, meaning that they were much happier to share their 'beliefs, experiences and meaning systems' (Brink, 1993, p. 35) in the confidence that they would be understood. Also, because of insider knowledge, the researcher was able to prompt as and when necessary; although the transcript demonstrated that the participant researcher made every effort to retain neutrality in the questions asked; the prompts encouraged the participants to expand on their answer, to provide more detail about the issues that they raised. The result of this is a richness of data and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that are 'illuminating and insightful' (Wellington, 2000, p. 97) and are unlikely to have been achieved if someone unfamiliar had been leading the focus group. Regardless of the existing relationship, all ethical processes, as outlined by British Educational Research Association (2018), were followed meticulously.

The data, in the form of a lengthy and detailed transcription from this focus group, benefitted from both researchers independently immersing themselves in it, reflecting upon the content and its meaning. It was important that the non-partisan researcher led on decisions about thematic coding analysis in order to reduce the potential bias. After this initial identification

and coding process, the participant researcher verified the status of the key themes identified, which are explored below. To preserve anonymity all names have been changed and any identifiable features of teachers, children and their families, removed. The words of the interviewees are clearly identifiable through the use of italics.

Parents as experts

Prevalent within the data was the concept of parents as experts in their own children's lives. Gemma explained how every aspect of the child's experience to date was held in the parents' memory, and just how valuable that was. She explained '*they've got the whole life there, haven't they? And everything that has affected them over the years'*. Because of this, all the teachers recognised just how valuable ongoing dialogue with parents was. As Polly explained:

> *We need the context of, how their weekend was, how they were this morning, things that might potentially be problematic during the day that we need to be aware of. It's just important to get the whole wider picture, otherwise we're guessing all day. If the family can just tell us "oh this can be because of…x,y,z" then it stops us from trying to guess.*

Gemma reiterated this, recognising that the children have '*got quite complex needs, so if we're ever in doubt I always ask them'*. She added '*we won't kind of you know, muddle through it, we'll check [with the parents] and make sure that we're doing it properly'*. By doing this, Maggie recognised that it enabled parents that had felt *done to* for a very long time to regain some control. Gemma talked about taking '*really small steps'* with an anxious parent, offering lots of

reassurance. She added '*making it seem like, like a partnership, you know…*

'What do you think about it?'…having that kind of dialogue, not just saying 'this is

what we're doing'. Gemma concluded that with a good relationship and a sense of

humour, most things were possible.

More than just sources of information, the teachers understood that a trusting

relationship between parent and teacher was necessary for the emotional

wellbeing of all parties. One way of building trust was to acknowledge the

expertise of the parents consistently, in small ways; for example asking: '*are you*

happy with how we've dealt with that? Is there anything you'd like us to do

differently?' [Polly]. The teachers recognised that parents being *happy* would then

put the child at ease, because, as Maggie explained, '*children pick up on whether*

their parents are comfortable with you as adults as well'. Key to this was the

removal of egos and the acknowledgement that the child should always come first,

as Maggie spelt out: '*It's not about us! It's about this little person, and that life'*.

Parents in need of support

Whilst recognising them as sources of invaluable information and partners in

the education process, the vulnerability of the parents was also recognised by the

teachers throughout the interviews. Maggie explained the disconsolate position

that many parents are in when they first bring their child to a special school:

> *…there's an awful lot of just gently coaxing parents at that point,*
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> *because they have lost trust in all the adults that have been involved in*
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> *their child's life so far, and they feel deskilled as parents. A lot of what*
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> *they've experienced from professionals… [has been] looking at the*
>
> *darkest things sometimes about their children. So, they can be really,*

really low when they come to us, and it is just about nurturing them …

and looking after them, listening to all their horrible experiences…

The empathy felt by the teachers for the parents that they worked with was apparent throughout their comments. Maggie explained that it was usual for the parents to arrive at the setting '*incredibly stressed*' by the frustration of their child's needs not being met and having to repeatedly '*read about all the awful things their child does, or can't do*'. Maggie mused that parents of children with SEN felt that their children were '*so dependent on them*' that '*to just transfer that over to a complete stranger, is extremely stressful*'. She added that the vulnerability of many children with SEN, which frequently involved substantial medical needs, meant that parents were often '*terrified*' to leave them.

The teachers were astutely aware of the emotions involved in coming to terms with the diagnosis of a child and realised that a feeling of helplessness and grief for dreams lost was something that would not go away. On the contrary, as Gemma explained, it could become more difficult as time went on, because '*as they're getting older, they're getting less likely to achieve what they were originally expecting them to achieve*'. Maggie considered how, even for those parents who had fought a hard battle to secure a place for their child in a special school, achieving this still did not appease the feeling of loss that persists, the emotional turmoil resulting from a diagnosis that '*has blown their lives apart'.*

All three teachers shared their understanding of parents' fears for the future of their child and how they spent a great deal of time assuring parents that it would be okay. This involved careful and thoughtful interaction with parents: choosing words carefully when recounting the children's behaviours to '*put their minds at*

rest' [Polly], '*constantly counselling*' [Maggie] parents to accept that '*some skills will fall away, and others will come back again*' and that '*it's okay*' [Polly]. They also shared how they prudently avoided parents feeling that they were to blame in any way if incidents occurred, because many parents tended to take all blame for their children's actions. Instead the aim was '*to try and put them at ease, and make them not responsible for what's happening*' [Maggie].

Gemma perceived that a key facet of her role was supporting the parents to '*parent their children in the best way*'. An aspect of this involved helping parents to nurture new expectations for their child. Polly explained that they dealt with two '*types*' of parent, those that accepted that developing the child's basic life skills was a more important aim than traditional academic success, and those who struggled to accept that their child wouldn't be attaining the traditional normative goals. As Gemma clarified, those parents who '*Still haven't really come to terms with where they [the child] really are*'.

What emerged throughout the data was the depths of empathy and kindness that the teachers continually tapped in to, to understand and support the parents with whom they worked. This was not sufficiently explored in the existing literature. The teachers shared how although parents could be cautious and aggressive at first, they, because of their specialist experience, understood where this came from. Maggie explained that in her experience parents could '*be very, very defensive, quite angry sometimes, very frustrated. You just have to remember all that rubbish that they've been through; and be kind to them*'. She added that key to that kindness was an attempt to dismantle the memories that parents held of bad experiences and replace them with positive ones '*immediately*'.

The teachers we spoke with were acutely aware that many parents upon arriving at their school had continually been told what their children *cannot* do; so they did their utmost to share with them small successes, '*just to turn it round 'oh, they did this today! It was really good, it was, you know, they were amazing… they tried so hard!''*. Gemma explained how it was so important to '*have a little step that makes everybody really happy that they've achieved it*'. Polly shared a very similar view, explaining: '*I just think, for me, the loveliest moments are where they're just like… "really? Like, that happened? "… and you're like "yeah! It was a huge, lovely, positive, happy thing that we experienced!" and they're like "oh, that's so nice!"*'

Introducing a 'New Normal'

The teachers shared that helping parents to accept their child's specific needs was key to relieving their anxieties and it was imperative that parents believed that their child was in safe hands. Polly explained that for many parents, having previously encountered consistent negativity from teachers concerning their child's behaviour, it took a while to adjust to the fact that there was a new, and better experience that the children could now have in school. She said:

> *… it's important for the children to know, the parents to know that how they behave here is completely normal to us and this isn't a big deal. We can handle it, we can manage it. If they want to go and, you know, lie in puddle for hours, it's alright. We can support them to do that. And the parents are often very worried that what their child is doing is very different, and is a problem, but for us, it's just, we understand that it isn't, we can see that that's just part of their development. So it's really nice for the parents to*

know that when they come here, that the children are just…respected, and are free to develop at their own pace…for us to just be able to say "look, that's fine, we can, we're fine with that"…

Maggie mused about the '*terrible place*' that many parents were in upon arriving at the school, having felt, for a very long time, that teachers in mainstream schools simply '*did not like*' their child. Maggie shared how parents could sometimes become quite tearful and overwhelmed teachers spoke positively to them about their child. She said that an aim was to allow parents to begin to enjoy their children '*instead of stress about them'*. These teachers saw a key aim of their work as being to release the valve on the extreme pressure that the parents have been under up until this point. A practical example of this was specialist teachers having no expectations of children to complete homework. Polly explained: '*we'll just sort of say 'look, maybe, just enjoy, just spend some nice family time together'…and they're like 'oh! So glad you said that!''*.

Being honest, with kindness

As part of the ongoing, open dialogue between parents and teachers, sometimes difficult conversations are required. The focus group shared that one important way of developing trusting relationships was through being totally honest with parents. In the exchange below the teachers discussed how keeping parents updated about incidents needed openness, but also sensitivity, informing parents in a way that would not upset them, because *'Honesty can sometimes be a bit unkind'* [Polly]. Gemma reiterated the importance of honesty balanced with sensitivity she said: *'I do try and be positive, if I put something in the diary, say, if I*

have to say that something happened, I'll try and counteract it with…this

happened as well…'.

The teachers' considerations around "*honesty and kindness and finding a*

balance between" [Polly], applied not only to discussing incidents but also to

managing parents' expectations regarding the development of their child. They

explained that many parents wanted to believe that their child's time in a special

school would just be temporary, before them returning to mainstream school. For

most this was unlikely. Maggie explained: '*You have to find the right words to be*

honest…and be kind at that point and just say 'look it's too early to say at the

moment'…'.

Facilitating the creation of parent networks

The teachers explained how in response to a reduction in the number of

nursery places available at the specialist provision, weekly stay and play sessions

had been implemented to offer parents of young children the opportunity to spend

time in the setting and experience for themselves what it offers. A benefit to this

was that it brought the parents of young children with SEN into contact with one

another. The focus group sensitively discussed how the sometimes extreme

behaviours of their children could make parents feel self-conscious. Because of

this they viewed it as a small triumph to see parents initiating friendships with one

another. Maggie explained:

> *[I've] Got two parents that I'm working with at the moment and they*
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> *have known each other now, been coming to sessions now, for six or*
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> *seven weeks, and they have just this week exchanged telephone*
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> *numbers which is so exciting! …They've just worked out their children*

are very similar, and actually they could go together, places, and share

that horrible feeling of my child is the one that's causing all the

problems instead of being on their own and doing it. And I think

that's...huge! And really nice actually that they find somebody to do that

with.

A picture of authentic care

The data collected through this focus group paints a vivid picture of authentic care and concern demonstrated by these specialist teachers towards the parents that they support. This is very different to the lack of understanding and conflict presented throughout the work of Hess et al. (2006) and Laluvein (2010). Perhaps the key difference is that the teachers that we spoke function within the specific culture of a specialist school, whereas many of the issues arising through the wider literature occur in relation to teachers in mainstream schools. Broomhead's (2013) argument that trainee teachers are not adequately prepared for the complexities of dealing with children with SEN and their families is valid; particularly when we consider the depths of empathetic understanding demonstrated by those teachers that we spoke with. This raises two contentious points; the first is whether preparation for dealing with children (and their families) with SEN needs to be given far greater prominence within a *general* teaching degree as it will, inevitably be a challenge that all teachers face as schools become increasingly inclusive; and the second, even more provocative point, is whether inclusive schooling really is the way forward, when, as our data suggests, children and families can access skilful, practiced and knowledgeable support through a specialist setting.

Both Turnbull and Turnbull (2002) and Galloway et al. (1994) attributed much of the apparent negativity in the relationships between the parents of children with SEN and teachers to the perceived blame (by the teachers) of the parent for their child's behaviour; but this was totally absent from our data. In fact, our interviewees, throughout, showed untiring respect towards the challenges that the parents experienced, and admired their strength in riding the many storms that they had encountered. There was a full and thorough understanding of just how difficult a time the parents had been through and the extent of the negativity that they were likely to have experienced. There was also full understanding of the sadness and shame (Orphan, 2004; Wolfendale, 2013; Sedibe & Fourie, 2018) that many parents brought with them when they arrived at the school; recognition of the fear of leaving their precious and vulnerable children, and acknowledgement of the grief of their hopes and the upheaval of the whole family unit. In our data parents were respected as the experts on their children, and, as Sedibe and Fourie advised in 2018, they were conscientiously *never* made to feel blamed for the actions of their children. The child-centered language of support and shared goals weaved throughout the interviews is very similar to the findings of Solvason et al. (2020) when dealing with disadvantaged families. And it is important to remember that these families are equally disadvantaged, although in quite different ways.

Empathy was central to the relationships described by the teachers, even though not explicitly named. Hodgkins (2019) argues that this is a professional skill that is essential in certain professions and which needs greater recognition. For example the 'anger' that was often mentioned in the literature on parenting children with SEN was also recognised in our data, but it was understood that this

emerged from the 'discourse of fighting' (Truss, 2008, p. 372) that parents had experienced previously, and so dealt with kindly. Parents were given time and space to readjust to their new normal. Our data diametrically opposes Sen and Yurtsever's (2007) views that the personal and emotional needs of families are frequently neglected by teachers of children with SEN. Comments made by our interviewees suggest that the emotional state of the parents was respected throughout all of the careful work with the child. The openness and 'always responding' to the concerns of the parents that Wolfendale (2003, p. 64) proposed was present in every comment that this sample of teachers made.

Finally, Sedibe and Fourie (2018) discuss how parents of children with SEN rarely experienced the social interaction that other parents of children attending mainstream school are afforded. The loneliness and isolation of parents of children with SEN was given careful consideration by the teachers that we interviewed, and the data indicates that they were genuinely delighted at the prospect of friendships forming between them. The 'Stay and Play' sessions provided by the school provided opportunities for networking and the sharing of ideas and strategies between parents that Riddel (2004) advocates. The teachers' conversation around the possibilities for understanding and support that an exchange of telephone numbers between parents signified, speaks reams about their emotional investment in the families that they worked with.

Conclusion

In order to acknowledge the limitations of our data it is important to ask whether the anomalies presented here between our, and much previous research, are due to different school contexts or whether they present different perspectives

of the same situation. If we spoke with the parents at this setting, what picture would they paint? Clearly the next step to be taken in this research is to hear parents' voices at the same setting. We should also acknowledge the likelihood that those teachers most positively inclined toward parent partnership were those most likely to volunteer for the research, and do so. Regardless of these potential limitations, there are still key issues that arise from the existing literature and our modest sample of data that require further consideration. These include:

1. The preparedness of teachers in mainstream schools for supporting the families of children with SEN, and the children themselves.
2. The lack of recognition afforded the specialist knowledge and experience held by those teaching in SEN schools by the persistent mantra that 'inclusion is best'.
3. The levels of counselling as well as specialist teaching that SEN teachers provide and the risk of the emotional burnout that Hodgkins (2019) warns against in her work.

The last point above is particularly pertinent. Whilst specialist teachers relentlessly support children and their families through these challenging times, what support are they receiving? Yet, in the experience of the authors, and confirmed by Gemma in our data, it is often settings dealing with the greatest trauma where the most humour abounds. A fascinating avenue for future research would be how this positive culture is created and maintained within settings dealing with the most challenging of circumstances.

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