A Critical Realist Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the EHC Needs Assessment Process Within One Local Authority: Understanding Parent, SENCO, and EP Views Within the Wider Context

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Submitted in Part Requirement for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD)

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September 2024

Word count (Excluding Contents Pages, Acknowledgements, Figures, References, and Appendices): 56,583

Summary

This thesis consists of three chapters: a literature review, an empirical study, and a reflective account. Chapter one consists of a semi-systematic literature review, using the principles of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to explore systemic factors affecting education, health and care (EHC) processes (DfE, 2015).

Chapter two adopts a critical realist lens to explore the EHC needs assessment (EHCNA) process within one local authority (LA). 12 participants' views were sought via semi-structured interviews. The participants were made up of four parents, four educational psychologists (EPs), and four special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs). Two analysis methods were used to interpret the data. Firstly, a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA, Braun & Clarke, 2022) was employed to provide a rich analysis of current and potential roles for parents, EPs, and SENCOs within the EHCNA process.

Secondly, a critical realist thematic analysis (Fryer, 2022) visually summarises analytical points. This analysis method tentatively suggests mechanisms which may influence the EHCNA process at local and systemic levels. The analysis and discussion are integrated to provide a rich and interpretative analytic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Chapter two is summarised with an interpretation of the data in response to the research questions, as well as outlining implications for the LA and EPs, and future possibilities for research.

Chapter three offers a reflective and reflexive account of the research process. This includes a critical self-analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2024) reflexive thematic analysis reporting guidelines (RTARG), and Yardley's (2000, 2015) principles of quality for qualitative research. Reflections are also offered on the epistemological agreements and tensions between RTA and a critical realist lens, and the interaction between methodologies. The potential strengths and limitations of the research are discussed, as well as aspirations for dissemination.

Access Condition and Agreement

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to begin by offering the most profound thank you to every participant who shared their time, story, experiences, and journey with me. Life means nothing without the 'human' experience, and I hope that I have been able to do justice to yours. I also hope this research can have an impact on the future experiences of children and young people, as well as the experiences of adults who advocate and care.

I would also like to offer my heartfelt appreciation to my family. You have always instilled the value of education within me, even when I questioned its value myself. Mum, you have taught me to never give up, always believe in yourself, and always follow your dreams. You have taught me this better than any school or university ever could. I am as much as proud of you as you are of me. Dad, you have not only taught me the importance of education for me as an individual, but also the collective value of education for all children and young people. Holding education as an important value has been a key reason for wanting to become an EP, so that I can have an impact on improving education for all. I am privileged to have come this far in my dream of doing so. Nan, you have always listened to me, never judged me, and you have always been the voice of reason in my ear. If I can listen to the voices of children and young people half as well as you have listened to me, then I know I am on the right track. Georgina, my best friend, you have been my rock to ground me, my umbrella to shelter me, and my sunshine to centre joy within a tough three years! Thank you for always being there.

This research would not have been possible without the dedicated support of my research supervisor, Dr Alistair James. You have treated me as a person before a student, and you have gone above and beyond with your time, knowledge, kindness, and wisdom. I have truly felt that being my research supervisor has meant more to you than a job, but instead a passion, and I am extremely grateful for this. Thank you also to all of the course tutors for sharing your time, energy and passion over the last three years. I have learnt so much, but I think the most important thing I have learnt is that there is no one way of doing things, and to keep asking questions! I also would like to thank my placement supervisor, Dr Georgi Turner. Again, you have been so generous with your time and care, and you have always helped to bring out the best in me. Thank you for being an amazing supervisor and person over the last two years! You have given me the space, time and opportunity to deeply reflect on my values and practice, and I look forward to continuing to work with you. A huge thank you also to all of my colleagues! I really enjoy working with you, thank you for all of your support.

To my fellow TEP cohort, what can I say? Words cannot really express, but I know that 'you know'. We have celebrated the good times and held each other up in the bad. I couldn't think of anyone better to have shared this journey with. Collectively as a group, but also as individuals, you have all been there for me one way or another, so it feels fitting to acknowledge you all by name; Burcu, Cristi, Demi, El, Iza, Jo, Josie, Keith, Louise, Natalie, Nicki, Sarah, Shaq, Vic. Thank you! And of course Charlotte, you are not in my cohort but you've been just as supportive!

I am also grateful to the Department for Education for providing funding, without which access to the EdPsyD would not have been possible. I hope that this research can be one small part (within a wider network of research and information) of creating better educational experiences for all children and young people.

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Glossary of Terms

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AEP	Association of Educational Psychologists
AP	Alternative Provision
BPS	British Psychological Society
C&F Act	Children and Families Act (2014)
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CQC	Care Quality Commission
DBV	Delivering Better Value (Department for Education Initiative)
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DWR	Developmental Work Research
EHC	Education, Health and Care
EHCNA	Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP/s	Educational Psychologist/s
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
JPLG	Joint Professional Liaison Group
LA/s	Local Authority / Local Authorities
LEA	Local Education Authority
LGA	Local Government Association
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NICE	The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NQEP/s	Newly Qualified Educational Psychologist/s
OFSTED	Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PATH	Planning Alternative Tomorrows (with) Hope
PCP	Person Centred Planning
RQ	Research Question
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
RTARG	Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines
SDT	Self Determination Theory
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENDCoP	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (2015)
SSEN	Statement of Special Educational Needs
SIT	Social Identity Theory
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEP/s	Trainee Educational Psychologist/s
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter One: Literature Review

Outline, Positionality, and Aims

This literature review aims to explore systemic factors relevant to the functioning of the Education, Health and Care (EHC) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system, through an ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A semi-structured thematic approach to the literature has been adopted. The EHC system is often described as a microcosm, meaning it exists within a much wider and complex social environment (Hellawell, 2017; Norwich, 2014; Richards, 2021). Therefore, this literature review includes examination of the functioning of the EHC system and the broader systemic environment within which it is situated, including relevant theory and literature.

Personal interest and educational relevance are important criteria for educational psychology research (Mayer, 2008), and I feel that the topic meets both criteria. I have a professional interest in the EHC process and SEND reforms (Department for Education, DfE, 2015). This is rooted in my previous experience as an EHC co-ordinator and my current role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). This interest has further developed through my educational psychology training, during which time I have contributed to EHC processes. I am therefore aware I am not a disinterested observer, but instead I am situated within the topic of the literature review. I therefore acknowledge that I am influenced by my own worldviews and professional experiences of this topic (Pilgrim, 2014).

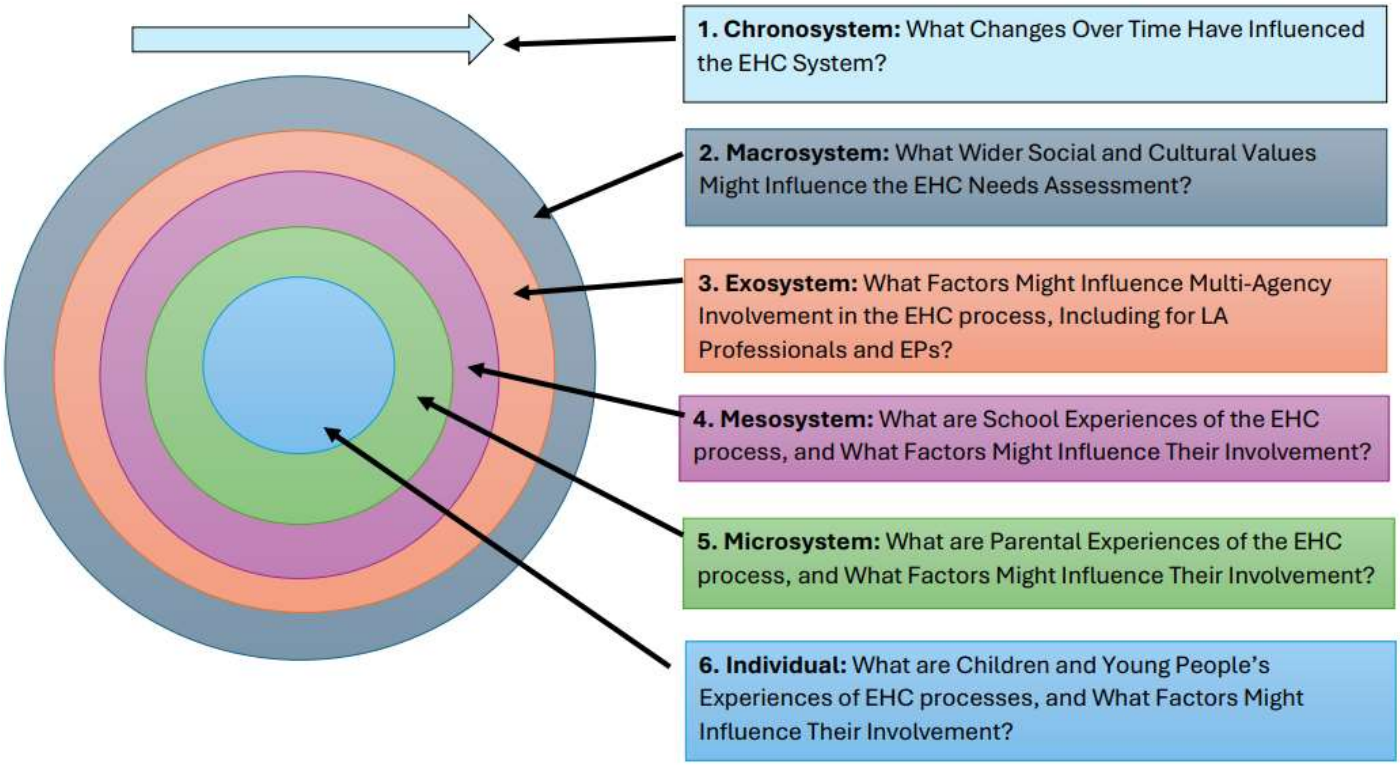
Figure 1 outlines the broad aims of this literature review. This is followed by a justification for adopting the ecological systems theory framework in relation to the literature and psychological theory relevant to the SEND and EHC system. I will then outline the semi-structured style and method of this review, before exploring the key themes. These include exploring political and sociocultural values, the participation of children and young people, multi-agency practice, and partnership working with parents. Finally, the summary offers implications for practice and future research.

Ecological Systems Theory Framework and Rationale for the Literature Review

Theoretical grounding is considered an important criterion for developing a research question within educational psychology (Mayer, 2008), and I have therefore framed the literature review questions within the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this section, I aim to outline the foundations of this framework and its utility to the topic. The ecological systems theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner in an aim to *“challenge the very basis of the way psychologists have studied child development”.* The model derives from an epistemological critique of methodologies to understand children

Figure 1

Literature Review Aims

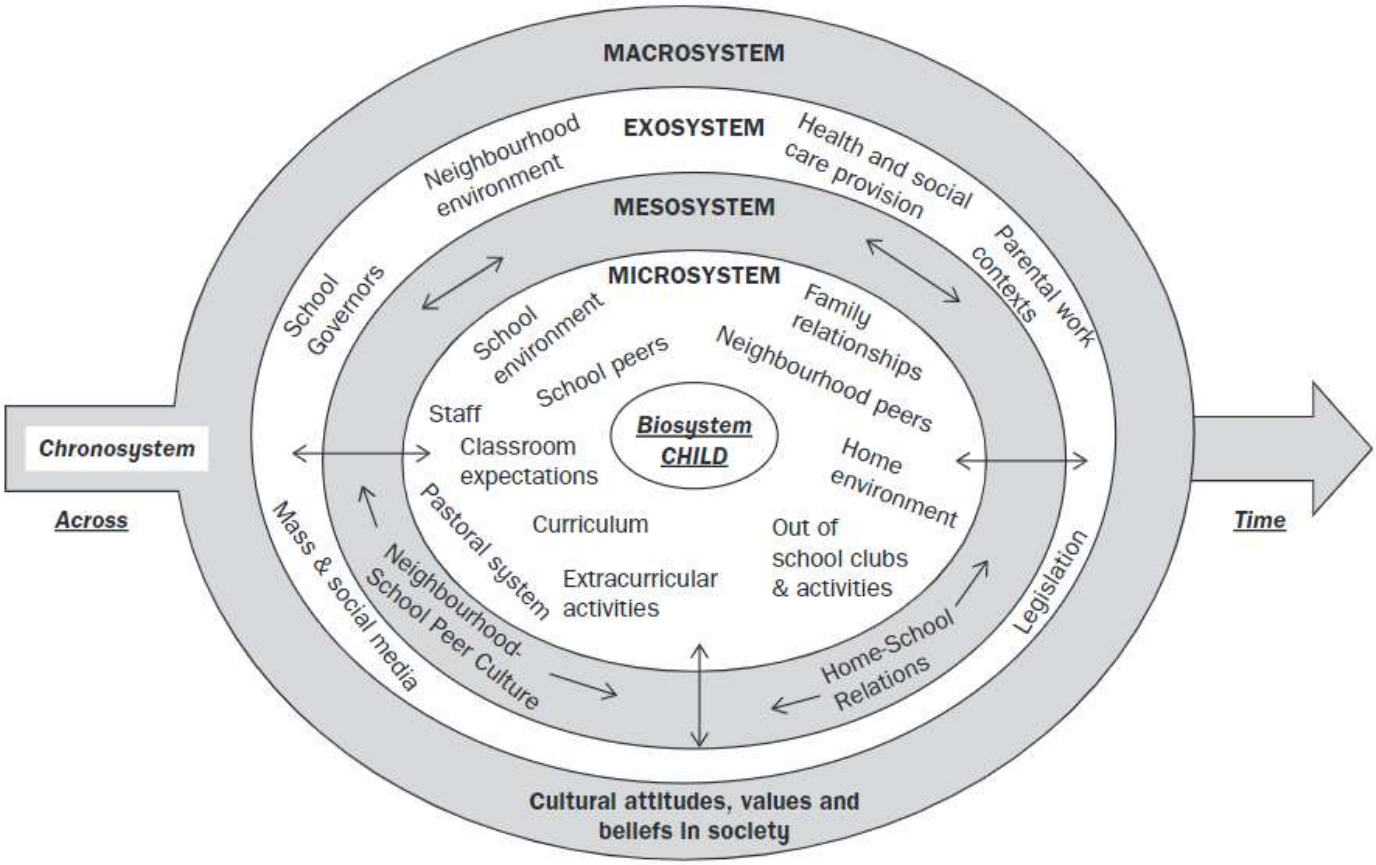


Note. The key aims of the literature review are represented using an ecological systems theory framework, ranging from the chronosystem to the individual level.

(such as laboratory experiments). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that instead, human ability and actualisation *"depend in significant degree on the larger social and institutional context of individual activity".* Therefore, Bronfenbrenner offers a framework which considers interactions between the child, their community, and the wider legal/political framework. The ecological systems theory was later reworked as a bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) in an aim to bridge ecological and biological understandings of child development, rather than conceptualise the two as disconnected (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). This is illustrated in Figure 2. The key rationale for this literature review is the multi-faceted, complex and persistent inadequacy of the current EHC system and the systems surrounding it. The literature exploring EHC processes notes failures at the individual, community and systemic level which cannot be addressed in isolation **(**Adams et al., 2018; Ahad et al., 2022; Cooper, 2019). I therefore aim to now provide an overview of the systemic challenges at each ecological level to justify the rationale for this literature review and the utility of an ecological framework to this topic.

Figure 2

Bronfenbrenner's (2001) Bioecological Model of Human Development (Frederickson and Cline, 2015, pp. 215)



Note. Figure 2 illustrates the six levels of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) and the specific influences at each stage.

Starting at the **individual** level**,** the SEND review (DfE, 2022) has noted that children and young people with SEND experience '*consistently worse outcomes than their peers across every measure'.* Research suggests that young people are often not included in EHC processes (Franklin et al., 2018), and when they are included they are not always given choices on how they would like to contribute, nor is the process accessible (Palikara et al., 2018; Sharma, 2021; White & Rae, 2016). This suggests children and young people with SEND can experience a lack of agency, despite the theoretical importance of choice and control in educational success outlined in self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The **microsystem** level considers the roles of parent and schools. The literature considers that parents are not always actively involved in EHC processes (Cochrane, 2016; House of Commons, 2019), that they can find the process confusing (Eccleston, 2016; Gore, 2016), and they can sometimes feel actively excluded (Ahad et al., 2022; Sales & Vincent,

2018). Considering the role of schools, it is increasingly acknowledged that educational settings do not have the resources to fulfil their obligations as listed in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (SENDCoP, DfE, 2015). For example, the SEND review (DfE, 2022) notes that schools are often ill-equipped to support SEND. From a theoretical perspective, this is concerning given that school staff often need to adopt the role of the 'more knowledgeable other' in respect to the curriculum, and therefore must adapt their teaching to each child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, Vygotsky, 1978). Indeed, a recent independent review of teacher development has also noted a lack of confidence in meeting SEND needs and a need for more training (OFSTED, 2024).

At the **mesosystem**, relations between schools and families appear increasingly strained. Boesley & Crane (2018) note that managing parental expectations are a continual challenge for SENCOs in the EHC process. Within the literature, parents can often feel ignored or excluded in the EHC process, and poor home/school relations adversely influence working together to support children and young people (Ahad et al., 2022; Cullen & Lindsay, 2019).

At the **exosystem**, there is inconsistency of EHC practice both within and between local authorities (Palikara et al., 2018; Sales & Vincent, 2018). This suggests that it is not just the outer rings of the ecological model such as government policy which requires examination, but also the functioning at localised layers of the ecological model. There is also a commonly noted lack of collaboration between education, health and care services (Cochrane, 2016; House of Commons, 2019; Skipp & Hopwood, 2016), as well as a lack of clarity between professionals (Ahad et al., 2022; Boesley & Crane, 2018). This prompts consideration of multi-agency functioning in the exosystemic layers of the system, which is a key principle of the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015). Relevant theoretical influences include Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which is explored within this literature review.

In terms of the **macrosystem**, medicalised models of disability appear to hold a strong influence on attitudes and values towards SEND. This medicalised model has placed a particular emphasis on diagnoses in education funding models (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2017; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2020). Wider contextual factors are also deprioritised within the EHC process, due to a narrow concept of four within-child categories of SEND which do not call for the assessment of environmental factors (Buck, 2015).

The **chronosystem** considers changes over time. Whilst the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) has remained virtually unchanged since its introduction almost a decade ago, the current ecological system surrounding children and young people has arguably drastically altered. For example, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been noted to have varying impacts

on children and young people's mental health (Paterson et al., 2024), and has also been attributed to developmental losses for children with EHCPs (Skipp et al., 2021). There has also been a cost-of-living crisis which holds relevance, given that poverty has been suggested to be both a cause and effect of SEND (Shaw et al., 2016).

Further, the system is increasingly considered 'unsustainable' and buckling under pressure, due to a complicated interaction of factors resulting in continually increasing numbers of EHC needs assessments and tribunals (Marsh, 2022, 2023), which is of concern given a reducing number of EPs (Atfield et al., 2023). Therefore, there is an ongoing need to examine EHCP processes considering the changing climate since the introduction of the SEND reforms (DfE, 2015). In conclusion, the inadequacy of the EHC system is a consequence of interconnected issues, which invites the aid of an ecological framework.

Using a Semi-Systematic Framework

This section outlines the nature and utility of a semi-structured approach to the literature in relation to the EHC system. Snyder (2019) categorises literature reviews into three approaches: systematic, semi-systematic, and integrative. The benefit of systematic approaches is that they have precise requirements for a search strategy and selecting articles, which can synthesise a collection of studies. However, Snyder argues that they are less appropriate for broader topics that have been conceptualised differently (for example, within different disciplines). This is because systematic reviews can exclude other relevant studies through a narrow approach. Whilst EPs play a considerable role within the EHC process and their involvement is a statutory requirement for EHC needs assessments (DfE, 2015), a much more comprehensive range of disciplines can be involved. A systematic style, therefore, can run the risk of excluding findings from other disciplines, as was a noted limitation within Ahad et al. (2022). I have also aimed to expand the scope of this literature review beyond EHC processes to consider wider systemic issues impacting the EHC/SEND system, which calls for a semi-structured style.

Semi-systematic literature reviews can be useful in identifying themes within the literature and applicable theoretical models (Ward et al., 2009). Semi-systematic literature reviews also afford the researcher more autonomy to gather literature that adds value, by allowing for a more open inclusion criteria. Further, semi-systematic reviews allow for references within relevant articles to be scanned for their usefulness and included within the main literature review where appropriate, which can aid the gathering of connected literature.

Additionally, a semi-structured style allows the researcher scope to include grey literature. I have chosen to broadly define this as *"literature which is not controlled by commercial publishers",* which includes governmental, industry and media sources, as well

as non-published academic research (Davidson, 2017). In this case, the rationale for including grey literature is to enhance an understanding of the factors impacting EHCP processes. Further, grey literature tends to be more industry based than academic or theoretical literature, meaning it can add practical value when understanding the systemic context surrounding EHCPs. The inclusion of grey literature can also reduce publication bias which can skew the availability of literature towards 'significant' findings or claims (Paez, 2017).

There are however acknowledged challenges with grey literature, including the time-consuming process of collection and the lack of cataloguing which influence its discoverability (Mahood et al., 2014), with the implication being that it is difficult to offer a complete picture of the debate within a topic. I acknowledge this also relies on the subjectivity of the researcher, although I believe this can also be a potential benefit in the telling of a convincing story, and therefore enable advocacy for political change (Davidson, 2017). Additionally, the inclusion of grey literature within this review has incorporated less dominant voices in the literature. For example, I have referred to selected articles from the special needs jungle (SNJ), which is an online parent/carer news source, in order to situate academic literature in relation to public discourse and debate. Media sources such as these can provide a researcher with a rich source of data (Favaro et al., 2017, pp. 119), and may therefore support a deeper appreciation of the topic.

In summary, it is anticipated that a semi-structured approach will add value by synthesising current research and debate around EHCPs, alongside academic published research articles and psychological theory. I have therefore aimed to offer a more novel contribution that takes account of the contextual influences and wider discourses surrounding EHC process, which I argue is particularly relevant to an ecological systems framework.

Search Strategy

Literature searches were undertaken using the online library database (EBSCO Host) and google scholar. In addition, Educational Psychology in Practice (EPiP) and the British Psychological Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology (BPS/DECP) journals were searched. Using the initial literature obtained, reference harvesting was employed to explore further literature relevant to the research questions. I undertook an initial scoping search focused on articles/research undertaken within the UK, since the broad research aim is to explore the EHC system. EHC processes are only applicable in England, however, it is impractical to filter literature between England and other parts of the UK reliably or with ease during the search process. Most of the literature referred to is therefore within the UK,

however this was expanded where there were theoretical or practical connections to the research questions. Whilst the SENDCoP came into force in 2014, earlier literature was considered for inclusion where it held relevance to the research questions, which included historical practice and policy (such as within the chronosystem). Combinations of broad search terms were used initially to scope the literature as represented in Table 1. Grey literature was also accrued through google scholar and the government website publications section (including research commissioned by the DfE). Articles were also discussed within research supervision, and I also employed literature accessed through the course of my TEP training programme.

Table 1

Initial Scoping Search Terms in Literature Review

Key Search Terms:
EHCP / Education Health and Care / EHCNA / Statutory assessment
SEN / SEND / Special Educational Needs Disability / Disabilities / Additional needs
SEND Code of Practice
Children & Families Act
Early Years / Child / Children / Childhood / Adolescent / Teenagers / Young adults / Young person / Young People
Additional Scoping Terms to Narrow Searches:
Bronfenbrenner
Co-production
Ecological Systems Theory
Education Act
Education / School / College / Early Years / Nursery
Educational Psychologists / Educational Psychology / Psycholog*
Equality / Equitable / Equal
Ethical / Ethics
Government / Policy / Department for Education
Healthcare / Health / Social / Social care
Learning Difficulties and or Disabilities
Model / Framework
Multi-agency / inter-disciplinary
OFSTED
Parents / carers
Person-centred practice / Person-centred / Person centred
SENCO or Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator
SEND Reform/s
SENDIST Tribunal
Social, Emotional and Mental Health / SEMH / Behaviour(al) / Emotional
System / Systemic
Teacher / Teaching / Pedagogy Theory / Theoretical
Warnock

Note. Table 1 outlines the initial scoping terms used to search the literature. The key search terms were used in most searches, while additional scoping terms were used to narrow the literature.

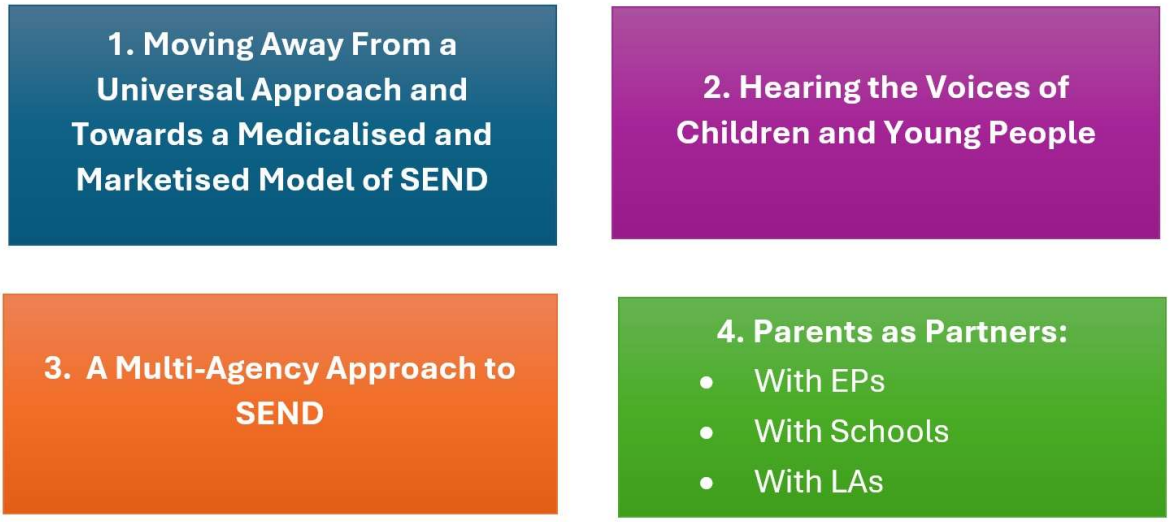
Themes Developed From the Literature

This section outlines and discusses the key themes I have developed from the literature. My original intention was to order these within the categories of the ecological model, which would have likely meant discussing the literature relevant to the chronosystem, followed by the macrosystem, and so on. However, as the literature review developed, I increasingly felt that a strict division fragmented my analysis of the literature, which drew me to consider the layers in parts rather than a connected system.

For example, when considering how successive codes of practice had changed over time (chronosystem), I noted this was often linked within the literature to sociocultural values (macrosystem) and could also include relevant points on how this might affect the nature of schools (microsystem) and the construct of the child (individual). Therefore, I have synthesised the literature to develop themes which represent the interaction between different layers of the ecological model. Figure 3 outlines the thematic map of this literature review. The summary will then revisit the research questions in relation to the ecological systems framework, including future research and implications for practice. Whilst I have adopted an ecosystemic epistemology, I have aimed to base my critique of the literature on its own methodology (where stated) (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Figure 3

Thematic Map of Literature Review



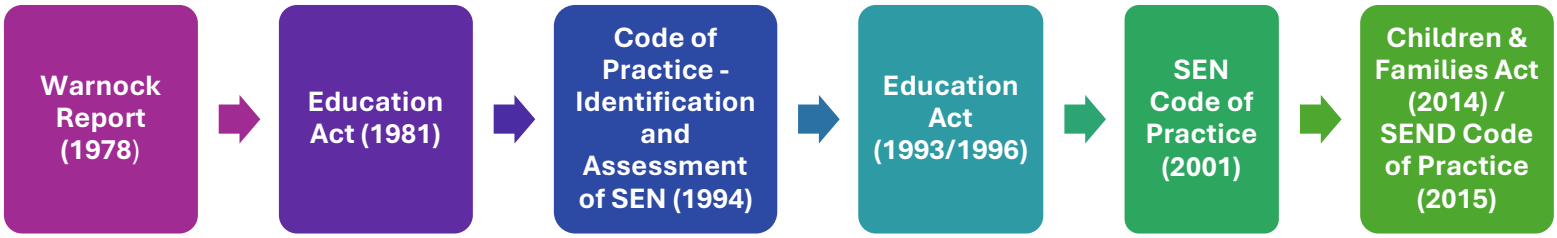
Note. Figure 3 details the four key thematic themes of the literature review in order. The fourth and final theme is broken down further into three subthemes in order to detail partnership with parents between different stakeholders.

Theme One: Moving Away From a Universal Approach and Towards a Medicalised and Marketised Model of SEND

A key theme within the literature is the continual repositioning and reconceptualising of SEND, which holds implications for the EHC system today. This spans across the ecological layers, all the way from the individual child to the values within society over time. This theme will consider how these societal values are reflected and constructed within SEND, in relation to the Warnock report (1978), the 1981 education act, and the three subsequent SEND codes of practice (1994, DfE / 2001, DfES / 2015, DfE & DoH). Figure 4 details the key development in SEND policy following the Warnock report (1978), while Table 2 outlines further detail on each code of practice.

Figure 4:

Key Developments in SEND Policy, From Warnock (1978) to the SENDCoP (2015)



Note. The key developments in SEND policy are listed in chronological order, beginning with the Warnock Report (1978) up to the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (2015).

The Warnock report (1978) proposed a significant change in the concept of the child with SEN, and advocated for a move towards inclusion, particularly within mainstream settings. Despite this, the subsequent 1994 code (DfE) did not once mention inclusion (Lehane, 2016). Warnock's report was highly influential in the development of the 1981 Education Act, although a formalised code of practice for SEN was not developed until 1994 (Castro-Kemp et al., 2019). The 1981 Education Act required Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to make provision for children with SEN, and therefore *'represented the last expression of a universalist approach'* (Bines, 1995). This provision was listed in a statement of special educational needs (SSEN). However, this was noted to create inequalities between the children who did and did not receive a SSEN, as well as creating a shift towards a managerial role for SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs) within schools, which further drew SEN into a marketised and accountable model of education (Bines, 1995).

Table 2:

SEN/SEND Codes of Practice Over Time (Adapted From Lehane, 2016)

	Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs	**Special Educational Needs Code of Practice**	**Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years.**
Publication year	1994	2001	2015
Authorship	Department for Education	Department for Education and Skills	Department for Education / Department of Health
Categories of need	*Eight areas of need:* Learning difficulties, specific learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, sensory impairments hearing and (separately) visual, speech and language difficulties, medical conditions	*Four areas of need:* Communication and interaction, cognition and learning, behaviour, emotional and social development, and sensory and/or physical	*Four areas of need:* Communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health difficulties, and sensory and/or physical needs
Model	*Five stage model:* (1) Teacher-led action (2) SENCO-led action (3) External agency support (4) LEA consider statutory assessment (5) LEA consider need for Statement of Special Educational Need	*Graduated approach:* (1) School action (2) School action plus (3) Statutory assessment (4) Statement of Special Educational Needs	*Graduated approach:* (1) Assess, plan, do review (Cyclical) (2) Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (3) Education, Health and Care Plan

Note. The three successive codes of SEN/D practice are tabled in chronological order (from left to right). The publication dates, authorship, categories of SEN/D need and model for practice are compared. Over time, there is a noted reduction in the number of SEN/D categories, and fewer stages in each model for practice.

Recent literature also notes that there has been since been an increasingly marketised concept of SEND, rooted in neoliberal policies (Allan & Youdell, 2015, Norwich & Black, 2015; Norwich, 2014). Neoliberalism is often defined as the promotion of free market economies which reduce the levels of state regulation and intervention (Goodley & Billington, 2017, Tett & Hamilton, 2019). The literature often argues that neoliberal attitudes and policies have a negative impact on inclusion within schools, since neoliberal interests are more aligned with economic forces rather than social interests and values (Potter, 2022).

Lehane (2016) explored the theme of neoliberalism using a mixture of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and content analysis, to examine the three codes of practice for SEN/D (1994, 2001, 2015). Lehane's findings outlined an increasing trend towards neoliberal marketised terminology within successive codes of practice. For example, a word frequency analysis noted that the word *'commission'* appears 236 times in the 2015 code, compared to just three times in the 2001 code, and once in the 1994 code. Further, Lehane (2016) points towards an increasing use of language orientated towards professional and

specialist expertise in successive codes of practice. This marketisation and medicalisation of SEND contributes to a construction of the child as an economic consumer subject to expert/medical assessment and validation of their needs (Riddell, 2020) in order to gain educational support.

Lehane (2016) goes onto argue that the terminology in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) is increasingly technical and less accessible than prior codes, for example with the introduction of *'joint strategic needs assessments'* and '*joint commissioning arrangements'*. This is despite the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) calling for the greater involvement of children, young people and families. In this sense, the concept of a child's SEND is framed as more of an economic, medical and technical undertaking than a universal and social activity.

In considering Lehane's (2016) textual analysis, a clear methodological rationale for the complementary use of approaches is provided. For example, Lehane utilises a semi-quantitative methodology in the form of word frequencies (Rogers, 2004). While quantitative approaches to textual analyses are often criticised for being *'simple and superficial'* (Jacobs & Tschotschel, 2019), Lehane embedded quantitative findings within a qualitative discourse analysis of rhetoric (Burr, 2015), intensifiers (Holland et al., 2008), and omissions (Wood & Kroger, 2000) which allowed for a reflective and complementary approach.

However, one critique might be that Lehane does not explicitly articulate their own ontological and epistemological base when combining this wide range of methodology, despite the author acknowledging CDA as a *'loose combination of approaches'* (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Not specifying ontology and epistemology is often a common critique of policy analysis, including within CDA (Anderson & Holloway, 2018; Ball; 1993).

The literature also notes a key change in the categorisation of children with SEND over time, as evidenced within successive codes of practice. While Warnock (1978) advocated for earlier assessment of SEN, a developmental rather than fixed model of assessment was suggested, with *'a new system to replace categorisation'.* Despite this, the 1994 (DfE) code outlined eight categories of SEN by which to group children with SEN. The categories of SEN/D have been reduced from eight to four within the 2001 (DfES) and 2015 (DfE) codes, becoming broader over time.

Further examining the chronology, there have also been changes in terminology which reflect a shifting construct of the child with SEN. Warnock (1978) for example advocated for a move away from *'educationally subnormal'*, instead proposing *'children with learning difficulties',* a term which persists today (Lindsay et al., 2020). While Warnock noted that diagnosis and labels might have some utility, a medicalised model was not felt to be adequate in understanding children's educational needs alone.

More recent changes in terminology have also promoted a move away from a behavioural paradigm to an understanding rooted in mental health (Norwich & Eaton, 2014). For example, the 2015 (DfE) code replaced *'behaviour, emotional and social development'* to *'social, emotional and mental health'.* This represents an increasing focus on mental health as an area of need, with some of the literature arguing this encouraged the medicalisation of children with SEND (Lehane, 2016). One way in which the further medicalisation of children with SEND might be noted in the 2015 code is the joint authorship of the Department of Education (DfE) and the Department of Health (DoH), unlike previous codes which did not include the DoH. The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) now therefore calls for health assessment and provision as part of the SEND statutory assessment process.

The 2015 SENCoP's (DfE, 2015) model of *'assess, plan, do review'* provides even less guidance to schools for early intervention and assessment than previous codes (Lehane, 2016; Norwich, 2014), arguably reducing the impact of a universal or semi-targeted approach. Instead, a higher focus is now placed on statutory assessment processes, rather than describing high quality teaching practices and identifying pupils with SEND (Norwich, 2014). Lamb (2019) argues this has further reduced parental confidence in a graduated approach to SEND.

The resulting influence of a medicalised model has since been argued to contribute to a SEND system whereby funding in education authorities is *'inextricably linked to a diagnosis'* (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2017). Further, a medicalised model permeates schools' beliefs and attitudes to SEN. For example, Harwood & Allan (2014) note the *'proliferation of diagnosis and psychopathologisation'* in education and schools, which exists alongside a continued need for resourcing based on diagnosis (Allan & Youdell, 2015).

Accordingly, the literature notes a 787% increase in autism diagnoses between 1998 and 2018 in the UK (Russell et al., 2022). This has been attributed in part to policies directing earlier assessment and diagnosis of children (Autism Act, 2009; Fernell et al., 2013). Research also suggests a significant increase in ADHD diagnosis for children within the UK, despite a lack of evidence that diagnosis alone supports better long-term outcomes, particularly in light of a lack of long-term support (Kazda, 2024; McKechnie et al., 2023).

Further, while the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SENDCoP (2015) call for inclusive practices, Daniels et al. (2019) note that surrounding performativity and accountability measures have resulted in perverse incentives for schools to not meet the needs of SEND students. These measures include the 'standards agenda' which aim to increase educational attainment, although they often focus on a narrow view of education such as literacy and numeracy skills (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Norwich & Eaton (2014) highlight neoliberal values as a motivation for adopting a seemingly medicalised model of SEN, for example by quoting a view that SEND was *'over-identified'* and therefore required a *'new approach'* to identification (DfE, 2011; Conservative Party, 2010, cited in Norwich & Eaton, 2014). The requirement for an increasingly specialist model of assessment further places SEND as existing with a neoliberal and specialised market rather than a universal one. Goodley & Billington (2017) argue neoliberal values are *'one of the biggest challenges to [the] inclusion of disabled and non-normative children'* in educational settings, and at worst they can be characterised by a paradoxical call for increased accountability against dwindling resources. This can be noted in Hunter et al. (2020), whose analysis noted an 8% reduction in LA spending per pupil between 2010 and 2019, as well as a failure to keep funding in line with the increasing number of EHCPs.

Looking to the future, Marsh (2023) predicts that the current trend will lead to around 10% of children and young people having an EHCP by 2042, compared to around 2.5% in 2017, suggesting a continued divergence from a universalist approach for children and young people with SEND. However, while the marketised, medicalised and specialist model of statutory assessment and support has promised earlier intervention and more accountability, these benefits have yet to be realised, or adequately funded (Hunter et al., 2020).

Theme Two: Hearing the Voices of Children and Young People

This theme considers the role of adults in gaining children and young people's views, particularly with regards to EHC processes, and the role of person-centred practice. There is a key role for EPs supporting children in the EHC process to empower them to share their views, and advocate accordingly (Joint Professional Liaison Group (JPLG), 2020). EPs also have a statutory duty to *'respect and uphold the rights, dignity, values and autonomy'* of children which extends to assessment processes (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2023, 2.5).

Hart (1992) developed the ladder of participation (Figure 5) to outline the case for the democratic involvement of children in decisions involving them. This ranges from non-participation (such as the presentation of adults' views as if they were the child's) up to true participation (where the child initiates the decision-making process and ideally chooses which adults to involve).

Figure 5

Hart's Ladder of Participation (Adapted From Hart, 1992; Goepel et al., 2020)

Note. Hart's ladder of participation (1992) illustrates the levels of a child's participation in decision making. This is categorised into non-participation (shaded in orange) and varying degrees of participation (shaded in green), with a higher number indicating a higher degree of participation.

Hart's ladder of participation (1992) was grounded in a rights-based model, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNC, 1989) (Article 12.1, 1989). This stipulates:

> **Article 12.1** *"Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".*

The wording *'capable'* however leaves interpretation of the capacity of children to be involved with decisions, which has an implication for children with SEND. Further, the UNC outlines a specific need to involve children within statutory processes, which would extend to the EHC process:

> **Article 12.2:** *The child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.*

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) stipulates that the views of children and young people need to be considered, and they should participate in the decision-making process *'as much as possible'.* The acknowledgement of *'possible'* seems to mirror the UNC (1989) language, which invites interpretation as to which children and young people have the capacity to share their views, and to what extent they are included within the EHC process.

This raises the question as to how well children and young people's views are sought and heard, and if there are any barriers or enablers to doing so. Ahad et al. (2022) highlighted a considerable theme within the literature of children's views not being gathered well in the EHC process, via a systematic literature. This included a lack of appropriate adaptation due to children's age and SEND (Adams et al., 2018; Sharma, 2021), not being involved or invited to share their views (Franklin et al., 2018), and children having a lack of control over the way in which their views were gathered (Redwood, 2015).

To address this question, Sharma (2022) conducted a Delphi study to identify the most common barriers to gaining children's and young people's voices and propose possible solutions. The Delphi method relies on recruiting participants with expertise to create a panel who reach a shared opinion on a particular issue and therefore a 'groupthink' (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The panel assembled by Sharma included six LA professionals (2 EPs, 2 SEND officers, 1 Family Support Worker, 1 Advisory Teacher) and two school professionals (1 SENCO, 1 Assistant SENCO). This may be considered a strength of Sharma's research, since it gathered a diverse range of professionals, which is an important consideration for Delphi studies (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

Most of the agreed upon barriers to gaining the child's view were implicitly conceptualised within Sharma's study as resting with the child, for example their language, cognitive ability, and fears of meeting a new professional, rather than being a result of a mismatched interaction between a professional and child. This aligns with the SENDCoP's (DfE, 2015) conceptualisation of a child's individual needs, which is broken down into four sections detailing within-child needs (i.e., cognition and learning/communication and interaction). This often leaves little scope to consider systemic and environmental factors which can influence children's strengths and needs (Buck, 2015).

However, the solutions proposed by Sharma's (2022) panel involved adapting the approach of adults around the child. The adaptation with the most consent was the use of creative methods such as visuals to gather children's views. From a theoretical perspective, this suggests the importance of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, which considers that adults need to adjust their approaches and language to match a child or young person's development.

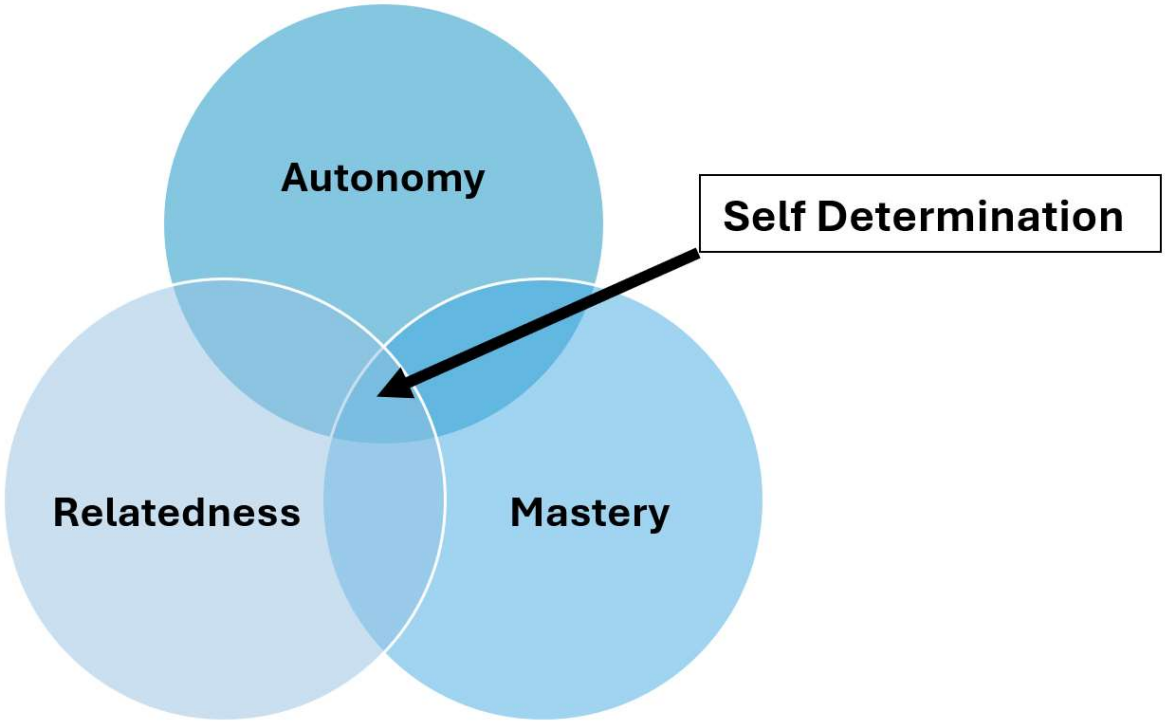
Broader literature has also considered barriers that professionals face in obtaining a child or young person's views, aside from within-child factors. These have included the stressful and ethical demands of being a SEND professional (Hellawell, 2015, 2017), the need for development of and training in methodologies (Sales & Vincent, 2018) and insufficient professional time and access to resources (Curran & Boddisson, 2021).

The lack of time is particularly problematic for EPs who may only get one opportunity to meet a child/young person, since there is not always enough time to gain their trust and truly understand or represent their views (Capper & Soan, 2022; Smillie & Newton, 2020; Redwood, 2015). This has also been noted by children and young people themselves, some of whom feel that one meeting is not enough time with an EP (Boswell et al., 2021). This sits alongside a context of a reduction in EPs in recent years and an increased EHC workload (Atfield et al., 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, Ryan & Deci's (2000) SDT holds implications for involving children and young people within the EHC process. This considers three important basic human needs for social development and wellbeing, as visualised in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Self Determination Theory (Adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2000)



Note. The three key needs are depicted (autonomy, relatedness, mastery) in a Venn diagram to illustrate self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In terms of the specific views of young people in contributing to their EHCP reviews, Cooper (2019) found that young people's relationships with familiar people (such as education staff and parents) were often crucial to supporting young people to share their views, as were having choices and control over how they contributed. This suggests that SDT needs are important for empowering children and young people within the EHC process.

Within Cooper's (2019) findings, young people were also often unsure of how their views would be acted on, and what difference this might make to their education. This links to Adam's (2017) findings (commissioned by the DfE), whereby only 19% of children and young people were given a choice of how to participate towards their EHCP, and only 44% were asked if they wanted to contribute at all. Both Cooper (2019) and Adam's (2017) research is however closer to the period that EHCPs were first introduced, meaning practice in this area may have since changed.

Research has also suggested that virtual methods of gaining a child's view, such as recorded videos or online calling can alleviate the anxieties around a face-to-face meeting and allow pupils to feel empowered (Hudson, 2006; Van der Kleii et al., 2017). This might

suggest virtual methods could support autonomy and relatedness under the SDT framework (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, despite an increasing number of remote and virtual EP assessments post-COVID (Association of Educational Psychologists, AEP, 2024), to my knowledge there is no literature exploring this specifically within EHC processes, suggesting that this is an area for further research.

One way in which the EHC process should support children and young people to share their views meaningfully is person-centred planning (PCP) as is outlined in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015). Gregory and Atkison (2024) define PCP as *'both a philosophy and method of service delivery'*, although they note considerable variance in how this is applied in practice. White & Rae (2016) note that PCP is an approach to planning which fits around the needs of the child, with their strengths and capabilities at the heart of assessment and planning. To centre a child within a PCP process may also relate to the basic needs conceptualised with SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), for example by giving control and ensuring the process is accessible.

In terms of application to SEN, however, not enough evidence has been gathered to suggest it changes a child's locus of control or feelings towards education. For example, White & Rae (2016) utilised a mixed-methods exploratory study with 16 students with SEND and their parents/carers. This explored views of PCP meetings involving children and young people. Scaling questions were used to understand students' reported feelings of control using a Locus of Control (LOC) scale, before and after the PCP meeting, although the results did not suggest a meaningful change. However, since this finding was with 16 pupils and in a small number of contexts this may not represent the national picture. However, participants did note that the PCP meeting felt collaborative.

Lundy (2018) suggested that when children and young people engage in a democratic process, positive outcomes are more likely to follow, and this is associated with the empowerment of the child and young person as both a person and a learner. However, research suggests varied evidence regarding how person-centred EHC processes are in practice. Considering Hart's ladder of participation (1992), there is literature to suggest that decision making is adult led within EHC processes and that children ae not always meaningfully involved. For example, children are not always adapted to or given choices regarding how they would like to contribute to EHC meetings (Palikara et al., 2018; White & Rae, 2016). Further, PCP can sometimes focus on the procedural rather than organisational culture required to truly involve children and young people, which has implications for whole school cultural values and attitudes (Redwood, 2015; Aston & Lambert, 2010). This further suggests that practices can sometimes be more adult-led than child-led, and therefore lower

on Hart's ladder of participation. This may also suggest a role for the EP in supporting schools to create a culture that is better orientated towards the meaningful involvement of children and young people.

Redwood (2015) also aimed to gain children and young people's view of the EHC process, although was only able to recruit one child. However, it was noted that the child had been well involved in PCP practices over a period, and a possible implication was the benefit of using PCP tools over time, rather than as a one-off event. There is however a need for further research to support this finding.

Bristow (2013) explored EPs' contribution to person-centred planning, specifically focusing on the Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) tool. Potential benefits included increased confidence and self-belief for young people, and positive behavioural changes such as improved effort within school. A specific consideration as to the success of the PATH included potential power imbalances within and between the systems supporting children and young people. This again supports the concept of the culture behind PCP being just as, if not more important than procedural elements.

Whilst person-centred processes are often highlighted as best practice (JPLG, 2020; SENDCoP, DfE, 2015), the literature raises questions about the mechanisms that can support truly person-centred approaches. This is because person-centred approaches involve complex psychosocial considerations of the person's needs and the broader systems that support them. Kusi (2017) explored specific factors that supported post-16 students in participating in person-centred EHCP annual reviews. This included individual factors, such as the apprehension of young people before a meeting, as well as factors relating to professionals. For example, other people's perceptions of a learner's competence could negatively impact the young person's participation in PCP, despite autonomy and control being theorised as essential for self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this sense, Kusi (2017) conceptualised young people with SEND as experiencing 'othering' and being seen as inherently different from other young people, a finding later supported by Robinson (2023).

Kusi's (2017) research is supported by findings suggesting that children and young people's views are often given a lower status and priority than parental views in the EHC process (Adams et al., 2017; Redwood 2015). For those over sixteen years of age, this suggests a lack of consideration towards the Mental Capacity Act (2005) which assumes those over sixteen have the capacity to make decisions for themselves. Research has also suggested that parental perceptions of their adolescent children's needs could be less reliable than parents of younger children (Raw et al., 2021; Van Roy, 2010), which supports

the need for young people's voices to be elevated within the EHC process. This is particularly important since the introduction of the SEND reforms (DfE, 2015) since young people can now have an EHCP up to the age of 25.

However, Buck (2015) suggests that policymakers and government agencies have interpreted the concept of person-centred as leaning towards a within-child model, for example, centring around the person's needs and disabilities rather than focusing on the holistic person. Buck goes on to suggest that this conflicts with the role of the EP, and that a psychologist's understanding of person-centred practice is at odds with the typical within-child or more deficit language used to describe PCP within government and policy documentation. This might be noted within the SENDCoP's (DfE, 2015) requirement that SEND *must* be identified during the assessment process, while a child or young person's strengths *should* be identified.

Theme Three: A Multi-Agency Approach to SEND

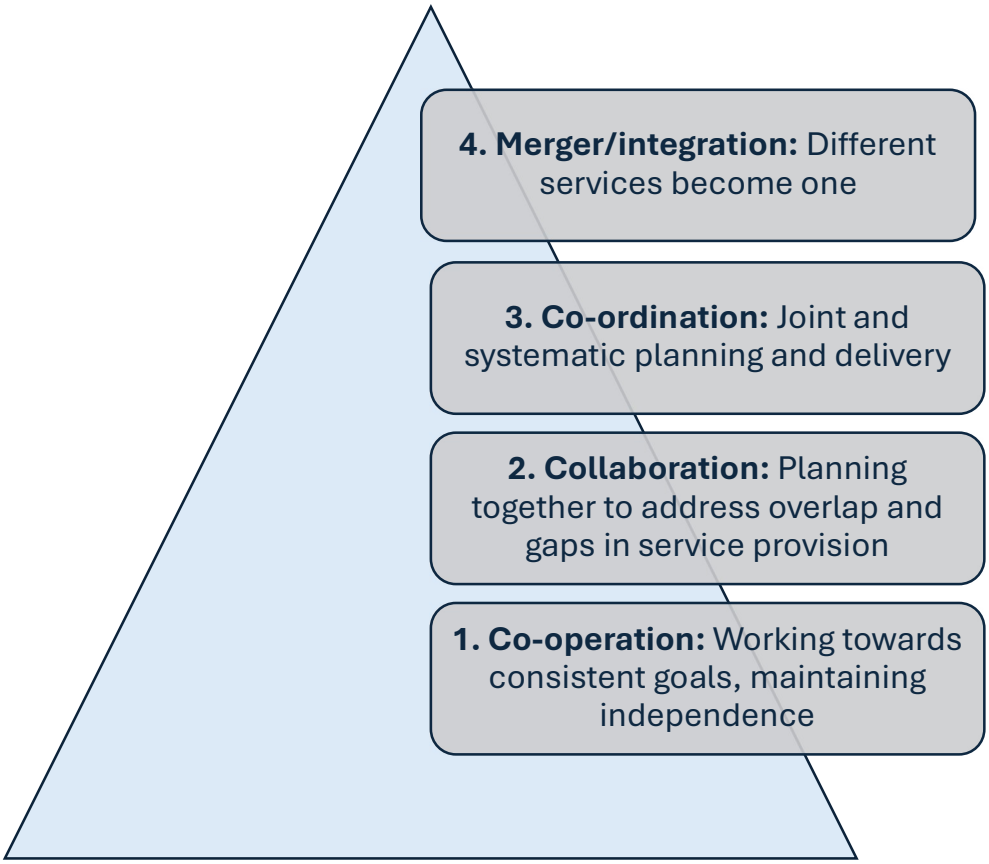
The need for multi-agency working within the SEND system has developed over time. Warnock (1978) initially outlined the need for a multi-agency approach to the assessment and identification of SEN. However, this was envisioned as being for a small minority of children, particularly those described as having complex needs. Another key influence in multi-agency working was the development of the Every Child Matters policy (ECM) (DfES, 2004). This aimed to move towards integrated services, as well as more accountability of these services.

For example, the ECM influenced legislation to create the post of director for children's services, in order to oversee these integrated services within a *'children's trust'*. The ECM suggested that EPs could sit within these trusts alongside other educational professionals (pp. 71), but also potentially in an integrated wider team alongside health and social care professionals (pp. 63). This suggested that the role of an EP would increasingly expand beyond educational services.

Frost (2005) considered the role of multi-agency partnerships in the context of the ECM and theorised four levels of multi-agency partnership (Figure 7). These range from co-operation at the simplest level, up to the merger of different agencies, the latter being promoted by the ECM agenda.

Figure 7:

Levels of Partnership (Adapted From Frost, 2005; Goepel et al., 2020)



Note. Frost's (2007) levels of partnership illustrates four levels of multi-agency partnership, ranging from co-operation at the simplest level (level one), up to the merger of different agencies at the highest level of co-operation (level four).

However, Frost's (2005) model leaves open the question as to how different professionals might integrate into a single service with shared values and aspirations. Social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979) holds key implications for multi-agency working and professional identity from a psychological perspective. Broadly, the theoretical assumption is that our identity develops from the social groups we belong to (in-group) as well as the social groups we do not belong to (out-group), with a favouring for our own group. SIT may therefore reinforce the ECM's (DfES, 2004) argument for integrated services by creating one group or service, as well as supporting Frost's argument for the same. SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that groups aim to reinforce the distinctiveness of their own group, as well as exaggerate the differences between their group and other groups. Tajfel & Turner theorised three main processes influential in the development of social identity. These are as follows:

1. Social Categorisation. This relates to a tendency to group people into social categories, which can be based on a range of intersectional factors. Examples might include age, economic status, levels of education, race, religion, occupation, and SEN/D.

2. Social Identification. Following a process of categorisation, individuals identify themselves within a category. SIT suggests this can influence individuals' perceptions, thoughts, and behaviour.

3. Social Comparison. Once individuals have categorised their social understanding of others and identified which groups they might belong with, SIT argues there is a tendency to compare their 'in-group' with 'out-groups'. This can include a competitive drive for a distinct identity of their group, which can result in exaggeration of the similarities between their in-group, and exaggeration of differences of out-groups.

SIT appears to hold value as a theoretical framework by which to consider the literature around EHC needs assessment, particularly when considering the role of multiple agencies and professions. The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) places a distinct importance on the role of multi-agency working, further suggesting the relevance of a theory which considers social influences within professional relationships.

Firstly, it may be argued that the distinct roles of professions is a result of social categorisation and identification (for example, the role of an EP could be argued to be a social category). Utilising a SIT lens within this literature review may therefore support an understanding of the multiple roles within the process, including the way in which professionals are categorised, and how this may impact on individuals perceptions, thoughts and behaviour (social identity), as well as how professionals compare their role and status to other groups (social comparison).

Given that the literature frequently suggests and a lack of a co-ordinated multi-agency approach within EHC needs assessments (Ahad et al., 2022; Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Tysoe, 2018), SIT appears to hold value in considering the barriers and enablers to multi-agency working. For example, a SIT lens might provide an understanding of where professionals feel they have a distinct or overlapping role. SIT also appears to hold relevance when considering power imbalances between agencies/professions. For example, the role of social comparison encourages consideration of a competitive drive for a distinct identity, which may influence the success of which agencies can work collaboratively as opposed to distinctly. Social categorisation/comparison and the need for a distinct identity can be seen within literature exploring EPs roles within a multi-agency context. For example, Cameron (2006) suggests a range of factors which support the EP role as having a distinct

offer when compared to other professions, including offering a psychological perspective, being evidence-based, taking a problem-solving approach, and looking at the 'bigger' issues.

Farrell et al. (2006) noted that EPs could make a positive and distinctive contribution to multi-agency teams in light of the ECM agenda (DfES, 2004) given their academic background and psychological training. However, Farrell (2006) also noted around half of EPs and most schools felt that EP casework could have been carried out by another professional, such as a specialist teacher or clinical psychologist. Conversely to SIT, this suggests EPs could sometimes minimise the distinctiveness of their in-group when compared to other professions. This suggests the role of the EP is open to social identity threats and may not articulate its distinct offer succinctly.

However, Gaskell & Leadbetter (2009) suggested overall positive implications for EPs who worked in multi-agency capacities, including an enhanced professional identity and clarification of their own skills. This concept is also reflected within the HCPC standards of proficiency for psychologists, who are expected to *'use formulations to assist multi-professional communication and understanding'* (HCPC, 2023, 7.14).

Greenhouse (2013) explored the role of EPs working as part of a multi-agency team and suggested that EPs could be a 'neutral facilitator' towards multi-agency group processes**.** However, in light of power imbalances around expertise, status, distinctiveness, and territoriality, other literature questions the extent of EPs neutrality. For instance, Warwick (2023) explored EP and social worker views on working in a multi-agency team, through the use of semi-structured interviews. While EPs working in a multi-agency capacity were able to hold a unique and distinct role, power imbalances were noted between EPs and social workers, with EPs often being seen to have the final judgement in decision making. This suggests that separate 'in-groups' can still exist within multi-agency teams from a SIT perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and that integrated services as suggested by the ECM (DfES, 2004) and supported by Frost (2005) do not necessarily create harmonious multi-agency relationships.

In the context explored by Warick (2023), EPs' professional status was considered as creating a power imbalance between themselves and social workers, particularly with newly qualified social workers who may not develop or express their own professional judgement as easily. Furthermore, in Warwick's findings, EPs were afforded more autonomy than social workers, since EPs could negotiate their casework rather than working on an allocation system alone. Therefore, the role of a 'neutral' EP in a multi-agency setting as suggested by Greenhouse (2013) appears open to challenge, particularly when EPs provide supervision (Warwick, 2023) or line management (Farrell et al., 2006) to other professions.

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) calls for greater collaboration between education, health and social care in the EHC process, which means local authorities and health services *must* work together and *must* have joint commissioning arrangements to plan for children and young people with SEND. As part of the EHC needs assessment, local authorities *must* gather advice from relevant professionals about a child or young person's education, health and care needs. The intended aim of these reforms was to create a streamlined process with less duplication (Thom et al., 2015), although it is often still reported that parents need to relay the same information to multiple professionals (Ahad et al., 2022; Franklin et al., 2018; Holland & Pell, 2017). This is despite Warnock's (1978) earlier recommendation for a 'named person' who could support parents accessing multi-disciplinary assessments and make the process more streamlined.

Norwich and Eaton (2014) framed multi-agency working as a complex interconnected and ecosystemic model, and therefore argued that a lack of strategic guidance within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) would prove inadequate to engender multi-agency working within the EHC system. This prediction appears to have held weight today. For example, the SEND review (DfE, 2022) has noted that the system relies on families engaging with multiple different services which are difficult to navigate.

There is also confusion around how national policy for multi-agency involvement applies in local contexts. Whilst parents and young people have the right to request specific involvement from a range of multi-agency professionals during the EHC process, it is down to the LA's interpretation of what is reasonably required (DfE, 2015, 9.49). Cochrane & Soni (2020) have pointed towards a political agenda as driving this confusion, including a decentralisation agenda where there is a reduced role for the state, and local authorities instead have to develop their own processes. This can be seen in literature suggesting that there is considerable variation in practice between LAs (Ahad et al., 2022; Sales & Vincent, 2018).

Further, while the EHCP document itself now stipulates the inclusion of health and social care needs, outcomes, and provision, there is criticism within the literature that health and social care needs are often dismissed within the EHC process and only recognised when they relate to educational needs (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Norwich, 2014). Further, a general lack of integration with health and social care has been noted within the literature (Ahad et al., 2022; Cochrane & Soni, 2020) with this being attributed in part to underfunded health and social care services (House of Commons, 2019).

Another key theme within multi-agency working in the EHC process is the difficulty in getting different services together (Ahad et al., 2022; Sales & Vincent, 2018; Tysoe, 2018).

This suggests that professionals are still working in a less integrated way under Frost's (2005) model and not jointly planning. Accordingly, the SEND review (DfE, 2022) has proposed the statutory use of multi-agency panels in the EHC decision making process, since it has not yet been voluntarily adopted by all LAs (DfE, 2022). This suggests an incline towards using legal and accountability frameworks to enforce multi-agency working, despite this approach ignoring strategic aims (Norwich & Eaton, 2014).

Redwood (2015) undertook a realist evaluation to consider the contexts and mechanisms which support multi-agency approaches in EHC processes in one LA. Part 1 of Redwood's analysis involved a survey approach. A strength of this analysis was the wide range of professionals who responded to the survey, including EPs, social care roles, health roles, and school-based roles, which received 31 participant responses. The majority of respondents (61%) were happy with multi-agency working in the EHC process, although most of the remaining participants felt there was a need for a trans-disciplinary approach (joint planning, working and sharing roles), as opposed to a multi-disciplinary approach (working alongside, no joint planning). This appears to correspond to Frost's (2005) levels of partnership, where joint planning is felt to contribute to improved multi-agency working. Theoretically from the SIT lens (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), there may also be a need for joint planning to engender shared values and aims, however, as previously considered, integration and joint planning alone is not enough to create shared identities and values.

Capper & Soan (2022) applied a cultural historical activity theory analysis of EPs involvement within the EHC process, which generated data within one Educational Psychology Service (EPS) who operated as part of a multi-disciplinary service. Their analysis was focused on inter-professional relationships between EPs and SEND officers within the LA, using a semi-structured interview, and a Developmental Work Research (DWR) focus group. Given that EPs and SEND officers worked in the same overall service, this level of working together might be well conceptualised with Frost's model (2005) as a co-ordinated approach. Further, since EPs and SEND officers had worked together to conceptualise a shared understanding of the EHC process, it might be suggested this had led them further away from seeing themselves as two out groups as theorised under the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, key findings included an overreliance of EP advice within the EHC process, and minimal input of other professional groups such as health and social care. However, as acknowledged by Capper & Soan (2022) a key limitation was that wider professionals' views were not gathered.

Theme Four: Parents as Partners

The Warnock report (1978) advocated for a key shift in power imbalances between professionals and parents, which was entitled in the report's chapter *'parents as partners'* (Lindsay et al., 2020). This theme aims to explore this concept with relation to EHC and SEND practice, which requires an examination of both parental and professional roles. I will begin by situating the chronosystemic context in the lead up to the EHC reforms (DfE, 2015), including the Lamb (2009) inquiry into parental confidence. This is then discussed with relation to EPs, in particular how changing models of EP services might impact on working with parents as partners. This literature is then broadened to consider parent/school partnerships, and finally LA/parent partnerships.

Prior to the SEND (DfE, 2015) reforms, the DfE commissioned the Lamb report (2009) with a remit to suggest ways in which parental confidence in the SEN system could be improved. The findings advocated for major reforms including a stronger voice for parents. This was based on a thorough analysis of research into parental satisfaction, including DfE published surveys, academic research, a web-based parent survey, stakeholder consultations, and a survey of children's views. This report synthesises professional, parent and children/young people's views alongside the evidence base.

Subtheme: Parents as Partners With EPs. A key theme within parent and EP partnership is the need for EPs to build and sustain the trust of parents and carers. The HCPC standards note that professionals must *"make sure that your conduct justifies the public's trust and confidence in you and your profession"* (HCPC, Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics, 9.1). This holds particular weight within the current adversarial EHC process. For example, the online parent forum Special Needs Jungle (SNJ) notes in an article that HCPC rules *"may be breached where an EP fails to provide lawful advice during an EHC needs assessment process"* and gives the example of *"vague, unspecific and generally unhelpful reports"* (Broach, 2021). The article goes on to suggest making a complaint to professional bodies such as the HCPC as one option available to parents. There is therefore a rationale for exploring the theme of trust within EP/parent partnerships, including the perceived identity of EPs as outlined within both literature and media sources.

The Lamb report (2009) identified several critical factors that influenced parents' trust in EPs. This included the length of time EPs had spent with a parent discussing their child's development and current progress, a finding also recently supported by Sawyer & Collingwood (2023). A particular implication for EP/parent partnerships in the Lamb (2009) report was the perception that EPs could be inherently conflicted by their employment with the LA. In some instances, EPs were therefore essentially seen by parents as upholding the

status quo of the SEND system by limiting their recommendations to fit with LA resources. Lamb noted that *"parents detect it very quickly"* and this *"destroys trust"*.

Lamb (2009) explored this parental perception with EPs directly. Whilst there were mixed responses, the conclusion partially legitimised parental concerns, noting that in some local authorities there was *"a professional culture where it is expected that they [EPs] will not make specific recommendations or will not recommend provision that they know the local authority cannot provide".* However, the Lamb inquiry was limited in its ability to address this area of concern. Despite being tasked with exploring whether making EP services at an 'arms length' from LAs would improve parental confidence, the inquiry was unable to make a conclusion, since no bids were received to undertake this research question.

Later research suggests mixed perceptions of models of EP services and parent partnership, although the literature is limited in directly gathering parental views. McGuiggan (2021) adopted an interpretivist position to explore EP views of working in partnership with parents, spread across four LAs. This suggested that a move towards a traded model did little to support parental trust in EPs, with the focus of traded services now being on meeting the needs of schools who commissioned advice, rather than children and families. For example, EPs spoke about schools having an ownership of their time and needing to *"keep schools happy",* which was also noted by Ashton & Roberts (2006). Further research therefore might be indicated to obtain parental views of partnership working with EPs since these views were based on EP views of partnership.

Further, some research suggests that a move towards a private or arm's length model can also create anxieties around the quality assurance of EPs work, with Lee & Woods (2017) noting some schools' view that LAs were better placed to rigorously screen and quality assure EPs work. However, Lee & Woods did not include parental views on the impact of EPS models, again supporting a need for research into parents' views of EP models and working in partnership. This is particularly important considering changing professional, social and economic shifts of EP involvement which impact on partnership working with parents (Dunsmuir et al., 2014), such as the move towards traded and independent services.

The literature is somewhat limited with regards to parent views of working with an EP during the EHC process specifically. Bentley (2017) gathered parent views of the EHC process, but noted the generated data contained little reference to EPs, which was attributed to a lower parental level of interaction with EPs than school staff. This included instances where parents either did not know who the EP was or did not know an EP was involved at all. Therefore, a significant implication for EP practice within the EHC process was to

consider how to support schools to promote the inclusion of parents within statutory assessments.

Despite this, parents within Bentley's (2017) analysis identified a number of factors which supported EP/parent partnership, including EPs sharing knowledge of the EHC process, listening to parents' views, and supporting a psychological understanding of their child/young person. Redwood (2015) also noted that parents could sometimes feel well supported by the EP during the EHC needs assessment process, however, given EPs limited time involvement, there were parental concerns this might not have a lasting impact, particularly when school staff did not have the experience/training required to meet the needs of children and young people. This further suggests a role for EPs in providing systemic support for school staff.

Subtheme: Parents as Partners With Schools. The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) expects that educational settings adopt a collaborative approach with parents to support children with SEN. However, research into partnership working with parents suggests difficulties in creating a model of engagement between schools and parents, implying conflict within the microsystem/mesosystem levels of the ecological theory.

Harris & Goodall (2007) adopted a qualitative methodology in exploring parent/school relationships, through case studies and semi-structured interviews. This was supplemented by a review of the literature, which the authors noted to be comprehensive in gathering a wide range of views. Harris & Goodall go on to claim that the literature *was 'unequivocal about the fact that parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement'*. Further, a claim was made that the key determiners of parental involvement were their socio-economic status and personal experiences of education. However, critically the authors did not specify an ontological/epistemological approach to their research, nor provide transparency on how the literature was gathered, such as their search terms or inclusion criteria. It is also not known whether a structured or semi-structured style of literature review was adopted, although the authors did note they drew on their expertise in gathering sources. Despite this, their findings broadly suggest that social and economic inequalities were seen as a key concern in parent/school partnerships in the lead up to the SEND reforms (2015).

This has been supported by Cleland & Lumsdon's (2021) systematic literature review of parent/school engagement. An interpretive approach was adopted, which led to the development of social capital (Bourdieu, 1968) as a key theme influencing parent/school engagement. Cleland & Lumsdon note the interpretative nature of their review meant that the findings were not necessarily generalisable, although they argued that qualitative

research aims to anticipate rather than predict future applicability to other contexts. One critique in relation to this literature review is that their systematic review had a very limited number of studies post the SEND reforms (DfE, 2015).

Day (2013) also considered the role of schools in engaging parents in a partnership model of working, by conducting focus group interviews. Day transparently outlines their methodological approach to thematic analysis, which included exploration of both semantic (surface) and latent (researcher interpretation) approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It noted that a systemic epistemology was adopted, suggesting (but not explicitly naming) an ecosystemic view as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The findings indicated that parents could feel blamed and judged by school staff, which was a key rationale for suggesting a relational model between schools and staff. Day therefore advocated replacing the concept of *'hard to reach parents'* with *'terms of engagement'*. Further research has also supported the concept of parental blame as impacting parents' involvement with their child's education, (Broomhead; 2013, Francis, 2012; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008). This has also been replicated within literature exploring the EHC process, with Keville et al. (2024) suggesting that professionals are less likely to support parents in accessing statutory assessment when they are perceived to hold blame for their child's needs.

The literature around EHC processes and parent/school partnership also discusses the role of the SENCO, with Daniels et al. (2019) noting this role to be an important recommendation within the Warnock report (1978). Gore (2016) explored the experiences of primary school SENCOs in working with parents/carers through the EHCP process, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis and semi-structured interviews. Their findings suggested that SENCOs could find parent/school relations in the EHC process to be emotionally draining, which led Gore to suggest a role for EPs in providing supervision and support for SENCOs. Further, the EHC process was noted to shift parental expectations of the SENCO role. This led SENCOs to feel they had taken on additional work since the EHC reforms, despite sometimes lacking power within the system, which influenced on their ability to drive change and therefore meet parental expectations. However, there appears to be a need for further research into parent views since this research exclusively gathered SENCO views.

Similar findings were also noted in Boesley & Crane's (2018) analysis of SENCO views on the EHC process. Managing parental expectations was a key theme, and SENCOs noted parents often had misconceptions regarding the EHC process, which made working in partnership more challenging. Boesley & Crane also adopted a qualitative approach with 16 participants, adopting a thematic analysis. Unlike Gore's (2016) approach, Boesley & Crane

adopted a semantic approach to the data, grounding their analysis in surface meanings rather than an interpretive one. One critique might be that while the authors transparently acknowledged their joint role in coding and theme development, no reflection was offered on areas of agreement/disagreement in their interpretation, and supplementary materials such as interview guides were not offered to allow the reader to gain more insight into the thematic analysis process. However, I acknowledge that guidance for thematic analysis has developed since the date of Boesley & Crane's publication and would not therefore have been available to the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2022/2024).

Boesley & Crane (2018) made a strong effort however in their dissemination and impact, which is a strong marker of quality for qualitative research (Yardley, 2000, 2015). For example, they reported a summary of their findings on the parent website, special needs jungle (Crane & Boesley, 2018). Within this article, they expanded on their finding of *unrealistic parental expectations',* noting that parent expectations were not necessarily unreasonable, but also not realistic within a very constrained system. This demonstrates a strong effort to present their research sensitively, as well as to invite parents into the debate on parent/school relations.

Bentley (2017) completed a thematic analysis to explore parent views of the EHC needs assessment process, which involved a latent (interpretative) approach to analysing parent views. Bentley noted a power struggle in the parent/school relationship, and that parents were not always well informed by schools in the EHC process. However, the 'professional skills' of some parents, such as their ability to advocate was seen as a mechanism by which parents could mitigate power imbalances within parent/school relationships.

This links with Harris & Goodall's (2007) claim that socioeconomic status could be a determiner of parent/school engagement, although Bentley (2017) did not specify parental socioeconomic status, and therefore the literature here is unclear whether socioeconomic status necessarily translates to holding 'professional skills' which allow for advocation. However, the SEND review (DfE, 2022) has concluded that *'families with access to financial and social resources are often better placed to secure support for their children',* further suggesting the role of social and financial capital as embedding inequities within the EHC process. From a psychological/theoretical perspective, this might link to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), since parents are categorised within the literature as being inside or outside of a group depending on their economic status, which has implications for intergroup conflict due to limited resources within the system.

Adams et al. (2017) highlighted the role of SEND, ethnicity, and social class as factors affecting parental satisfaction with the EHCP process. For example, parents of children with a visual impairment or moderate learning difficulty were more likely to report higher satisfaction, as were parents of children from non-white backgrounds. There was also a reported correlation between economic deprivation and satisfaction with the EHCP process, with higher economic well-being associated with decreased satisfaction. Despite this, Adams et al. noted that there was little evidence of a link between parental satisfaction with EHCP processes and documentation when compared to professional evaluation of an EHCP's quality. This suggests a discord between how professionals and families grade the quality of EHCP plans.

Whilst Adams et al. (2017) documented demographic and socio-economic variances in parental satisfaction, it did not explore the reasons why this might be in-depth. It could be hypothesised that this is a contentious and highly political area of research, hence the lack of detailed exploration into this. For example, when the Local Government Association (LGA, 2022) reported that most SEND appeals came from affluent families, this was met with press controversy from legal charities and campaigners who attributed blame to a defective SEND system, not affluent parents (Reyes, 2022). The debate around socioeconomic status and parental advocacy has also proven controversial within the wider media, as explored within the SNJ parent forum's analysis of *'the dyslexia battle and middle class mums'*, which argues that a failing and under resourced SEND system is the culprit of inequalities, not the economic status of advocating parents (Vaughn, 2020).

Parents as Partners With Local Authorities. The influence of the Lamb (2009) report on partnership work between local authorities and parents can be seen in the Children and Families Act (2014) and SENDCoP (2015) reforms. These reforms made it a statutory requirement for parents to be involved in decision making, as well as offering increased choice and control for parents. This included not just the involvement of parents at an individual level, but also the requirement that LAs *must* involve parents in developing each authority's local offer of support. The SENDCoP also notes a role for LAs work with parents, such as involving parents in advocacy through parent/carer forums. However, this is a less prescriptive *'should'* do, rather than must do (DfE, 2015, 1.12).

Parent/LA relations were also explored by DfE commissioned research. This was with the aim of informing and later evaluating SEND/EHC reforms (DfE, 2015). For example, the SEND pathfinder trailed new ways of working in 31 LAs, between 2011 and 2015. While there is a range of reports that make up these findings, I have referred to the final summary report here as the source of literature (Thom et al., 2015) which represents the findings on

the pathfinder programme. The final evaluation of this programme adopted a mixed-methods approach, which included a survey of 698 parents, thematic case studies, and qualitative interviews. This also included a comparison group of 1000 families to compare the findings to those who were not in the pathfinder trials.

Thom et al.'s (2015) conclusion was that the pathfinder approach had improved the process for families, *'often in ways that are statistically significant'*. This included a more family-centred approach where families felt more heard, and higher overall family satisfaction. However, it is noted that this trial came with additional funding for local authorities, which could have caveated the study's findings and implications if this funding was not continued under the EHC reforms. Indeed, the review estimated that the additional cost per satisfied family during the EHC assessment process was £3,175. While this analysis might appear to be quite a blunt methodology, the socio-cultural context of the EHC reforms exists within marketised, neoliberal and accountable special educational needs system (Lehane, 2016) as outlined in the earlier theme 're-conceptualising special educational needs over time', which may explain Thom et al.'s analysis, as may the fact that the research was commissioned by a government body.

The key implication for LA/parent partnerships within the pathfinder programme (Thom et al., 2015) was the provision of a 'keyworker' within the LA who co-ordinated the EHC process. The success of the key working approach was influenced by the consistency, knowledge, and competency of the keyworker in their interactions with parents. This holds implications for the LA staff in terms of training, capacity, and their ability to act within the system, all of which could influence parent/LA relationships. Redwood (2015) also noted that the skills of LA staff were seen as important, alongside empathy and active listening skills, suggesting that these might be important factors in a co-production approach.

However, parental perceptions of LA staff knowledge and training since the EHC reforms show a mixed picture within the literature. Adams et al. (2017) undertook a survey of 13,643 parents whose child/young person had received an EHCP. 82% of parents felt that LA staff were knowledgeable in the EHC process. While mostly positive parental perceptions were held of LA staff's knowledge, the study's inclusion criteria did not seek the views of parents who were unsuccessful in obtaining an EHCP for their child. Further, there was no retrospective comparison of parental perceptions of LA staff pre-EHC reforms, making it hard to draw any comparisons in perceived staff knowledge.

Cullen et al. (2017) also considered the role of LA staff knowledge and the impact on LA/parent relations in the EHC process, in particular with regards to mediation/resolution processes. While parents expected LA staff to be knowledgeable and skilled, it was noted

there were *'no national standards for the quality or training of SEND staff'.* This remains the case today. Under a SDT framework, this might suggest LA staff needs for mastery and competence are not met, which may also influence their relationships with parents.

Accordingly, Cullen et al. noted that the majority of parents felt LA staff lacked adequate knowledge and training. However, this finding might be skewed given that this relates to parents going through mediation and resolution processes. Cullen et al. also acknowledged that the relatively small, qualitative sample gathered may not represent the national picture. This diverges from Redwood's (2015) analysis, which reported mainly positive parental views of LA staff, although the majority of participants in this study were not involved in mediation or resolution processes.

However, further research also supports concerns that LA staff lack knowledge and training which can hamper parent/LA relations and reduce parental confidence. Palikara et al. (2018) undertook a survey of 349 SEND professionals, which included LA staff, and concluded that there was a need for *'clear guidelines and systematic, standardised training'* in the EHC process, owing to a view that LA staff were writing plans with little knowledge or training of SEND, which was raised at the governmental level (House of Commons, 2019). Palikara et al. (2018) noted this resulted in a variable quality of EHCPs and inconsistency within LAs.

Power imbalances between LAs and parents have also been noted within the literature to be a key barrier to LA/parent partnerships, exacerbating parental stress and contributing to adversarial relationships. Cullen & Lindsay (2019) explored parent/LA relationships with regards to EHC mediation and tribunals, through 78 qualitative interviews with parents. Data was analysed through the Bronfenbrenner (1979) framework, and the transactional stress theory (Lazarus, 1966). The transactional stress theory holds that stress occurs in response to a challenging event, which is continually appraised by the individual, and a coping strategy is then developed in response.

Cullen & Lindsay's (2019) analysis using transactional stress theory highlights the cumulative stress parents could experience in mediation and tribunal processes against the LA. LA staff were often perceived as rude, unprofessional, or in the worst instances exerting their power over parents. Given that parents experienced prolonged stress in the context of mediations and tribunals, parents were noted by Cullen & Lindsay (2019) to be 'tipped' into physical and mental health difficulties resulting from their interactions with LAs. This was noted to hamper a partnership model of working with parents, and instead contribute to an adversarial model. However, there still exists a gap in the literature to gain LAs staff perceptions on the factors impacting the LAs engagement with parents (Ahad et al., 2022).

While Cullen & Lindsay's (2019) findings were limited to the mediation and tribunal process, further research has also suggested the stressful impact of the SEND assessment process, with parental participants in Starkie (2024) noting an impact on both their physical and mental health. The need to fight a battle was also a theme within Starkie's analysis of parent experiences of SEND assessment processes, adding weight to this as a stressor which encourages an adversarial rather than relational approach. This suggests a role for a relational and co-productive model of engagement between LAs and parents to reduce power imbalances, which may be well supported by EPs.

Literature Review Summary, Implications and Future Research

I will now summarise and synthesise the literature review into the research questions set out under the Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework. This includes a consideration of the theoretical and practical implications of the literature, as well as possible areas for future research.

Question One: What Changes Over Time Have Influenced the EHC System?

A key theme within the literature is the increasing pressures on the EHC system over time, due to an increased number of EHC needs assessments and tribunals (Marsh, 2022; Marsh; 2023). This is of relevance to EPs given their statutory role within the EHC process, particularly given that the number of EPs in England has reduced in recent years (Atfield et al., 2023). Further, the current trend of increased EHC workloads is predicted to rise to 'unsustainable' levels (Marsh, 2023; DfE, 2022). There appears to be a lack of practical solutions within the literature to address these challenges, however, and the cumulative impacts of changes over time appear to be a considerable threat to supporting children and young people with SEND. Another change over time is the role of EP services, with an increasing move towards traded models (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Dunsmuir et al., 2014; Lee & Woods, 2017; McGuiggan, 2021). Within an increasingly pressured SEND system, it is again unclear how EPs might respond to the wider systemic threats to the SEND system, although EPs may be well placed to advocate for political change given the considerable influence they hold (Swinson, 2023), particularly with research into the functioning of the EHC system. However, this might depend on EPs ability to form a coherent narrative on what a reform should involve, which is not quite clear, although may include the creative deployment of EPs in early intervention as well as statutory assessment.

Question Two, Macrosystem: What Wider Social and Cultural Values Might Influence the EHC Needs Assessment?

Key social and cultural values identified within this literature review include neoliberal and marketised values, which continue to gain dominance within the UK education and SEND

system, despite the negative impact this can have on inclusive practice (Allan & Youdell, 2015; Goodley & Billington 2017; Hunter et al., 2020; Lehane, 2016; Norwich & Eaton, 2014). Additionally, a medicalised model of assessment is noted in both LA and school practices (Allan & Youdell, 2015; Boyle & Lauchlan, 2017; Harwood & Allan, 2014). This is also reflected in significantly increased rates of child diagnosis within the UK, despite a lack of evidence that this can improve outcomes for children and young people, many of whom do not receive adequate support post-diagnosis (Fernell et al., 2013; Kazda, 2024; McKechnie et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2022).

From a psychological perspective, SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) might suggest that this categorisation encourages children and young people to be 'othered', which is reflected in literature suggesting that children and young people hold a lower status in the EHC process and are often not consulted (Adams et al., 2017; Kusi, 2017; Redwood 2015; Robinson, 2023). This is despite Warnock's (1978) recommendation to replace a system of categorisation with a multi-agency and developmentally based approach to assessment. This suggests research might explore alternative models of intervention and/or assessment for children and young people including PCP approaches, which may be well supported by EPs, and potentially theoretically influenced by SIT and/or SDT.

Question Three, Exosystem: What Factors Might Influence Multi-Agency Involvement in the EHC process, Including for LA Professionals?

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) aimed to break barriers to multi-agency working and ensure the collaboration of professionals within the EHC process. This followed government initiatives such as the ECM agenda (DfES, 2004; Farrell et al., 2006), whereby an integration of services was suggested (DfES, 2004; Frost 2005). It was also suggested that EPs might be well placed to integrate into multi-agency teams alongside health and care professionals.

However, the literature suggests that multi-agency aspirations set out in the SENDCoP have not been achieved. A common theme within the literature is that services are fragmented and hard to access (Ahad et al., 2022; Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Tysoe, 2018). It has also been suggested that the SENDCoP did little to address strategic thinking in multi-agency relationships (Norwich & Eaton, 2014). Further, there is inconsistency between and within LAs, suggesting a complex interaction of local and national influences on EHC processes and multi-agency working (Palikara et al., 2018; Sales & Vincent, 2018).

Generally, the literature suggests that there is limited research exploring EHC processes with LA staff, including EPs (Ahad et al., 2022; Capper & Soan, 2022). However, the research suggests that LA professionals including EPs experience stress and complex ethical dilemmas within their roles (Atfield et al., 2023; Hellawell, 2015), which may be a

barrier to multi-agency work. The limited time and resources of professionals is also a key factor highlighted in the literature, including for EPs (Atfield et al., 2023; Capper & Soan; Smillie & Newton, 2020).

EPs are often placed within the literature as striving for a distinct identity within a multi-agency sphere (Cameron; 2006; Farrell, 2006; Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009; Greenhouse, 2013; Warwick, 2023). This might be theoretically understood as a need for social identification and comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 2006). Whilst there are positive examples of EPs distinct contribution in multi-agency teams (Greenhouse, 2013), there are also examples of EPs perceived expert status as contributing towards power imbalances in multi-agency practice (Capper & Soan, 2022; Warwick, 2023). This might be one factor influencing multi-agency relationships for EPs which would be worth exploring in future research.

Power imbalances may also have implications for LA staff and their ability to carry out statutory duties under the SENDCoP, (DfE, 2015), such as co-production. This is also further complicated by a perception that LA staff receive inadequate training to execute their roles (Cullen et al., 2017; Cullen & Lindsay, 2019; Palikara et al., 2018), suggesting difficulties in meeting LAs staff needs for competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Therefore, there is a strong rationale to suggest further research directly with LA staff (including EPs) which might include exploration of ethical demands, power imbalances, co-production, and training needs. This may be influenced by both SIT and SDT, and might also consider both local and national influences on EHC practice within LAs.

Question Four, Mesosystem: What are School Experiences of the EHC process, and What Factors Might Influence Their Involvement?

A key theme within the literature is the role of the SENCO and managing parental expectations (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Gore, 2016). Schools are also under increasing pressure to perform to an accountability and standards agenda, despite the literature suggesting this encourages exclusionary practices and perverse incentives for schools to not meet the needs of children and young people (Ainscow et al., 2006; Daniels et al., 2019). In this sense, it might be suggested that schools are inadvertently encouraged to enhance social categorisation, identification and comparison under a SIT lens (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Alongside increased accountability, schools now have less guidance for the graduated response in the SENDCoP compared to previous codes of SEN/D, which has reduced parental trust in schools (DfE, 2015; Lamb, 2019; Lehane, 2016; Norwich, 2014). This might suggest unmet needs of autonomy for school staff from a SDT lens (Ryan & Deci,

2000). Further, recent evaluation suggests teachers report a low level of confidence in meeting SEND needs and have a need for further training and support (OFSTED, 2024).

The literature therefore suggests there is a role for EPs in supporting SENCO wellbeing, reducing SENCOs isolation within the EHC process, and supporting SENCOs and teachers with whole school training (Bentley, 2017; Curran & Boddison, 2021; Gore, 2016; OFSTED, 2024). This might suggest unmet needs for mastery and relatedness from a SDT lens.

Whilst research has been undertaken with SENCOs in relation to EHC processes, this has often not gathered data alongside parental or EP experiences (Bentley, 2017; Boesley & Crane, 2018; Gore, 2016), suggesting there is a role for research to connect/compare these views together and explore parent and professional views of how schools can work with EPs, parents, multi-agency professionals, and of course children and young people.

Question Five, Microsystem: What are Parental Experiences of the EHC process, and What Factors Might Influence Their Involvement?

Despite an increasing emphasis on the role of parents and carers within the EHC process (DfE, 2015), the literature orientates towards negative and stressful experiences (Cullen & Lindsay, 2019). It is frequently noted within the literature that parents can feel excluded or not listened to during EHC processes (Ahad et al., 2022; Eccleston, 2016; Sales & Vincent, 2018), and therefore that their needs for relatedness and autonomy are not being met.

The role of social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1968) has been considered as a key factor influencing parental involvement in education, SEND and EHC processes (Adams et al., 2017; Bentley, 2017; Cleland & Lumsdon, 2011; DfE, 2022; Harris & Goodall, 2007). From a SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) perspective, the limited resources and associated economic and educational inequalities within the EHC process appears to have encouraged group conflict, including the categorisation and distinction of parents who exist in ‘in’ or ‘out’ groups economically.

Ensuring that that the EHC system does not replicate economic or educational inequalities is highly relevant to the role of an EP (BPS, 2021b, HCPC, 2023). This is also relevant to EPs given the importance of their partnership with parents (Day, 2013; JPLG, 2020; HCPC, 2023). However, the wider discourse suggests disagreement in who the responsibility for equitable access to education lies with, i.e. parents, local government, or the state (DfE, 2022; Hunter et al., 2020; LGA, 2022; Reyes, 2022; Vaughn, 2020). This debate may also be connected to a culture of parental blame, which influences parental

involvement in education and SEND (Day, 2013; Francis, 2012; Keville et al., 2024; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008). The literature therefore suggests parents are also categorised into groups based on their perceived parenting skills or ability.

While there may be a valid role for exploring parental and carer health within the EHC process, the literature suggests that a change of culture in the SEND system is required to support parents (Cullen & Lindsay, 2019). Therefore, simply aiming to alleviate parental mental health and wellbeing in the EHC process might be seen as tackling the symptoms of a dysfunctional system, rather than its underlying structure.

This might be particularly true from a critical realist perspective, if it is agreed that there are 'real' and underlying impacts of the SEND system. This suggests an existing gap within the research to connect parental experiences to systemic influences on their involvement in EHC processes, including factors such as advocacy and parental blame.

Question Six, Individual level: What are Children and Young People's Experiences of EHC processes, and What Factors Might Influence Their Involvement?

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that autonomy, relatedness, and mastery are basic needs. Within EHC processes, this would suggest that children and young people need choice and control over how they are involved, relational support, and for accessible means of communication. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation also connects to SDT, since it outlines the choice and control children have within the EHC process as well as their relation to adults, such as whether interactions are child-initiated or adult-led.

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) particularly draws on the importance of choice and control for children. It partially acknowledges the role of mastery, since the aim is to involve children as much as '*possible'.* However, it does not appear to provide guidance or information as to how their views can be gathered in an accessible way.

A considerable literature suggests that children and young people's psychological need for choice and control are not being met in the EHC process. In terms of choice and control, the literature suggests that children and young people are not always invited or involved in sharing their views, and when they are they often lack choices in how this is achieved (Ahad et al., 2022; Franklin et al., 2018; Palikara et al., 2018; Redwood, 2015; Sharma, 2021). While relationships are considered within the literature to be an important factor in supporting children and young people to share their views (Cooper, 2019), there is a concern that they can become 'othered' within relationships and therefore hold a lower status within the EHC process (Adams et al., 2017; Kusi, 2017; Redwood, 2015). The literature also notes that children and young people have a diverse range of needs which requires adults to make the EHC process accessible and person-centred (Bristow, 2016;

Lundy, 2016; Sharma, 2021, 2022; White & Rae, 2016).The literature suggests there is a role for research exploring how professionals can therefore move towards true participation and involve children and young people in decision making, including the role of choice and control, relationships, and person-centred accessibility.

The limited literature base suggests that virtual means of gaining children and young peoples views might support their autonomy and interactions with adults (Hudson, 2006; Van der Kleii et al., 2017). Therefore, it is suggested that this may be a critical gap within the current EHC literature warranting further research. This is particularly relevant for EPs who have a statutory role within the EHC process and gather the views of children and young people, either directly or indirectly (Atfield et al., 2023; DfE, 2015; JPLG, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review has suggested that the psychological needs of children, young people, parents/carers, EPs and LA staff are generally not well met. From a SIT perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the literature review has suggested that inter and intra group conflicts have overwhelmed stakeholders within EHC processes.

Further, this literature review suggests that basic human needs for autonomy, relatedness, and mastery are poorly met within the EHC system for many stakeholders (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Critically, however, this literature review also argues these psychological needs cannot be met through a resource allocation system alone and requires significant cultural changes at all levels of the ecosystem. Further areas for research are now summarised:

- The role of technology within the EHC process, including remote EP assessment with children and young people, and EP consultation with parents/carers/professionals.
- Partnership working between parents/schools/EPs/LA staff, in particular gathering views alongside each other to explore areas of both distinct and shared identity. It would be particularly helpful to know where these stakeholders are united in agreement in terms of making a positive change in the EHC and SEND system.
- Identifying training needs for LA staff, including co-production, ethical demands, relational approaches, and minimising power imbalances.
- Multi-agency working across education, health and care.
- Whole-school EP input, inclusive practices, and earlier intervention for children and young people with SEND alongside statutory assessment processes.

Chapter Two: Empirical Paper

Abstract

The aim of this study was to research the Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process within one Local Authority (LA). A critical realist lens was adopted (Bhaskar, 2008). The ultimate aim of a critical realist lens was to explore subjective experiences, whilst holding a view that there are real and tangible implications for stakeholders in the EHCNA process. It is acknowledged that these implications are accessed through an interpretive process, including the subjectivity of the researcher, although this is considered a strength rather than a limitation (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Data was collected via a semi-structured interview with 12 participants (four Parents, four EPs, and four SENCOs). Data was firstly analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This provided four overarching themes which hold implications for children and young people, parents, and professionals. Secondly, themes/subthemes were organised into a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022). This visually presents national and local influences which might explain participants' experiences with reference to wider literature, theory and EHC/SEND practice. In particular, this includes Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, Vygotsky, 1978). The summary offers implications for both EPs and the LA, as well as highlighting possible areas of future research.

Local Authority Context and Background

The research was undertaken within a local authority (LA) in the East of England. The most recent census highlights that the population is over 750,000, with almost 40% residing in rural areas (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The authority was rated close to the top third of the 2019 indices of multiple deprivation.

Department for Education data from 2024 highlights that the authority maintains over 7500 EHCPs. This was an increase of over 1000 EHCPs in 2023 alone (DfE, 2024). The authority voluntarily participates in the Delivering Better Value (DfE, 2022) in SEND programme. This programme is offered to 55 local authorities with considerable SEND deficits. DBV is a DfE initiative in response to the SEND and AP green paper, which aims to provide financial stability to LAs, while fulfilling children's potential. The DBV provides additional funding to meet the authority's SEND needs through tailored intervention. Much of the authority's DBV funds are spent on early intervention, such as rolling out training programmes for schools.

Previous local area OFSTED SEND inspections are noteworthy. In 2019, it was identified that *"local area leaders have not made sufficient progress to improve the serious weaknesses identified in the initial inspection"* which were found in 2017. Both inspections noted ineffective governance and leadership, poor timeliness and quality of statutory assessments, a lack of joint working, and the poor quality of the local offer. The most recent OFSTED inspection was conducted in 2023, with its publication coinciding with my data generation. I have elaborated on this in the reflective chapter. The inspection concluded that:

> *"There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, which the local area partnership must address urgently".*

The report outlines that children and young people face a system that has not worked well for a long time, and their needs are not identified accurately or quickly enough. Pupils with an EHCP perform less well than those in comparative authorities and are much more likely to be excluded or not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

In particular, the weakness in statutory EHC plan processes led to widespread and systemic gaps, with variable quality of EHCPs. Crucial information within EHCPs was missing or incorrect. The inspection also noted that co-production is not embedded, and communication is poor. The LA was required to create an action plan outlining how to address these concerns.

Research Rationale

In choosing this area of research, I was firstly influenced by my previous background as an EHCP co-ordinator and my current experience as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). This has meant I have worked within the EHC system in multiple roles, which has driven my personal and professional interest in this topic. Given that I have undertaken this research within my placement LA as a TEP, I am motivated to produce 'real world research' that can have an impact in the area I am working (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I therefore am situated within the context I wish to understand (Pilgrim, 2014) and acknowledge my active engagement and subjectivity within the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

The literature suggests considerable national and localised challenges facing the EHCP and SEND system. Children and young people with SEND consistently experience disadvantage and poor outcomes (DfE, 2022), yet their views are not always sought or heard (Franklin et al., 2018; Palikara et al., 2018; White & Rae, 2016). Parents can often feel excluded within EHC processes (Ahad et al., 2022; Sales & Vincent, 2018) and experience

stress which impacts on their physical and mental health (Cullen & Lindsay, 2019; Starkie, 2024).

Professionals within the SEND system also appear to experience poor outcomes, with literature suggesting work-related stress (Atfield et al., 2023; Gore, 2016; Hellawell, 2015). Accordingly, relationships between parents and professionals are also noted to be fractured and adversarial at times (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Cullen & Lindsay, 2019). Further, despite the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) outlining a clear aspiration for close multi-agency working, there is a noted lack of collaboration between professionals within EHC processes (Ahad et al., 2022; Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Skipp & Hopwood, 2016). The findings of the recent national SEND review (DfE, 2022) paints a problematic picture nationally, including a vicious cycle of late intervention, poor identification of SEND, poor resource management, and poor experiences for children, young people and their families. This suggests widespread failings within the EHC and SEND system, and therefore an urgency in improving outcomes for all involved.

Given the scale of challenges for SEND already acknowledged at national and local levels, it might be reasonable to ask what further research could add. I will therefore now outline the need for research within a local context. Despite shared national criteria, the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) allows local authorities to develop their own criteria to help them decide when it is necessary to carry out an EHC needs assessment, suggesting regional divergence in the process. The literature also alludes to a postcode lottery in identifying SEND, and therefore the subsequent quality of EHC documents (Ahad et al., 2022). Further, the literature also suggests there are inconsistencies in EHC processes both within and between LAs (Palikara et al., 2018; Sales & Vincent, 2018). There are also inconsistencies in EP practice between LAs (Lamb, 2009). This variance suggests that national research alone may not adequately capture a picture of local practice, and may not be generalisable in improving outcomes for children and young people within this LA. Further, research undertaken within other individual LAs may also not be generalisable within other LAs, although I appreciate they may have some transferability. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been prior psychological research of the EHCNA process within the LA identified within the research I have undertaken.

My rationale for wishing to explore the EHCNA process within this specific LA includes the continued adverse findings of its OFSTED inspections, dating back to 2017 and resulting in *'systemic and/or widespread failings'* noted in 2023. While the SEND review (DfE, 2022) outlines a struggling SEND system across England, the seemingly stubborn

difficulties in improving outcomes for children and young people in this area suggest a clear rationale for research within this LA.

The LA's SEND strategy aims for EHCNAs to involve the right people, be person-centred, specific, and understandable. As a result, children and young people are expected to receive the support they need to achieve successful outcomes. The LA's SEND strategy also places a substantial value on person-centred assessments as being an important mechanism for a 'good' assessment, in line with expectations of the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015). However, this is often not the experience that has been described within repeated external evaluations.

Whilst the national picture suggests poor outcomes for many children and young people with SEND (DfE, 2022), the local picture paints an even more concerning one (in some respects). The local area SEND OFSTED inspection (2023) noted that pupils in this LA with SEND fare less well in academic outcomes compared to similar pupils nationally, and this gap is increasing for secondary school pupils. The timeliness of completing EHC plans has also been noted to be getting worse instead of better, and there is a specific lack of planning and provision to meet social and emotional needs.

Therefore, the contradiction between the LA's aims and the outcomes of external evaluation suggest that the LA is not currently functioning as intended by its own strategy, nor as intended by the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015). In line with my worldviews and training as a TEP, I therefore believe that psychologically informed research may hold a contribution (alongside other work) in supporting the LA to achieve its aims for children and young people. By applying a critical realist lens, I am aiming to tentatively suggest mechanisms that influence practice and therefore generate suggestions/implications for the EHCNA process within this LA.

Research suggests that statutory documents can support professionals in delivering effective interventions under the *'right conditions'* (Wilczynski et al., 2007, cited in Castro-Kemp et al., 2021). This suggests that EHCPs have the potential to make an important impact. Therefore, there is a rationale for researching influences on the implementation of the EHCNA process.

Further, I have aimed to take a different methodological approach to prior research exploring EHC functioning at local levels. For example, Redwood (2015) employed a realist evaluation framework (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) through the use of a questionnaire, case studies, and focus groups. Capper & Soan (2022) applied an activity theory analysis to local practice, which included EPs and LA SEND officers. I therefore aim to provide a novel and nuanced understanding of the EHCNA processes within the identified LA through the use of

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024) and a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022). Further, I hope by gaining the views of multiple stakeholders that it might be possible to suggest areas of distinction and agreement.

Ontological and Epistemological Stance

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology is described as the philosophical study of being and truth, whilst epistemology is concerned with how knowledge can be created (Willig, 2013). Whilst there are multiple positionalities within this, both ontology and epistemology might be considered on a spectrum or continuum. Within ontology, the spectrum ranges from realist to relativist views. A realist view proposes an objective truth, whilst a relativist view proposes multiple realities tied to culture and context, which are not absolute (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

The spectrum within epistemology is between objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism suggests that an objective knowledge and reality can be understood through empirical means. In contrast, subjectivism proposes that meaning exists within the subject. I adopted a 'critical realist' lens to frame the research, which is credited to Bhaskar (1978). This combines a realist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology, suggesting that there is a truth and reality but that this is understood through a subjective lens (Stutchbury, 2021).

Applying Critical Realism to the EHC Needs Assessment Process

The critical realist viewpoint holds implications for EHC needs assessment processes. Firstly, it would assume that there are 'real' implications. This might include funding and support, allocating placements to specialist schools, and providing interventions/approaches. This might also include the time it takes to go through the process and the policies that structure how it is viewed, such as the SENDCoP (2015).

However, the critical realist lens allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the EHC needs assessment system. Critical realism values individual perspectives and experiences, which are shaped by underlying social structures and forces. These influence, shape and shift the views of stakeholders and external observers (Bhaskar, 1978). Therefore, one person's 'reality' of the EHC process may contrast heavily with another person's 'reality'. This is especially given that there is an inconsistency in practice between LAs (Palikara et al., 2018) which can create different outcomes for children with similar needs (Sales & Vincent, 2018). The interaction between multiple systems also produces continual change (Willig, 2013).

A critical realist viewpoint supports that there are less explicit values and underlying mechanisms which influence reality (Sayer, 2000). Whilst the EHC needs assessment is part of a broader legal framework, the diversity within the children and young people it supports suggests it is not a 'one size fits all' programme. Therefore, it could be argued that it is understood through multiple levels of subjectivity and debate, which influences the lens through which EHC processes are portrayed, despite holding underlying and independent contexts and structures.

In considering the impact of the research, I considered which ontological and epistemological approaches might support emancipatory impact (particularly when sharing the analysis with the LA). Emancipatory approaches to research aim to challenge power imbalances and promote social change, particularly for those who might be marginalised or oppressed (Nahez, 2022; Schudel, 2022). I therefore hoped that the emancipatory impact of the research would be positive and person-centred changes to practice within SEND.

I identify with Yardley's (2000/2015) argument that "*the decisive criterion by which research must be judged is its impact and utility".* A purely 'realist' epistemology might have encouraged me to argue somewhat more conclusive claims and objective truths. This could support confidence in changing practice, given that it proposes an objective reality. However, this could risk an oversimplification of the nuances and values within the system.

Furthermore, a realist viewpoint may not hold much further probative value since LA EHC processes are already often evaluated against a somewhat realist viewpoint, such as in OFSTED SEND inspections, which make a decisive judgement based on pre-determined categories and standards. Alternatively, a fully relativist approach may have given a stronger voice to subjective viewpoints. However, this lens might assume that these viewpoints are constructions rather than cultural tools by which to theorise the effects, structures, and real powers of the EHC needs assessment system.

I felt that a critical realist approach would help to make sense of the subjective debate while theorising the impacts and mechanisms of the EHC needs assessment process. Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that critical realist research can validate the real impact of external realities as noted by participants. In this sense, critical research can be well suited to adopting an emancipatory approach (Schudel, 2022).

For example, dissatisfaction with the EHC needs assessment process might need to be seen as having underlying structures of truth and, therefore, a 'real' impact to advocate for change. However, critical realism proposes that we cannot perfectly 'uncover' an objective truth, even if it exists. Whilst a reality exists independently of the researcher and participants, any findings are mediated by language and culture (Braun and Clarke, 2022,

p170). This means that the 'truth' is obscured by subjectivity within and outside of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, whilst a critical realist thematic analysis (TA) aims to provide a compelling and coherent interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 171), the analysis is open to further interpretation and scrutiny.

Another feature of critical realism that makes it suitable for researching the EHC needs assessment system is that it appreciates the complex and open nature of systems, which cannot be easily controlled. This relates well to the EHC system. For example, interpersonal and subjective relationships exist between individuals and groups and broader structures, such as government policy and legislation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bhaskar (1978, 2008) proposed multiple layers of reality which are central to critical realism (Elder-Vass et al., 2023). These are the empirical domain, the actual domain, and the real domain. The empirical domain notes experiences and observations or interpretations of events. The actual domain represents both observable and unobservable events. The 'real' domain highlights the underlying structures and causal mechanisms studied. By exploring the empirical (i.e.) perceived data and theorising causal mechanisms, a critical realist lens can connect experiences, policy and practice within its epistemology.

Table 3:

Defining the Three Domains of Reality (Bhaskar, 2008; Elder-Vass et al., 2023)

	Real domain	**Actual domain**	**Empirical domain**
Casual mechanisms	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences	✓	✓	✓

Note. Bhaskar's (2008) three domains of reality are compared in tabular format to highlight their links to causal mechanisms, events, and experiences.

Table 4 illustrates how a critical realist lens might apply to EHC research, using the example of Atfield et al. (2023). This study researched EP workforce shortages using a mixed methods approach, including quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews/case studies. It did not explicitly note an ontological or epistemological lens. However, it explored both experiences (such as views that an EHC is seen as a critical way to meet needs) and

events (such as an increase in demand for assessments). Atfield et al. conclude an underlying 'vicious circle' between high EHCP workloads and reduced early intervention work, which further drives demand for EHC needs assessments. This conclusion might be viewed as the researchers' claim to a causal mechanism, which explains the events and experiences they gathered and described. The authors note that their claim is tentative, and that further research is required, which is compatible with the fallibility of critical realist explanations.

Table 4:

Illustrative Example of Critical Realism in Relation to EHC Research (Atfield et al., 2023)

	Real domain	**Actual domain**	**Empirical domain**
Casual mechanisms	'Vicious circle' between high EHCP workloads and reduced early intervention work (pp.104).		
Events	Increase in demand for EHC needs assessments (pp.101). 35% of LAs have less EPs in 2023 vs 2019 (pp.33).		
Experiences	Reduced job satisfaction for EPs (pp.105). EHCPs are perceived as key to support special educational needs (pp.104).		

Note. Table 4 highlights a worked example of how critical realism might apply to EHC research, specifically Atfield et al. (2023). The casual mechanism of a vicious cycle of high EHCP workloads and reduced early intervention are noted to influence increased demands for EHC needs assessment, which is experienced in a perception that EHCPs are key to support special educational needs.

However, Bhaskar's (2008) stipulation of the three domains has been criticised as confusing and redundant despite being a central concept of critical realism. Elder-Vass et al. (2023) argue that the categories of causal mechanisms, events and experiences are already sufficient, and the three domains (real, actual and empirical) do not add additional explanatory value. Whilst some critical realist approaches advocate for categorising data under real, actual and empirical domains (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021), others advocate

that applying the concepts of experiences, events and causal mechanisms are more intuitive, easier to understand, and hold more explanatory value (Elder-Vass et al., 2023; Fryer, 2022). I have therefore adopted Fryer's approach to critical realist thematic analysis which categorises data into experiences, events and casual mechanisms, which is further explained in the data analysis section.

Epistemology and Interpretation

Interpretation is mediated in several ways. This includes the research participants' understanding, and my active and interpretative role as a researcher. This is particularly important considering my role within the EHC system since I operate within the social reality I seek to understand (Pilgrim, 2014). I have previously been employed as an EHC coordinator, coordinating EHC needs assessments within LAs. I have also contributed towards EHC needs assessments as a trainee educational psychologist. Therefore, I embrace my subjectivity and position within this research as an useful tool (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020; Berger, 2015). Accordingly, I have referred to myself in the first person when referring to my role within this research, in order to situate my active role (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Further, research is also judged by consumers of the research. This means that the data is *'not the final or only arbiter of the truth'* (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 98). Therefore, it is an aim that using a critical realist lens will generate knowledge whilst acknowledging that such knowledge is influenced by social and cultural values and, therefore, contextually located.

Ethics Application and Considerations

I initially aimed to gather data from up to four cohorts, with between three and six participants per group. This included EPs, SENCOs, Parents/Carers, and LA SEND staff. I aimed to give recruitment a broader scope to aid the process and noted within the ethical application that data generation would depend on recruitment. Data was generated within one identified LA (where I am on my educational psychology training placement). I felt this would allow the research to be more coherent and inform practice within that authority. I gained agreement within the ethics application to expand to other authorities in England to support feasibility if needed. However, expanding data generation beyond the identified LA was unnecessary since 12 participants were recruited. The ethical application underwent three stages of ethics approval, and minor amendments were suggested at each stage by the ethical board and within supervision. This process began in June 2023 and was approved by the UEA's Research Ethics Committee in October 2023. The research ethics complied with the BPS (2021a, 2022b) code of ethics and conduct as well as the code of

human research ethics. The approved ethical application can be found in Appendix 1. While no significant harms were foreseen, it was acknowledged that parents and carers may wish to share emotive experiences of the EHC process and may discuss active challenges in gaining support for their child/young person. The parental participant information form therefore included signposting for parents and carers through two charities (MIND/Young Minds) and the NHS (Appendix 2). Signposting was also provided to guide parents/carers in accessing support for their child/young person through SENDIASS and Young Minds.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment and Makeup

Table 5 details the contextual information of participants, who were recruited through purposive sampling according to the research inclusion criteria. While situating the data is important (Elliott et al., 1999), this must be balanced with a duty to participants, which supports aggregation of participant circumstances in some cases, as opposed to line-by-line reporting of participants' information (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Ethically, I felt it would not be appropriate to detail each participant's exact role/experience where there are a minimal number of people within such a role, such as is the case for Newly Qualified EPs (NQEP) or Senior EPs within the identified LA, or where the specifics could lead to easy identification for those familiar to the participants. Where the information is relevant to the participant's experiences and non-identifying, this is ascribed accordingly (for example, the age category of the SENCO's school or the age category of the child/young person at the time of the EHC needs assessment).

Gatekeepers were contacted as per the approved ethical application. The Principal EP within the identified LA agreed that EPs could be contacted and invited to participate. EPs were invited to participate during team meetings, EP service days, and through e-mail. SENCOs were recruited by sharing the research outline at online SENCO network meetings and sharing the professional recruitment poster via e-mail on the LA mailing list for SENCOs. A bespoke recruitment poster for parents/carers (Appendix 3) was shared on social media through the SENDIASS team and the officially recognised local parent carer forum. Further, SENCOS and EPs were invited to share this with parents where appropriate. Three out of four parents had one child or young person who had gone through the EHC needs assessment, whilst one parent had gone through the process with three children. I did not advertise to or recruit parents/carers that I had been professionally involved with since this could be an ethical conflict and might increase power imbalances within the research and my practice as a TEP.

Table 5:

Contextual Information of Participants

Cohort	No. of participants	Criteria	Role	Experience
EPs	4	HCPC registered and working within the identified LA Contributes towards EHC needs assessments through their role	Newly Qualified EP (in first year of practice) (1) Maingrade EP (1) Specialist EP (1) Senior EP (1)	Less than one year (1) 2-5 years (2) 10+ years (1)
SENCOs	4	Working in an educational setting within the identified local authority as a SENCO Contributes towards EHC needs assessments through their role	Early Years SENCO (1) *(SENCO 3)* Primary SENCO with an attached nursery (2) *(SENCO 1 & SENCO2)* Secondary SENCO (1) *(SENCO 4)*	One year (1) Less than three years (1) 10+ years (2)
Parents	4	Parent or carer of a child/young person who has had an EHC needs assessment within the identified LA	Parent (4) Carer (0)	EHCNA during primary school (2) *(Parent 2 & Parent 4)* EHCNA during secondary school (2) *(Parent 1 & Parent 3)*
				EHCNA within the last year (3) *(Parent 1, Parent 2, & Parent 3)* EHCNA within last 2 years (1) *(Parent 4)*

Note. The contextual information of participants is presented in a tabular form, outlining the number of participants in each cohort, the inclusion criteria, and contextual information including roles/experience.

Parent occupations were not directly elicited as part of the process. However, two participants volunteered that they held or previously held professional roles within the education sector. Whilst interviews were open to both parents and carers, to my knowledge, no carers volunteered. I was approached by two parents who had not yet had an EHC needs assessment but wanted to share their views about SEND support or being refused an EHC needs assessment. It was explained that the criteria required that their child/young person had already had an EHC needs assessment, and signposting was provided to advocacy services.

SEND officers in the identified LA were invited to participate via e-mail/poster recruitment in agreement with the Deputy Head of SEND Services. However, only one expression of interest was received. This meant that data from this cohort was not gathered. Whilst this may have been for many reasons, one possibility might be the recent poor OFSTED inspection and associated workload. Since the research already had 12 participants from three other cohorts, I felt this was sufficient to proceed. I have reflected further on the recruitment process and challenges within the reflective chapter.

Data Generation

As per Braun & Clarke's (2024) reflexive thematic analysis reporting guidelines (RTARG), I have referred to 'data generation' rather than 'data collection'. This is because data does not pre-exist as something which can be collected without the active role of the researcher in 'generating' the data. One-to-one interviews were conducted between January 2024 and May 2024. Participants were advised that the interview would likely take around 45 minutes. Participants were given the choice of face-to-face interviews or remote interviews via video link, with all participants opting to conduct interviews remotely via Microsoft Teams. I provided this choice to support recruitment and allow participants to use their chosen method. Offering both choices was also purposeful in encouraging participants with health conditions and/or disabilities to participate since they may require the choice. Further, in-person interviews would allow those less confident with technology to participate. Pragmatically, the use of remote interviews also allowed for the larger and rural geographical area of the authority to be covered in a timely manner.

One-to-one interviews were selected as the best fit for several reasons. Firstly, this made the most sense for parents/carers who wished to tell their stories in depth. One-to-one interviews allowed me to focus on each participant's experiences and chronology without having to facilitate the group dynamic of a focus group. It also allowed participants a higher level of confidentiality than in focus groups (Willig, 2013).

Given the potentially emotive and personal nature of the interviews, parent participants were advised that we could allow additional time to share their stories and views if they needed longer. Two parent interviews went slightly over an hour, although the longest was almost two hours, which reflects the unpredictability of interview approaches to data generation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). One parent interview was within the 45-minute allocated timeslot. The EP and SENCO interviews lasted for between 35 minutes and an hour.

A semi-structured interview format was employed (Appendix 4). A different interview guide was tailored for each cohort, although they had common themes and overlapping areas (for example, asking about the perceived impact of the EHCNA system). Professional participants were asked to comment on the impact for different cohorts they had worked with, whilst parents were asked to comment on how the process had worked for their child/children and themselves.

Reflective notes were taken following each interview, and the follow-up points/questions were refined. A semi-structured interview guide was chosen as the most appropriate 'hybrid' option because it would support exploring key identified themes whilst allowing participants to contribute to setting the agenda of the interviews. It was also felt that a semi-structured approach would allow the exploration of interesting points in more detail through follow-up questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Adams, 2015). Given that at least three participants were known to have overlapping roles (for example, two parents working in education/one SENCO who was also a parent of a child with an EHCP), participants were asked to share experiences related to the cohort to which they had been recruited. I have reflected on this within the reflective chapter.

The previous literature review and my experiences as a TEP and EHC coordinator influenced the development of the semi-structured interviews guides and the research questions. For example, I considered the applicability of psychological theories within the EHCNA process. This included social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in relation to how participants might identify their own role and the role of others. I also considered self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000) in considering each participant groups needs for autonomy, mastery, and relatedness. I also considered Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, 1978) when thinking about how professionals gather children

and young people's views. I also considered the models featured within the literature review, including Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, which encouraged me to consider how professionals might support children and young people's decision making. Finally, I also considered Frost's (2005) levels of partnership when considering how different professionals worked together.

Questions were not always asked linearly to allow for a natural flow and to provide participants with choice and control in sharing their views. Some topics were answered naturally through conversation, although participants were still prompted with each question in case they had further contributions. Interview dates were dispersed between the three cohort groups. This meant that data was gathered from each participant group throughout, rather than taking a fixed approach of interviewing each cohort before moving on to the next. This was purposeful as it allowed adjusting the semi-structured guide and prompts, dependent on responses. This meant that the interviews were continually refined and that different cohorts could comment on other participant groups' general responses. It was also an efficient way to generate data since I could be flexible around participants' availability instead of waiting to finish interviews with another cohort.

All interviews were video recorded on Microsoft Teams, although participants had the option of not turning their cameras on to encourage autonomy and comfort. Two participants exercised this option, although one of these was due to technological difficulties. Microsoft Teams completed the initial transcription, although I checked and corrected transcripts to ensure accuracy (including spelling and punctuation) while listening to the recordings. This also aided data familiarisation. The transcripts were 'cleaned up' (Braun & Clarke, 2024) for readability which meant that vocalisations (i.e. ~~'um', 'ah'~~) and individual word repetitions were removed (i.e. 'I think that ~~that~~').

Data Analysis

Transition from Realist Analysis to Reflexive Thematic Analysis. I had originally intended to analyse the data using a realist analysis framework (Pawson & Tilley, 2006). This approach aims to explore the relevant contexts and mechanisms which influence outcomes, resulting in a Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) hypothesis.

However, I reflected early on into the data analysis process that this style of analysis encouraged me to lean to an overly technical and formulaic approach to the data, rather than an immersive one.

I therefore felt this risked making generalisations, rather than centring participants' voices within the research. I also noted that prior research had used realist analysis to explore EHC

needs assessment processes (Redwood, 2015), and I therefore felt that another approach might add a more novel understanding of the data. The data was therefore analysed via a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and critical realist thematic analysis (Fryer, 2022).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 171) note that critical realist approaches to thematic analysis (TA) explore situated and interpreted realities. Interpretation is reached through multiple lenses. Firstly, the participants themselves speak to their interpretations. This means that the data provided by participants is already mediated and shaped by their interpreted reality (Willig, 2013). As a researcher, I have also further interpreted the data.

Table 6 outlines the six steps of RTA. However, these steps alone do not adequately capture the spirit of RTA because “the process is not the method” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 6). Instead, it requires applying the process to broader values, assumptions, and practices. The steps are cyclical as illustrated. I therefore moved back and forth within the process.

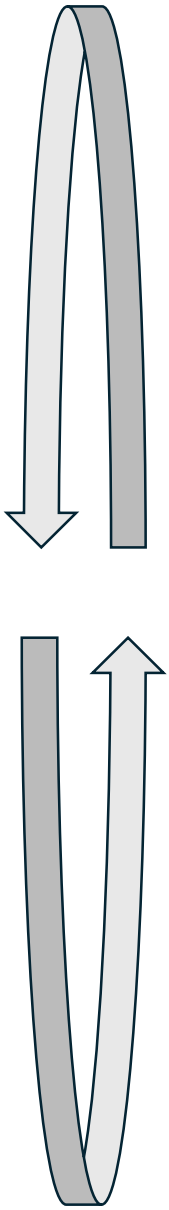
Braun & Clarke (2022, pp. 125) advocate against the need to justify the use of RTA *against* other methods since this suggests there is always one ideal method for research, which may not be the case. However, it is essential to justify *how and why* RTA is well-matched to the research questions. Braun & Clarke (2022, pp. 236) outline how RTA is ‘closer to a method’ than a methodology, allowing for theoretical flexibility.

RTA is sensitive to the situated social and political context of research and practice (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 211), which aligns with the concerns of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2016; Bergene, 2007). Further, RTA analyses can produce actionable outcomes that inform policy (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 261), which was essential to my aim of adopting an emancipatory approach.

Coding. All participant coding was jointly compiled since RTA aims to create themes that capture a wide range of data with a shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 97). Further, this allowed for individual experiences to be compared and contrasted with the systemic context for practice. Under a SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) this also allowed me to consider where group views were distinctive or united. Jointly compiling data aided the exploration of the broader mechanisms and events, suiting a critical realist lens. However, some codes were found exclusively within a participant group; for example, *‘the EP feeling uncomfortable with the expert model’* reflected the EPs professional view of their role.

Table 6:

Reflexive Thematic Analysis Steps (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

1. Dataset familiarisation	I initially listened to the recordings while checking transcripts for accuracy. Following this, transcripts were read individually, and key reflections were noted and compared to the reflective notes taken at the time of the interview. This included reflecting on my previous professional and personal experiences.	**Cyclical nature** 
2. Data coding	I tagged data using both semantic and latent coding, using Microsoft word. Transcripts were put into two tables with the data on the left-hand side, and space for codes on the right-hand side. Codes were applied to both short quotes and whole sentences/paragraphs. Whilst I held in mind the stipulated research questions, an inclusive approach was taken, and data that did not specifically answer the research questions were included where I felt it might have value to the analysis and expansion of the research questions. Data that did not appear to hold any relevance was not tagged with a code. Codes were revisited to check for meaning and areas of overlap, which led to codes being combined/reworded. 571 codes were initially generated from the 12 interviews, which was reduced to 534 codes after re-coding.	
3. Initial theme generation **4. Theme development and review** **5. Theme refining, development and naming**	Codes were grouped electronically on Microsoft word into themes/subthemes, which involved a cyclical and reiterative process. Table 7 highlights a final worked example of thematic development. Reflective memos were used to consider my active involvement in theme generation. Mind mapping software was used to visualise the potential themes/subthemes, which again was a reiterative process (https://www.mindmup.com). Appendix 5 details an initial mind map of potential themes and subthemes.	
6. Write up	Tagged data was grouped electronically on Microsoft word into the respective theme/subtheme. This required adjustments during the write up stage where the themes/subthemes developed further. The final RTA themes, subthemes and codes are listed in Appendix 6.	

Note. The six stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) are presented, with contextual details of how this was applied within the research. The final column indicates the cyclical nature of the data analysis, whereby the researcher moved back and forward between stages throughout.

Both semantic and latent coding were employed. Semantic coding is participant-driven and more descriptive, staying closer to the explicit meanings of participants. For example, the code "going against the tide" was a direct participant quote. Under a critical realist lens, this allowed the 'empirical domain' to be incorporated since it relayed the perceptions and observations of participants. It also allowed the data to be influenced in an inductive sense, whereby the data influenced knowledge generation. Latent coding refers to a more implicit conceptual interpretation of the data. This can include deductive approaches to coding, which are driven by the researcher's knowledge. Incorporating latent coding allowed me to add my theoretical understanding and subjectivity. Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 55) note that semantic and latent coding are two ends of a spectrum rather than a binary choice. Therefore, not all codes will neatly fit into one category, and some codes will represent the merging of participant and researcher meanings. This is particularly relevant within a critical realist approach since it prompts the researcher to move beyond the 'empirical domain' (observations) and into the 'actual' and 'real' domains, which include the underlying structures behind individual experiences (Bhaskar, 1978, 2008).

Duplicate codes with the same or very similar semantic meanings were collapsed into a single code to aid theme generation and development. For example, *'not understanding the appeal process'* absorbed the code *'parents unsure of how the appeal process works'.* In these instances, I returned to the transcripts to ensure that updated codes reflected participant comments. This reduced 571 codes down to 534. In some cases, codes elaborated on an important distinction and did not need to be merged. For example, one code reflected that *'EHC is an important document'*, compared to *'EHC can be an important document to note emergency protocols'*. The latter focused on a specific concern around health protocols rather than the educational importance of the EHC plan. Another example would be the code *'EP advice challenged by LA'* vs *'my role is not to write what you think you can offer'*. Both relate to EP advice being challenged, although the latter added further value as it spoke about how an EP responded to being challenged by the LA. Therefore, these codes remained independent.

Some codes were elaborated or rewritten for clarity. For example, the code 'easier to apply online' captured some participants' views that applying for an EHC assessment online was easier. However, the initial code was shorthand and did not clearly capture the fact that it was about applying for an EHC needs assessment. The code was, therefore, renamed 'It's easier to apply for an EHCNA online'.

Further, idiosyncratic codes were noted accordingly so that this could be considered (For example, codes that were raised by a single participant and appeared unique to their

circumstances). Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 55) note that as a qualitative methodology, RTA is not necessarily concerned with measuring the number of times a code is featured since it may still add thematic value. This contrasts with some forms of content analysis, which record the number of times a code features within a dataset (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). While a code may be unique, it may form part of a larger pattern when considered under a theme. Therefore, these codes were not excluded at this stage but instead considered in terms of their contribution to theme generation in steps three and four. The use of inter-rater reliability or a pre-determined codebook or can be considered problematic within RTA due to a positivist lens (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 277), as well as being problematic for the same reason within critical realist approaches to TA which believe in the fallible nature of knowledge production (Bhaskar, 2008; Fryer, 2022). Therefore, I managed the coding process independently but reflexively through journalling and memos.

Thematic Development. In RTA, themes have distinct central organising concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2024). I avoided developing single themes in relation to specific research questions since I acknowledge that this can hinder deeper analysis and the connections between questions (Braun & Clarke, pp. 89, 2024). Some themes represent contradictions within the data. Whilst individual themes in RTA are usually coherent in their point, contradiction can appear when the tension or contradiction is what the central organising concept is about, and the focus of the tension is a key theme (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 108). This is useful for exploring dichotomies and tensions within the data.

Within RTA, the use of subthemes is possible but should be justified and used purposefully (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 88) since an overreliance can create a fragmented analysis (Trainor & Bundon, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this instance, a number of subthemes formed part of the thematic map to explain better the tensions and contradictions within themes that highlight tensions and require further explanation. A higher number of subthemes can be used depending on the length of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 89). I have reflected on the number of subthemes within my reflective chapter.

Further, it should be noted that the final thematic map presents both areas of distinction as well as areas of overlap. For example, subtheme G discussed the role of co-production with respect to advocacy and adversary within the EHC needs assessment process. However, this also related to person-centred practices discussed in theme 1, since co-production may be linked to person-centred practices. Theme 3 also considered the distinct role of digital tools within the EHC needs assessment process, however also considered the need for person-centred practices to be embedded within digital methods,

therefore having some area of overlap with theme 1. Whilst I aimed to provide distinct thematic areas, I note that some of the topics/themes (such as person-centred practices) were important to consider across multiple themes and subthemes.

Table 7:

Worked Example of Thematic Development

Example code	**Thematic development**
Labels are not always helpful.	Going against the tide without a diagnosis.
Lack of 'human' elements to communication.	Digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment process.
Lack of choices around remote assessment.	Digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment process.
Lack of clarity on available support.	Lack of clarity around how children move in/out of services.
Lack of communication between LA departments.	It was the LA vs the LA.
Lack of co-production driving tribunals and dissatisfaction.	Co-production, we don't really do it yet.
Lack of diagnosis means school need to explain the impact on child's life more so.	Going against the tide without a diagnosis.
Lack of external agencies for parents.	Too little, too late.
Lack of face-to-face contact.	Digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment process

Note. Table 7 highlights a worked example of the list of codes, and the thematic development of each code into themes and subthemes.

A Critical Realist Lens to Thematic Analysis

Whilst RTA can produce actionable outcomes by itself, I have chosen to also complement this with a critical realist thematic framework of mechanisms, events, and experiences, as outlined by Fryer (2022). My intention behind this is to connect the wider context for EHC practice to the data noted within the LA I have researched, since the noted 'tentative mechanisms' were drawn from both my interpretation of the data, in addition to wider literature and theoretical influences that I felt held relevance to the events and experiences noted within the data analysis. Therefore, some mechanisms were rooted in my understanding from wider references of relevance, while some were generated directly from

the data. For example, figure 13 illustrates tentative mechanisms from the wider literature base, including empirical research suggesting that social and emotional needs are harder to unpick and objectively evidence (Boesley & Crane, 2018). However, the data analysis also led me to suggest that social and emotional needs were seen as less critical for educational progress than other needs, and this was therefore included as a tentative mechanism.

As Braun & Clarke (2022, p163/254) note, combining methodologies requires careful and transparent consideration of ontology and epistemology. There are some tensions when considering the 'realist' elements of critical realism within RTA. An important tension is that critical realist research intends to offer tentative explanations of phenomena (Bhaskar, 2008), which RTA does not always capture well (Fryer, 2022). This is despite critical realism being described as one of the most popular approaches to RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp.189). Critical realism considers it a central tenant that research tentatively offers explanatory value (Bhaskar, 2008). Fryer's model supports the consideration of subjective experiences and visually connects these to the broader contexts and mechanisms important within critical realism, which therefore tentatively offers explanatory value. The critical TA data analysis method therefore supported the data analysis to ensure adherence to the adopted epistemological and ontological positions of this research. Finally, I also felt that the visual presentation of Fryer's framework could support accessible and insightful dissemination of the research. Figure 8 outlines the steps of data generation and analysis.

Figure 8:

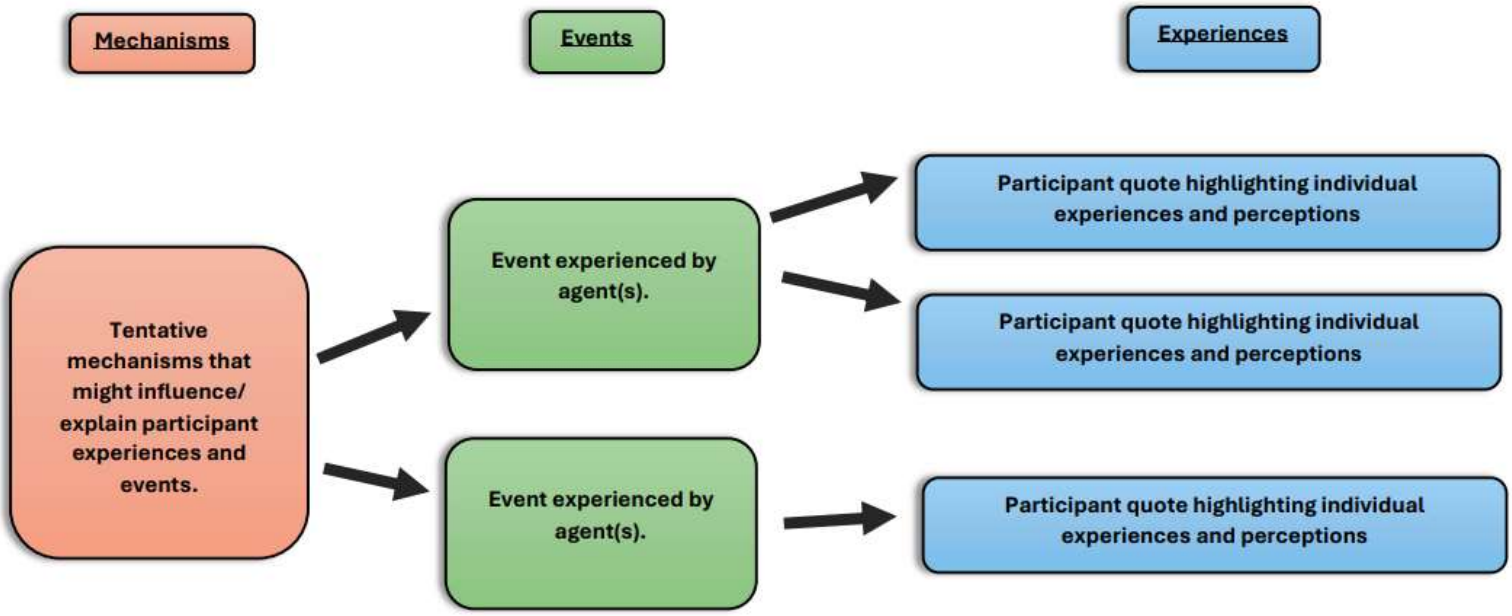
Data Generation and Analysis Steps

Note. The main steps of data generation and analysis are illustrated, beginning with the data collection method (semi-structured interviews) and the two styles of data analysis used (Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2022 / Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Fryer, 2022).

Figure 9 outlines Fryer's approach to critical realist thematic analysis. Following an RTA analysis to offer a rich picture, I reviewed the codes for each theme to generate potential mechanisms, events and experiences.

Figure 9:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis Framework (Adapted from Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen 2021).



Note. The key analytic points of the Critical Realist Thematic Analysis Framework (Fryer, 2022) are broken down into three key areas, including mechanisms (shaded in orange), events (shaded in green), and experiences (shaded in blue). Arrows show the connections between participants experiences, events, and mechanisms.

Quality Within Qualitative Research

Braun & Clarke note that 'generic' or 'universal' quality criteria for qualitative research, such as Elliott et al. (1999), can be problematic when applied to RTA without further consideration (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 277). For example, they do not necessarily account for the theoretical assumptions of different methodologies within qualitative research (Reicher, 2000). However, general principles can be helpful, particularly when open-ended and flexible, such as Yardley's (2000, 2015) principles of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact/importance.

Braun & Clarke (2024) developed the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). This was in response to concerns about the quality of published RTA articles, noting methodological incoherence and a need for more transparency. The RTARG was also developed in response to the incompatibility of other qualitative checklists to RTA.

Braun and Clarke (2024) therefore propose using the RTARG to assess the quality of RTA research. The RTARG includes consideration of the introduction, methodology, analysis, and reporting. I have therefore used the RTARG to self-assess the quality of the research, which can be found in the reflective chapter. RTA does not offer a 'rulebook' but a recipe guide that can be adapted. This includes combining data analysis methods where there is a coherent and transparent rationale. It also considers ontological and epistemological positioning, the theoretical 'fit' of methods, and purposeful action (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2017, p11, cited in Braun & Clarke 2022, pp. 254). As I have adopted a critical realist lens for the research, I have therefore reflected further on the RTARG's applicability to critical realism within the reflective chapter.

Research Questions

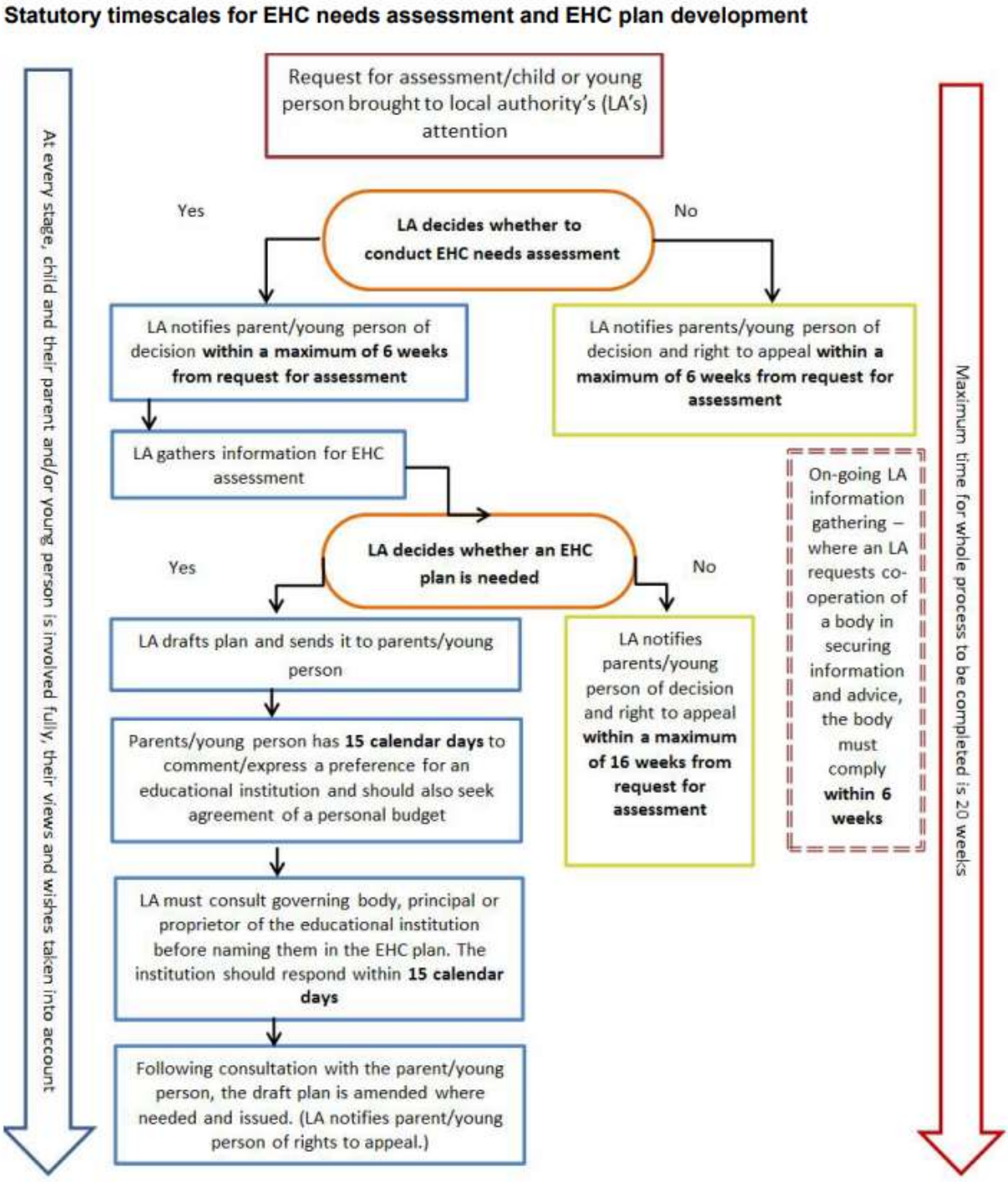
What might be the important mechanisms that influence the EHC needs assessment process within the identified local authority, and how are these related to the experiences of parents, SENCOs, and EPs? In particular:

> **RQ1)** Are there any factors that create inequalities for children and young people within the assessment process, and if so, who and how might this impact?
>
> **RQ2)** What role do (or could) parents and SENCOs play within the EHC needs assessment, and what factors may influence their involvement?
>
> **RQ3)** What contribution do (or could) educational psychologists make to the process, and which factors may influence the success of their involvement?

An outline of the EHC assessment process is provided for informational purposes in Figure 10.

Figure 10:

Statutory Process for EHC Needs Assessment and EHC Plan Development (SENDCoP, DfE, pp.154)



Note. The statutory timescales, decision points and processes for EHC needs assessments are depicted. The first stage is deciding whether an EHC needs assessment is required. If agreed, an assessment is then followed by a decision on whether an EHC plan is need.

Analysis and Discussion

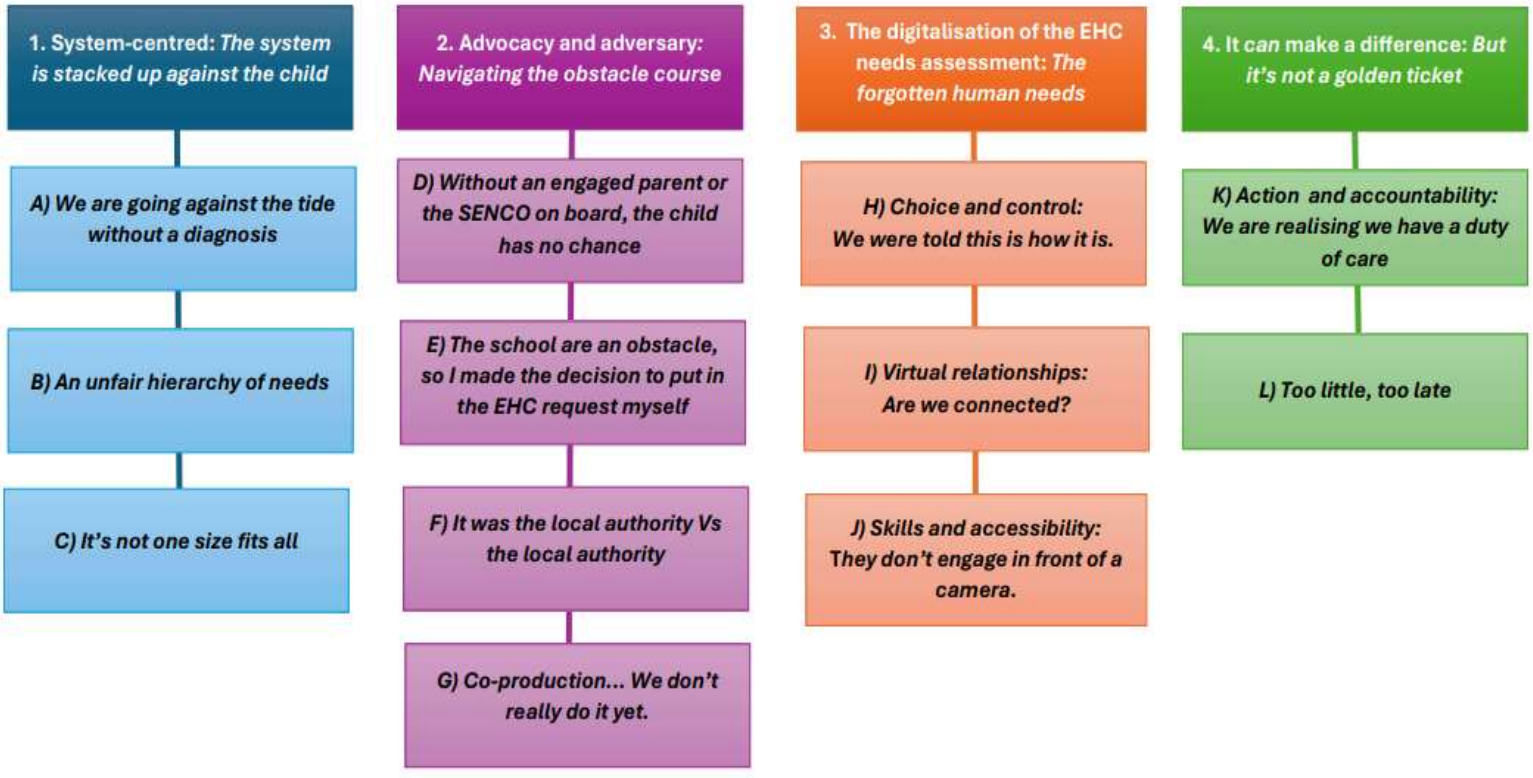
Figure 11 illustrates the key themes developed through the RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) process. The key themes relate to the dominance of a system-centred model, the need for advocacy and adversary within the process, the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment, and the impact of the process as whole.

A critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021) was employed to complement the RTA. Therefore, themes are concluded with a visual summary to suggest tentative mechanisms that influence and underly the events and experiences noted by participants within the EHC needs assessment process. This includes the noted links to the wider literature for SEND practice within the UK, and relevant psychological theory/research. This framework was previously highlighted in Figure 9.

The discussion points relevant to this research have been integrated within the analysis section, as is suggested within RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024), since this can enrich the analytic narrative and contextualise meaning. Finally, a summary is offered which revisits the original research questions, including implications for parents, SENCOs, EPs, and the identified LA.

Figure 11:

The Rich Picture: Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the EHC Needs Assessment Process



Note. Overarching themes are numerically represented, with sub-themes alphabetically categorised. Each overarching theme is colour coded to show the relationship with sub-themes.

Theme One: System-Centred: The System is Stacked up Against the Child.

This theme speaks to the conflicts of embodying a person-centred approach against the backdrop of a complex EHC needs assessment system. Within this analysis, professionals and parents alike advocated the need for a person-centred journey, although equally noted this quite often doesn't happen. Whilst capacity is often raised as an important barrier for person-centred practice, the analysis also suggested dominant narratives and practices which exist to maintain and protect the structural integrity and needs of a resource allocation system, rather than the needs of children and young people.

Whilst the EHC needs assessment is the focus of this analysis, it is acknowledged that there are a collection of interconnected systems surrounding children and young people, including parents, schools, as well as local and national policy, which have the power to influence the EHC system and its ability to uphold an equitable and fair model.

Subtheme A: We are Going Against the Tide Without a Diagnosis. The weight of diagnoses was noted by many participants to be an important factor in securing and negotiating the EHCNA process. In some instances, this was felt to be a natural or logical course of action, since it provided for a thorough understanding of the child or young person's condition, which relied on professional expertise and knowledge. In this instance, diagnosis was framed as the first and critical step in securing educational provision, as well as providing an explanatory understanding.

> ***Parent 3:*** *What we wanted to do is understand our child. That's what a diagnosis will start to unpick. I think for me that had to start with a professional saying this is what you are dealing with.*
>
> *Once you've got that step out of the way…then you've got a level playing field where you can assess what the educational arm needs to have.*

This approach appears to be promoted as best practice by the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015), which states that:

> ***5.29*** *'Where there are concerns, there should be an assessment to determine whether there are any causal factors such as underlying learning or communication difficulty'.*

However, the Children & Families Act (2014, 36.8) does not state that such an assessment or diagnosis is a pre-requisite for an EHCNA, but instead sets a threshold that a child or young person *may* have special educational needs which *may* require provision through an EHCP. Despite this, many participants often sensed that children and young people without a diagnostic explanation would be at an automatic disadvantage in accessing the EHCNA process.

> **SENCO 3:** *We're realising in the applications we make, that the children that haven't got a diagnosis are the ones that get refused. We've worked that out ourselves.*

> **SENCO 4:** *Having a diagnosis makes you significantly more likely to get you an EHCP… It does make a real difference.*

While some participants acknowledged the possible insight and understanding that a diagnosis was felt to bring, it was also framed as a bureaucratic burden in contrast to a person-centred model, which inhibited the voice of adults close to the child. Whilst many parents held a concern pre-diagnosis, their observations and views were frequently framed as less influential and powerful than a professional. This is despite the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) stipulating that *'parents know their children best, and it is important that all practitioners listen and understand when children express concerns about their child's development'.*

> **Parent 1:** *I kept going to the school and saying that there's something wrong… It's like they didn't even realise there was a problem. The school didn't think anything was wrong…but I'd always known my child is different.*

> ***Parent 2:*** *Mum's word doesn't mean diddly squat. When a professional says it, it's referenced. And that's just really, really clear, the entire bureaucracy is based on medical evidence. Without that piece of paper which says X Y and Z, you don't get any support.*

SENCOs also described feeling disempowered when representing the needs of the child to the LA without a diagnosis. Despite their specialised role focused on supporting children's educational needs, the language and experiences of participants suggested they felt discredited when identifying a need and requesting support, without having a diagnosis to back it up. For example, SENCO 1 rhetorically asks *"who am I"* when comparing their knowledge to a paediatrician or EP, suggesting an imbalance of power and status in their role in comparison to other professionals.

> **SENCO 4:** *There have been times when I have been told 'this is only your judgement'.*

> **SENCO 1:** *A diagnosis does give you a stronger case. Where they haven't had a diagnosis, I have had to go to appeal. I could say this child presents as ASD, but unless like an EP or a paediatrician has agreed… then who am I? You know, it's like schools don't know anything.*

Further, SENCOs were also at times portrayed as less trusted to understand a child's needs and adaptations than professional or medical advice. **SENCO 3** describes identifying children in an early years setting who were felt to need additional support, although feeling that their opinions were not as acceptable as advice from other professionals, prompting medical or educational intervention and assessment. EPs also reflected on their perceived status as *'the expert'* within the EHCNA process, noticing this could create power imbalances. From a theoretical perspective, the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that SENCOs perceived a clear separation in their identity in comparison to other professionals.

> **SENCO 3:** *They seem to be accepting from a professional that there was something that needs addressing, rather than us pointing out, yes… [this child] does need support above and beyond everyone else.*

> **EP 4:** *I think they're more receptive to an EP saying it than they might be to anyone else saying it possibly. And there's something there about power there isn't there. And their perception of us as professionals.*

Aside from diagnosis, the presence of external expertise was also framed as gatekeeping the EHC needs assessment. SENCOs also described how a lack of prior external involvement could hold a child back from being accepted for an EHC needs assessment, despite not being a legal requirement. While many SENCOs sought additional advice to support the child and school, this at times was also portrayed as a tick-box exercise, sometimes holding little expectation that external advice could lead to any improvement for a child's situation. In this sense, SENCOs had to submit to the needs of the system in order to support children and young people, perhaps experiencing a lack of autonomy in the EHCNA process.

> **SENCO 4:** *We have to jump through every single hoop before we do the application. One of the things we were challenged on is that we hadn't done a [specialist teacher] referral. There are occasions we go in kind of knowing we're doing [an external referral] to tick a box and gather evidence…. We had to essentially put [it] in knowing it wouldn't work.*

Many parents described how schools would often request medical evidence when they had requested support for their child. However, this could also lead to parents feeling

ping-ponged between school and health, suggesting a lack of clarity as to the roles of schools and health services. This is interesting given that while SENCOs often appeared to feel unfairly discredited when identifying a child with needs but without a diagnosis, parents were also equally challenged when requesting support from the school without medical evidence.

> **Parent 1:** *The school say go to the GP, the GP say go to the school. I tried my GP because he hasn't been in school for two weeks. And then she [the GP] said 'I can't help you, I don't know what you expect me to do'.*
>
> **SENCO 3***: I have parents coming to me saying my GP couldn't [complete a referral]. I have to say to them… I'm sorry… your GP is either misinformed or is lying to you.*
>
> **Parent 2:** *The schools are all very much a case of… go to your GP, ask your GP for evidence.*

One EP considered the structural limits and boundaries of the EHCP system and referred to *'decision points'* around whether to assess or issue an EHCP, whereby panels will consider the evidence available to them.

> **EP 4:** *The way the system is set up and the decision points along that system… unfortunately, having a diagnosis will potentially smooth the process…If a SENCO can say here's a child with autism, then people understand that they know what that probably means… but it's like a sort of shortcut, isn't it?*

The comparison of a diagnosis to a *'shortcut'* in a decision point appears to imply a diminished responsibility on getting to know the individual needs and the person, instead relying on a medicalised model to indicate who does and does not require additional support. Diagnosis in this way is portrayed as a quick way to make decisions on a child's EHC needs assessment, despite blanket labels often concealing the individual diversity of each child and young person's needs. (Foroni & Rothbart, 2011, 2013).

Despite a view that funding was linked to diagnosis, both EPs and SENCOs were keen to highlight that they wanted to support the child regardless of their diagnosis, to the extent possible within their role.

> **SENCO 2:** *We always put the provision in whether they've got the diagnosis or not, because that's, you know, that's really important.*
>
> **EP 4:** *Regardless of the label or the diagnosis, I just need to create and unpick a picture of what is, you know, working for them, what's not working for them.*

However, the EHC decision making process was seen as much more rigid, and less likely to take account of the whole person. Some SENCOs spoke to the differences of the advice of the LA and the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) (*that a diagnosis is not necessary for an EHC needs assessment*) and the contrasting experiences (*it does makes a difference).* In the view of some participants, this suggested a discord between observed advice and their experiences. In terms of the wider literature, Boyle & Lauchlan (2017) noted that funding in education authorities is '*inextricably linked to a diagnosis'*, which was a viewpoint supported by many participants.

> **SENCO 2:** *It does make a difference. They [the LA] say it doesn't, and they always say oh no, you just treat the child as though they've got ADHD or ASD…they don't need a diagnosis. But actually, as soon as you add those reports on to the EHCP form, it gives it so much more weighting.*

SENCO 2 speaks to an attitude from the LA to treat the child as if they had a diagnosis, for example, as if they had autism or ADHD. However, this further suggests a bias towards diagnosis within the EHC process, since children are expected to respond to provision based on their assumed diagnosis, rather than considering that different children with the same diagnosis may require drastically different support. Under a SIT lens (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this might suggest an exaggeration of the similarities of children within a diagnostic category.

One EP recalled working with a child who did not have a diagnosis and likened trying to get them through the EHC process as *"going against the tide",* which conjures an imagery of acting against the dominant structural expectations of the system. Further, diagnostic assessment was sometimes framed as mediatory act to settle disputes about a child's needs, either between professionals, or between parents and professionals.

> **EP 1:** *You know, the system is stacked up against this child to have had all the diagnostics… We are going against the tide here…… it was all SEMH and there was no diagnosis.*
>
> *Eventually we got it for him…it took all that doing and about a year, just to get to the [EHC] request. That wasn't the SENCO saying that, the SENCO was against it.*

I was particularly drawn to the choice of two analogies employed here. The first being a system which is *"stacked up"* against the child, suggesting inherent power imbalances of the child and young person against the LA. Further, illustrating a force of nature such as *"the tide"* suggests that trying to resist the medicalised model is like trying to resist a powerful force. From a critical realist lens, an analogy linked to a natural phenomenon prompts

consideration of ontology and realism, perhaps encouraging a view that there is a ‘real force’ that exists and frames experiences within the EHC process (i.e. a medicalised model).

At an economic level, this view appeared to place a considerable amount of pressure on parents and schools to seek private assessment or healthcare leading up to the process, to formally evidence and ‘legitimise’ the needs of children and young people, as was also noted within statutory processes by Starkie (2024). Without this, it was felt that the child would fall through the cracks and go missing within the system, particularly in the context of long waiting lists.

> **SENCO 2:** *They said to the parent he needs an EP assessment, which I thought was strange given that [it’s] part of the [EHC] assessment. So, we said, ok, we’ll do a private one. And then they accepted him straight away for the EHC assessment.*

External services to support parents and schools were noted by participants to be under intense stress, driving schools and parents to reach out for private support. Where children and young people were referred to public services, they were sometimes rejected which further drove the need to seek private advice. Seeking such support was often a very purposeful step given the expense, although enabled parents and schools to feel that the child was progressing through the system in some way, and perhaps overcome a sense of lost control that came from a lack of external support.

> **SENCO 2:** *We're finding the only way we can get support for this little boy is if we pay for it. The reason we did that was because all the free stuff were saying no to us. We applied for [specialist teacher support] but we're not being accepted for these things.*

> **Parent 3:** *[Diagnosis] is much too long of a process. We were really fortunate by stumbling almost onto the [private] consultant psychiatrist… Not that that’s not a lot of money to most people and to us, but that's a drop in the ocean in relation to the results.*

Whilst seeking private support was seen as a positive step in that it could secure results or desired outcomes, some participants reflected on the discomfort they experienced around inequity, given that not everyone could afford it. However, in this sense, both schools and parents were driven to take whichever action they could for the child and young person, and therefore seeking private support was ultimately felt to be justified and necessary to avoid the child being failed within the EHC system. Indeed, the local area OFSTED SEND inspection (2023) concluded *“the reality that parents experience is that their children get lost*

in the system and fall through the cracks", which closely mirrored the expectations of Parent 4.

> **Parent 4:** *We've done a lot of it privately… which equitably doesn't feel very right, but for my child I needed to do it. Had we not have…he'd have fallen through all the cracks. We took some soul searching, because I think the system should be open to all. We were just fortunate enough that we could take that avenue.*

As well as securing quicker access to professional support, it was sometimes felt that private services could provide a higher quality of involvement and advice. The higher quality cited included a more detailed description of needs and more robust specificity on required provision. Questions were raised in relation to the impartiality of advice givers, with some participants feeling that LA EPs were inherently conflicted due to their employment within the LA, hence a noted contrast in recommendations when compared with private EP reports.

> **SENCO 2:** *So definitely if we get those private EPS in, they definitely give the weighting… because it's got it all there…they cover everything.*

> **Parent 2:** *Every single…council EP report I have had has been vague and nondescript. I have had private EP reports for all three of them. In complete contrast, those have been very, very specific…*

Despite seeking private services due to a perception of quality and timeliness, one parent raised the point that it was hard to know exactly what you would be getting from a private service, and whether they would meet standardised levels of care. This could be important if a private report was rejected by the NHS or LA.

> **Parent 3:** *There's a huge trap there for parents, because you don't know whether you're going to somebody who is following the NICE guidelines or isn't, you just don't know….The diagnosis was eventually accepted by the NHS, but that took the best part of a year.*

However, some parents felt that while diagnoses and labels could serve a purpose of gaining support, this might not have been necessary if the support was provided initially.

> **Parent 2:** *It's a shame so many parents are having to spend time and money to get their children diagnosed, when actually they don't necessarily need that diagnosis… If their needs were just recognised and supported, they wouldn't get to that point of desperation.*

> **Parent 4:** *I'm not a label hunter. I don't think we need any more labels, particularly for my son.*

This perhaps suggests an appetite for a social model of disability. A social model of disability considers the way society is organised creates oppressive barriers to inclusion (Lawson & Beckett, 2020), a model which is adopted by the Children with Disabilities Council (CDC) in the UK. Some participants also noted that a diagnosis can be poorly received or understood by children and young people. SENCO 3, for example, questions the use of labels for children at a young age. By advocating '*let them be children',* the implication is a view that a label takes away from childhood. At times, some children were also seen as reluctant to engage with the support that was recommended following a diagnosis, perhaps for a fear of stigma. This might suggest a resistance to social categorisation under the SIT lens.

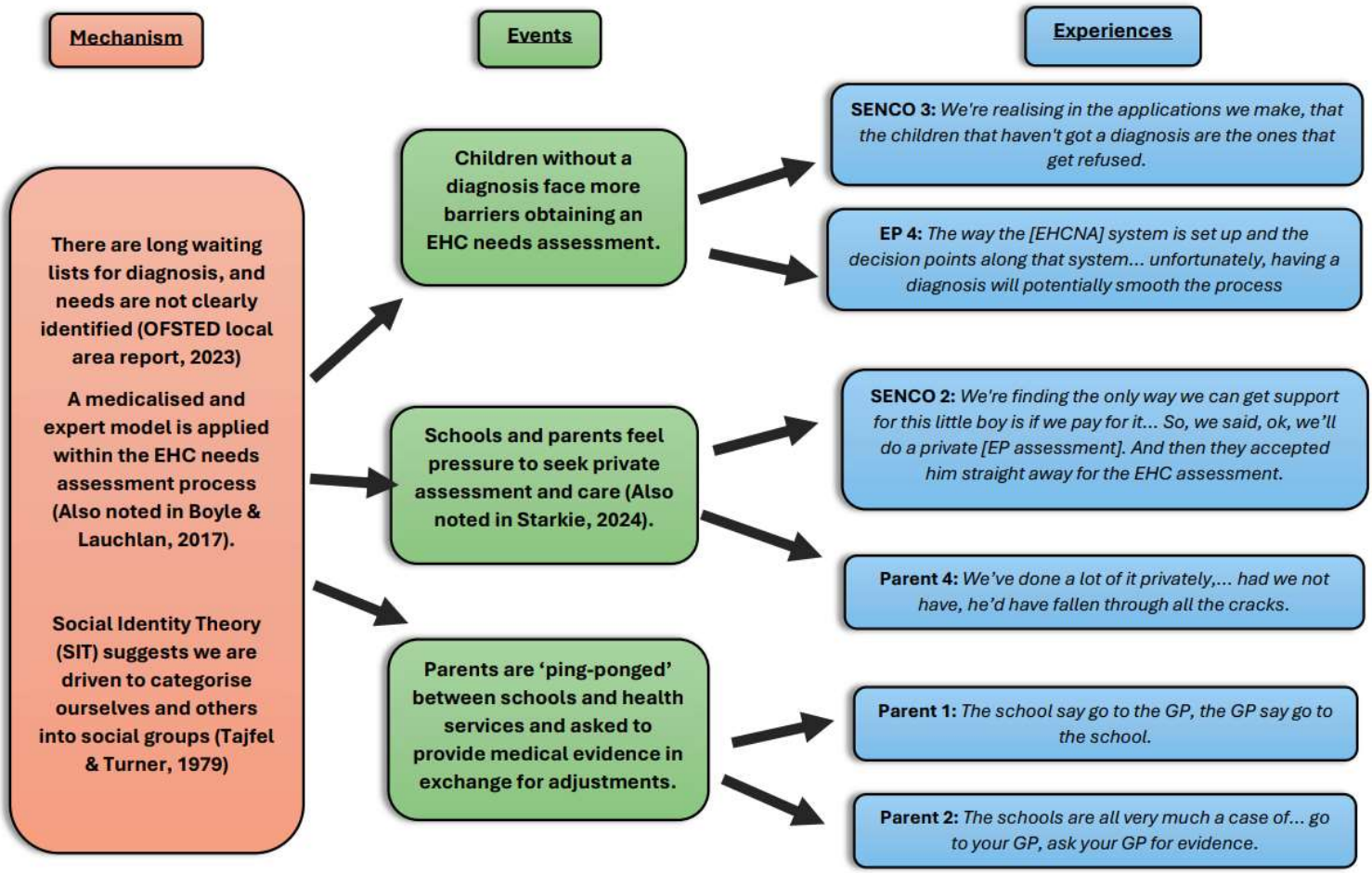
> **SENCO 3:** *I often say, why do we have to label them at such a young age? Just let them be children.*
>
> **Parent 1:** *He accepts his diagnosis, but he won't admit [it] to his peers… He's desperate to fit in, like all teenagers are. Then you also have the barrier behind that, which is an unwillingness to engage with any reasonable adjustments.*

Within the literature, diagnosis and labels can be both empowering as well as disabling. For example, they can provide a level of legal protection within the UK (Arnold, 2017), as well as sometimes holding importance in developing a personal identity and feeling validated (Morgan, 2023). However, a psychological concern is that labelling can led to 'outgroups' and therefore encourage bias and stigma towards children and young people (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel et al., 1971).

Educators and parents can also hold lower aspirations and expectations for children and young people with a label than those without a label, even when their functioning and abilities are similar (Knight, 2021; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2020). In some instances, labels can also obscure inadequate teaching practices and underlying low expectations for pupils (Norwich et al., 2012).

Figure 12:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme A: We Are Going Against the Tide Without a Diagnosis



Note. Figure 12 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme A '*we are going against the tide without a diagnosis'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature and theoretical base.

Subtheme B: An Unfair Hierarchy of Needs. A common narrative within the analysis was the sense of value and worth attributed to different areas of need, which frames the EHC assessment process as enforcing an 'unfair hierarchy of needs'. Participants across cohorts sensed that academic, physical and 'within child' needs were more readily accepted, understood and prioritised, particularly in contrast to children with social, emotional and mental health needs, therefore creating an inequality between different types of special

educational needs. This is despite children with SEMH being at a much higher risk of school exclusion (Thompson et al., 2021).

Equality is a clear principle noted for schools and LAs within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) and the Equality Act (2010). Public bodies are expected to not only promote equality, but also act with foresight to anticipate and mitigate challenges to equality. This could therefore reasonably be seen to include supporting children and young people with social, emotional and mental health needs, to ensure they are on a fair footing in the EHC needs assessment process.

> **SENCO 2:** *Actually, some children would really benefit from it [an EHC] from an SEMH point of view despite the fact that they can read and write and do their maths ok… that one's always a bit of a challenge.*

Social, emotional and mental health needs were portrayed as much trickier to unpick, understand, and eventually demonstrate through the EHC needs assessment. In some instances, parents and schools appeared to find this narrative off-putting and discouraging in seeking support.

> **Parent 2:** *We were told by the headteacher we wouldn't get an EHCP for him, because he was too smart…You tend to believe the professionals and believe what you're being told.*

It was particularly challenging for SENCOs where there were thought to be complex and competing psychological intersections, such as questions around attachment and trauma in the context of neurodiversity. However, participants often spoke of the difficulties with accessing mental health support which made this harder to unpick and therefore evidence for the EHC process.

> **SENCO 1:** *It's trying to work out what we can do…when you think a child definitely presents as having a difficulty like ADHD, but they're not assessed because the paediatrician thinks it's a trauma response.*

> **SENCO 2:** *Particularly since COVID, [there is] a lot of children who struggle with anxiety, separation anxiety, mental health…. Getting support for those children is really challenging.*

This aligns conceptually with Boesley and Crane's (2018) analysis of SENCO views, which suggested social, emotional and mental health needs were more difficult to validate and evidence within the EHC process. While this was a common frustration of SENCOs

within my analysis, at least two parents also noted SENCOs replicated this bias themselves by discouraging an EHC needs assessment due to an apparent lack of academic need.

Wider research also notes that the culture and priorities of individual schools can influence attitudes and the allocation of resources (Richards, 2021), which can impact schools' attitudes towards providing support and SEND assessment. It could therefore be that some SENCOs are constricted by the beliefs and attitudes towards academic needs within their school.

Parent 3 speaks to the implied worthiness of their child's needs, prompting consideration of the value that is attributed to the different areas of need in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015).

> **Parent 3:** *There is a huge misconception that if your child isn't significantly struggling academically, then you are not worthy, or they are not worthy of consideration for an EHCP. The SENCO [told us] we shouldn't bother applying for an EHCP because he was academically able.*

From a parental perspective, this may suggest some SENCOs within the local area have adopted or at least given way to the position that academic needs are a benchmark for judging the validity of an EHC needs assessment. Whilst this might not be the personal views of SENCOs, this could be an attempt to be pragmatic and essentially driven from a need to 'pick your battles' wisely with the LA. In discouraging some EHC needs assessments, the further implication is that SENCOs at times play a gatekeeping function for EHC needs assessments.

Some participants spoke to the intense emotional distress that children and young people could experience within school. Despite the significant impact this could have on a child or young person's functioning, academic measurements were often seen to be the 'benchmark' used by the LA when considering a request for an EHC needs assessment.

> **SENCO 4:** *There was a young girl who could not enter the building without screaming, crying, drooling because she found it so stressful. She did not have a diagnosis…And it [the EHCNA] was rejected. The reasoning given was that she was academically capable, and she was… but she couldn't even get in the classroom.*
>
> **Parent 2:** *Her self-care completely crashed. She was to the point of depression.*
>
> **Parent 3:** *His mental health really suffered… You can take a good two hours of him not being able to do anything, not being able to actually function.*

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) outlines that academic performance is not a reliable indicator of special educational needs, and prompts consideration of emotional and behavioural difficulties:

> ***6.23:*** *It should not be assumed that attainment in line with chronological age means that there is no learning difficulty or disability. Some occur across the range of cognitive ability and, left unaddressed may lead to frustration, which may manifest itself as dissatisfaction, emotional or behavioural difficulties.*

The above acknowledgement within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015, 6.23) raises the question as to why emotional wellbeing and functioning are seemingly a lower priority than academic performance. Some participants considered the wider context within education, observing that the academic pressure and focus on schools encourages the disregard of social, emotional and mental health for pupils. In this sense, it is not just the EHC needs assessment process which creates a hierarchy of need, but instead it its one which perhaps draws from and reinforces a wider cultural expectation that education focuses on academic progression at the cost of other needs.

> **EP 2:** *Sometimes that's [emotional wellbeing] overlooked in preference for.... how are we going to make progress in their reading, their writing, their maths? But actually, you know, unless they're feeling regulated, we can't really work on any of that stuff.*

> **Parent 2:** *Everything is league tables…. The system is gamifying academic achievement above anything else…And because the focus is entirely and utterly academic…your social interactions and your mental health isn't.*

The local area OFSTED SEND inspection (2023) noted that pupils *"fare less well in academic outcomes than similar pupils nationally".* This suggests that it is a valid and important aim to raise academic performance within the local area. However, it also concluded that *"leaders have not coherently pulled together… planning and support for social, emotional and mental health".* There is therefore a clear case for addressing both academic and emotional needs, rather than one or the other.

Wider research argues that there is an over emphasis on standards and performance testing within the UK education system, which are prioritised over inclusion (Lehane, 2016; Norwich, 2014). Academic attainment is also a common yet controversial method for grouping classes within English schools (Tayor et al., 2020) which further promotes the importance and assessment of pupils' academic performance.

In this sense, the wider dominance of the academic agenda is one contextual factor which may encourage bias in favour of seeing academic needs as a higher priority within EHC needs assessment. Indeed, a recent review into the SEND crisis concluded there is a narrow focus on the assessment of academic skills within EHC processes which encourage a within child and deficit model (Atkinson et al., 2024).

One motivation for an academic focus might be a governmental expectation that the education system produces economically productive adults (Goodley et al., 2014). However, a focus on academic standards fails to consider that there are multiple barriers to employment beyond academic needs. For example, Martin et al. (2019) noted that anxiety and social communication needs are important considerations of employment for autistic young people. There is also an increasing trend of mental health conditions being a barrier to employment within the UK (McCurdy & Murphy, 2024).

Aside from ideological and cultural practices, this analysis also noted pragmatic barriers to the LA's role in promoting social, emotional and mental health. For example, some participants felt that the LA's workload was already unmanageable, and therefore there was no motivation to address inequalities.

> **Parent 3:** *The local authority are already overwhelmed, they can't cope with what they've got, so they're not gonna make an issue out of it.*

One EP noted a clear distinction was drawn between learning and mental health needs in decision making panels, suggesting that a lack of a learning difficulty raised a higher level of scrutiny supporting the premise of a hierarchy of need noted above. This appeared to sit uncomfortably and prompted the EP to intervene and advocate for the child from a psychological lens.

> **EP 4:** *If there's not a clear learning need, people on that [EHCNA] panel seem more reluctant to approve an assessment than they will if there's a child with learning difficulties that are very explicit.*
>
> *I have to sometimes step in and say, well, actually, you know, there's evidence here, this child is very anxious, or this child is very depressed or things like that. It's almost as if there's not that clear learning difficulty, they're less likely to approve the EHCNA.*

Crucially, however, there is a key conflict within the SENDCoP in the assessment of academic needs against the assessment of emotional needs. When determining which information to consider when determining if a child or young person *may* have special educational needs, LAs should:

> **9.14** *Pay particular attention… to evidence of the child's academic attainment (or developmental milestones in younger children).*

Information around a child's academic attainment or developmental milestones can usually be provided by an educational setting in most circumstances. In contrast, LAs should:

> **9.14** *'Pay particular attention… to the child's…emotional and social development…, taking into account relevant evidence from clinical and other health professionals and what has been done to meet these by other agencies'.*

This appears to set a much higher evidentiary threshold for emotional and social needs than academic needs, by setting an expectation for clinical and health involvement in the assessment of social and emotional needs. Therefore, it might be argued that the SENDCoP does indeed encourage LAs to set pay particular attention to the involvement *(or by implication the absence of)* external support for emotional and social development.

This guidance might have been included to ensure LAs did not disregard clinical advice, but the wording nonetheless implies a higher evidentiary threshold for social and emotional needs. This is of relevance to the local area, since the OFSTED SEND inspection (2023) noted that there is insufficient planning and support for social, emotional and mental health needs. Therefore, children and young people within the local area might appear to be stuck in an oppressive cycle. They might struggle to access an EHC plan without clinical/health evidence for emotional/mental health needs, yet access to said clinical/health guidance is also noted by OFSTED to be inadequate in the local area.

> **SENCO 2:** *It's impossible to get seen by CAMHS these days. Whereas when I was first teaching [X] odd years ago, children would be seen by CAMHS all the time.*

Many participants noted that decision making is ultimately a paper exercise, meaning that children and young people's progress within the EHC needs assessment depends on how well their needs are presented in writing, including by the provision of external advice. Norwich & Eaton (2015) noted that introducing the new category of SEMH needs in the EHC reforms did little to help specify the thresholds for difficulties, which suggests it can be hard to make fair decisions on support.

> **EP 3:** *In terms of panel …it's just reading a piece of paper, isn't it? I don't believe you can understand a child completely by what's written on a piece of paper. That's probably a flaw of the panel because that's just how that works. They can only read what's given to them.*

> **SENCO 2:** *It is a very different read of the child [on] paper than actually knowing the child. We know these children are best. They don't. They just have a piece of paper.*

I have not intended the concept of an unfair hierarchy of needs within SEND assessment to be confused with Maslow's hierarchy (1943). However, it is interesting to draw comparisons between the two. For example, in Maslow's hierarchy, physiological needs are 'basic' and critical needs. The meeting of psychological needs is secondary in Maslow's model to basic needs, which may be replicated within a SEND hierarchy. For example, the EP above noted *"learning difficulties that are very explicit"* were less likely to meet resistance within EHC panels, as opposed to mental health or emotional needs.

Explicit learning difficulties might be seen to be a within child and therefore critical educational need, as opposed to emotional or psychological needs which were felt less likely to be approved for EHC assessment. The literature also notes that the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) did little to specify the nature of social, emotional and mental health needs that require an EHCNA or EHCP (Norwich & Eaton, 2015), which made it harder for SENCOs to evidence these needs (Boesley & Crane, 2018). As SENCO 1 observed, SEMH needs might be easier to dismiss as transient and simply 'behaviour', rather than an *'ongoing difficulty'.*

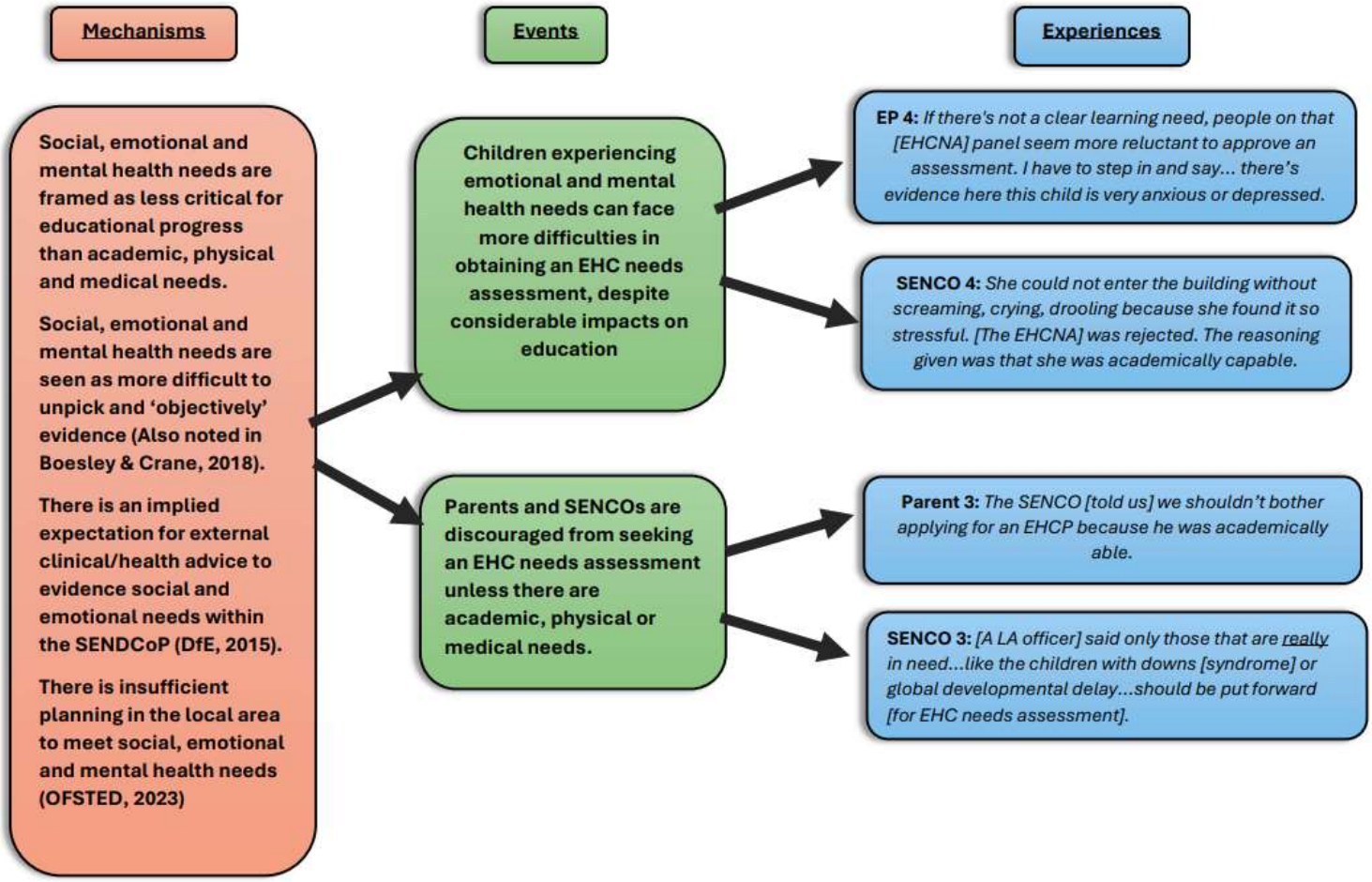
> **SENCO 1:** *It's almost automatic, if it's, you know physical. Especially, a couple children have come to me with chromosome deletions and an EHCP, and I've not really understood why they need one… Whereas a child with SEMH type profile, it can be more difficult because I'm trying to show how it's not just a behaviour, it's an ongoing difficulty.*

The wider literature notes that SENCOs often work in an isolated context (Curran & Boddison, 2021, Curran et al., 2017) and can therefore be *'highly reliant'* on external advice (Richards, 2021). This raises a question as to the influence of the LA in communicating 'thresholds' and setting the local priorities and agenda within EHC needs assessments. **SENCO 3** recalled explicit advice from the LA that only children with certain diagnoses or areas of need should be considered for an EHC within the early years, specifically medically identifiable needs. By noting these children were *'really in need'*, there is an implied suggestion that other children were not considered likely to have a considerable need (although I would caution that this was not necessarily the conclusion of the SENCO, but instead the advice that they recalled being shared with them).

> **SENCO 3:** *[A LA officer] said only those that are <u>really</u> in need should be put forward, like the children with downs [syndrome] or global developmental delay are the ones that should be put forward [for EHC needs assessment].*

Figure 13:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis: Subtheme B: An Unfair Hierarchy of Needs



Note. Figure 13 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme B '*an unfair hierarchy of needs'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature.

Subtheme C: It's Not One Size Fits All. This subtheme considers a prominent pattern generated from the analysis, that a mechanistic approach is structurally embedded into the EHCNA system, rather than a tailored arrangement for each individual child and young person. Participants across all cohorts outlined how individual circumstances and complexities called for adaptation in the assessment process, although the EHCNA process was directly and indirectly framed as 'ticking boxes' and being performative, rather than transformative and empowering. As Norwich & Eaton note (2015), person-centred practice is often hampered by a single and inflexible approach regardless of the individual's needs.

Children, young people, parents and professionals were therefore characterised as needing to bend to the requirements and constraints of the assessment process, rather than vice versa. This was often framed in the context of a lack of time/resources, which connects with literature highlighting these as a common issue within the EHC process (Hellawell, 2017; Palikara et al., 2018).

> **Parent 1:** *They [local authority staff] don't have time to listen… they have that many that they don't talk to people as individuals. They group the whole service as one.*

> **EP 2:** *The narrative is that 'this is what we have to get through' [EHCNAs] before we can do anything else. That's the service narrative that distracts from being truly child centred.*

EPs recalled often having limited or no involvement with children before providing EHCNA advice, and this affecting their ability to genuinely empower children and young people or elicit their views. This mirrored concerns raised within Smillie & Newton's (2020) analysis of one-off assessments, which were felt to be limiting to capturing a child's 'true' wishes and feelings within psychological advice.

> **EP 1:** *When you don't know the young people, it becomes a performative act. Something that you go and… tick some boxes. You leave with the sense that I'm not sure they were genuine in their answers… I have no way of knowing.*

> **EP 4:** W*e very, very rarely have worked with a child before…the bulk of our time is spent doing EHCNA, it's like chicken and egg.*

At times, this led some parents to believe that the EP recommendations were not in line with what their child wanted or needed, and more focused on their diagnosis or area of need, rather than a personalised solution.

> **Parent 3:** *All of the measures [recommended by the EP]…were for him to have a classroom assistant sit with him, to address all of those needs. That was never gonna work because having somebody with him… it signposts… He's very self-conscious, desperate to fit in.*

It is worth noting that the Ofsted SEND inspection of the local area (2023) concluded that *"many EHC plans lack the voice of the child or young person".* EPs often described the involvement with children as having to 'parachute' or 'swan' in and out, due a lack of prior involvement. This meant that EPs often felt they had limited contextual understanding of both the child and school. Brief involvements with children and young people often drew EPs to seemingly uncomfortably feel that their expertise was reduced to discrete assessment

work, at the cost of understanding the contextual factors around the child. This supports Buck's (2015) argument that psychological advice should include an additional section to outline systemic and environmental considerations during the EHC needs assessment process, rather than just the current categories which are more focused on within-child needs.

> **EP 1:** *Coming up to an assessment, [it's] completely parachuting on someone's life.*
>
> **SENCO 1:** *With some EPs it can just feel like a tick box exercise. It feels like they've got an itinerary that they have to meet…I worry about how personal they [EP reports] are. Obviously there is a massive backlog…but you need to get through them in a still in individualised way, don't you?*
>
> **EP 2:** *I am uncomfortable with the idea that I am the expert swanning in... I want to come up with ideas for what could help the young person based on everything about them, you know, like the context… [which] I have very limited information about.*

While EPs cited some meaningful interactions with children and young people despite a limited involvement, there were occasions where they found it difficult to add value, particularly where it was not possible to build a rapport with the child or young person. In this sense, psychological advice was framed by EPs and SENCOs as a repetition of what was already known.

> **SENCO 1:** *Often…that advice is not rocket science, it's stuff that you've said already and its stuff you have.*
>
> **EP 1:** *I always go with the intention to provide something a bit different to what is already known… but actually many times I heard…you didn't say anything we didn't know.*
>
> **EP 3:** *In terms of what our advice is, it's not hugely different [from specialist teachers]. Sometimes, it's a bit like, [school] knew this already. And I think that can be a bit of letdown.*

Parents also reflected on how their child or young person might not feel comfortable to share their views with an unfamiliar adult. However, most parents described not being present for their child's assessment, leaving them unsure as to how this process went for children.

> ***Parent 4:*** *In terms of working with the EP… it's hard for me to say. He's a quiet boy, a people pleaser. My suspicion is he will very much nod and say that everything is ok.*

This is an area which therefore might require further research, although paradoxically such research could face similar issues of gathering a genuine voice of the child. One complicating relevant factor within the literature was that many children either didn't know they had an EHCP or did not know the contents (Daw, 2020; Franklin et al., 2018). However, research does suggest mechanisms which are important in gaining children and young people's views, including choices and control about how they do so, support from familiar people (Cooper, 2019) and creative methods (Sharma, 2022). Additionally, EP advice was often not shared directly with schools unless parents took it upon themselves to do so. This meant that SENCOs were reliant on the draft or final EHC plan to work out a child's required support, without knowing whether the EP had recommended something different.

> **SENCO 4:** *They're [EP reports] not shared with us unless the parent choses to share them. [The LA] never send us a copy… we don't know what the actual original EP recommendation was. We don't know if the EHCP matches that.*

Participants also reflected on the differences in the process for different developmental stages and ages, arguing that 'one size does not fit all' when it comes to assessment. The one nursery SENCO in this research noted an explicit directive in LA advice, whereby EHC needs assessments were discouraged at this developmental stage, suggesting a pre-determined bias on the necessity of EHC needs assessments based on age. By appealing to the SENCOs limited time, EHC requests were portrayed in this sense as being fruitless.

> **SENCO 3:** *[A local authority officer] came in and said 'you should not be putting in applications at this young age for your children. So please do not put in these multiple referrals because they will not be granted… save yourself the time'.*

Despite this, EPs spoke about providing advice towards several EHC needs assessments within the early years. EPs sometimes found it harder to consult with early years staff, since the need for higher levels of child supervision and staff ratios meant it was harder for setting staff to be available. Complicating this was that it was felt harder to directly gather the views of young children. Observation was therefore often seen as a key assessment tool for younger children to counter difficulties accessing staff or the child's view directly.

> **EP 1:** *In an early years setting, there might be young children… [who] need attending to quite closely. If I remove one member of staff to have a meeting with me… they feel it, and I think they resist that.*

EP 3: *Quite often they [children] can't engage, and I'm then really heavily reliant on my observations. Especially with your early years' ones, you tend to see quite a lot in a short period of time.*

However, when EPs were able to consult with early years staff, it was often noted they had a sophisticated and detailed knowledge of the child, due to the smaller nature of early years settings. The keyworker nature of the early years approach has also been noted within the literature to support EHCP processes and implementation (Richards, 2021). Primary schools were also felt to have an advantage due to their relatively smaller size compared to secondary schools.

EP 3: *When I do a consultation with an early-years professional, they tend to know those children through and through, inside out. Primary school [is] pretty much the same.*

SENCO 2: I *think in a primary school it's a lot easier than if I was in a secondary school, because I know the children really well.*

Some participants noted it was harder to collate advice and consult with secondary school staff, given that most pupils would have multiple teachers. At times, it was also felt to be harder to gain the views of young people in secondary schools than children in primary school.

SENCO 4: *It's difficult…in a secondary school because we don't have one classroom teacher who can provide concise comments. A primary school can talk to one person and get all the details they need. I need to speak to 17.*

EP 3: *Secondary schools… I might get one person that knows them well, but if it's the SENCO it's not usually them that has the best knowledge, and there's so many teachers.*

Research sometimes suggests that secondary schools rely on the deployment of individual teaching assistant support to understand and support pupils needs (Webster & Blatchford, 2018). In the context of my analysis, this could be problematic for young people that do not have close contact with teaching staff prior to an EHC needs assessment and may not be as 'well known' by many members of staff. Young people were sometimes framed as being more educationally disaffected and less likely to share their views. This was often linked by participants to their age as well as their needs, although it may be that young people have had a longer and more complex history of negative experiences within school, and therefore were harder to engage through one off assessment work. Feeling safe and building rapport have been noted to be key mechanisms to gaining pupil views (Sharma,

2022), however it is questionable how this could always be possible for EPs to facilitate in one-off assessments for all pupils.

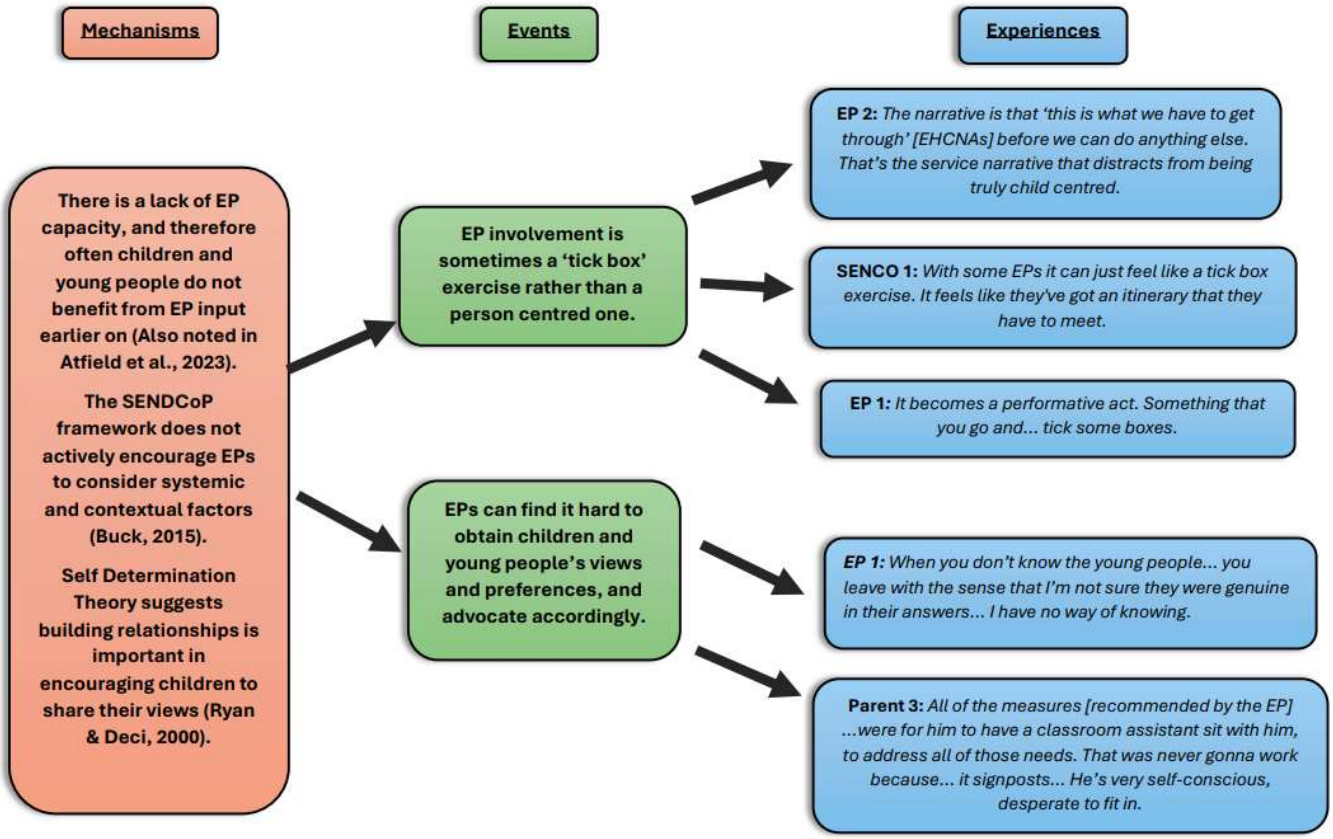
> ***EP 1:*** *[In] Adolescence…the young people take some time to open up and develop relationships, especially if they come from a history of trauma… I don't feel it that much with children of primary age but secondary age I think is so different.*

This might suggest that the role of the EP is also to support the adults around children and young people to help share their views. However, as SENCO 4 noted, it could be very difficult to gather pupils' views within a secondary school, particularly when pupils were not attending. This suggests that some young people are not well served by the current model of brief and time limited EP involvement.

> ***SENCO 4:*** *Often by the time a student reaches [the] EHCP, they're quite disillusioned with school... I can't provide a one-page profile for a student that won't come into school.*

Figure 14:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme C: It's Not One Size Fits All



Note. Figure 14 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme C '*it's not one size fits all'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature and theoretical base.

Theme Two: Advocacy and Adversary: Navigating the Obstacle Course.

This theme illustrates advocacy, conflicts, and challenge underlying the assessment process. Participants across all cohorts drew upon several persuasive narratives when sharing their experiences, suggesting that adversary and advocacy are central to the EHCNA process. Such advocacy and adversary were noted at multiple levels by parents, SENCOs and EPs. This was also observed between LA departments itself, by both EPs and SENCOs. Underlining this was felt to be lack of co-production, despite this being an expectation within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015).

Subtheme D: Without an Engaged Parent or the SENCO on Board, The Child has no Chance. Advocacy was often considered a necessary 'driving force' to keep the EHCNA on track, or direct towards favourable outcomes. Going through the process was often not expected to be successful or favourable without considerable proactivity on the part of the parent, or without this, a SENCO who agreed with and supported the request for an EHCNA.

> **Parent 1:** *It was always me reaching out to [The local authority]… it was always me chasing them. They didn't get back to me. They didn't answer my phone calls.*
>
> ***SENCO 2:*** *Unless you chase it, you get nothing… [The local authority] say they're gonna do this, that and the other. Then they speak to you like they don't know what you're talking about, several months later when you're having to chase them.*
>
> **EP 1:** *If the SENCO is not on board and the parent can't for whatever reason engage, then that child has no chance, no chance.*

I noted that SENCOs and parents often referred to the LA as 'they', perhaps suggesting a distinct separation and distance between themselves and the LA. While the Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests creating distinct identities is to be expected, the extent to which participants appeared to distance themselves from the LA holds implications for shared decision making as per the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015). Research very early on into the EHCP framework suggested generally positive experiences of parents being listened to (Redwood, 2015) and even being empowered (Scott, 2016), although more recent research suggests the opposite, with parents often feeling ignored (Ahad et al., 2022; Cullen & Lindsay, 2019).

Parents and SENCOs within the interview data often noted feeling ignored and therefore excluded from the process, especially since long timelines meant that there were extended periods with no communication. On a personal level, this was noted to exacerbate parental stress within an already complicated and uncertain process, as is also referenced within the literature exploring statutory EHC processes (Starkie, 2024, Cullen & Lindsay, 2019).

> **Parent 3:** *We were trying to cope with being ignored for almost a year. The local authority seemed to sit back* and do nothing.

> **Parent 2:** *You go months, not weeks. Months where you are not getting any communication at all.*

On a professional level, SENCOs often did not have up to date information, which could leave them open to criticism since they were expected to know what was happening with the EHC needs assessment. Cochrane (2016) noted in their analysis that SENCOs were expected to have the most knowledge out of all professionals within the EHC process. However, Cochrane noted that parents were more passively involved in the EHC process and reliant on professionals, which contrasts with my analysis which noted examples of both SENCO and parental proactivity.

> **SENCO 2:** *We end up having to answer the parents' questions, and we don't always know. It makes us look incompetent when it's out of our hands.*

The complex interaction of multiple steps, decision points, and professionals involved in the EHC needs assessment was at times portrayed as being overwhelming to some parents, who did not understand what was happening or why. SENCOs also reported confusion at times, noting inconsistency which made it hard to understand the thresholds.

> **Parent 1:** *I don't know why they weren't appealed. The school knew he wasn't able, so I really can't tell you why they didn't appeal it. I really don't know. I know somebody went in for the EHCP [to see the child], but I still to this day don't know who they are.*

> ***SENCO 3:*** *The whole system is really difficult to navigate, and I think parents have the same sentiment as me.*

> ***EP 3:*** *It's really evident when a parent has understood the process and hasn't. Quite often, despite explaining my role, I'm not entirely confident that this parent understands what I'm doing at this point.*

To understand the process and be in a better position to advocate, many parents described having to undertake a considerable amount of research into the workings of the EHCNA process, at times drawing comparisons to this being a job. In this sense, parents envisioned their role as needing to be proactive in the context of a reactive system. As one parent articulated:

> **Parent 3:** *It came to the point that out of necessity, I had to become something of an expert, in inverted commas... I took that responsibility on myself.*

Parents felt that their advocacy and ability to fight for their child were more likely to be successful if they had acquired knowledge of the relevant processes and laws. It might be suggested therefore that cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1968) act as a protective factor which mitigate power imbalances between parents and the LA and allows parents to challenge decisions against the legal framework of the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015).

> **Parent 2:** *Because… I'm articulate, I'm capable, I'm in the very fortunate position of having the time, the aptitude and the ability to know what the law is, I'm able to advocate for them. There is a very different situation for a phenomenal number of people who do not have the time, aptitude, ability or knowledge to advocate for their children.*

> **Parent 4:** *It helps if you are a person who is able to understand the system and fight your child's cause.*

However, knowledge of the law and the system alone could be insufficient to produce successful outcomes. Keville et al.'s analysis (2024) noted that when parents challenged the legality of EHC processes, they encountered the LA's *'different interpretation'* of the law, raising the question of what else do parents need apart from knowledge. Bentley (2017) noted that parents with 'greater professional skills' were better able to advocate within the EHC process, and those without these skills could be disempowered.

Within my analysis, those who were not able to confidently advocate from a position of knowledge were felt to be on the back foot from the start. Many SENCOs noted that children with comparable needs were disadvantaged without parental proactivity and advocacy, further supporting the concept of parental advocacy, knowledge and skills as key mechanisms in meeting children and young people's needs.

> **SENCO 1:** *I've got a number of children with quite complex needs, but because they [parents] aren't phoning everyday, they're not really getting anywhere.*

SENCO 2: *If the parent takes it lying down and says, 'that ok, that's fine', they'll not assess. If they say no, actually I disagree and these are the reasons why, they'll [the local authority] sort of bow down to it.*

Parent 3: *Anyone that didn't have the capabilities that we have would have been sent in circles. And I find that…repugnant.*

One SENCO shared the example where a parent had submitted an EHC request before the child joined their setting, which was denied, with the parent reporting to the SENCO they found it difficult to understand and use the terminology within the process. This further suggests a view that cultural and social capital including language can impact on the success of parents' advocacy for their child. In the SENCO's view, this rejection was despite the fact the child had significant needs and required specialist support.

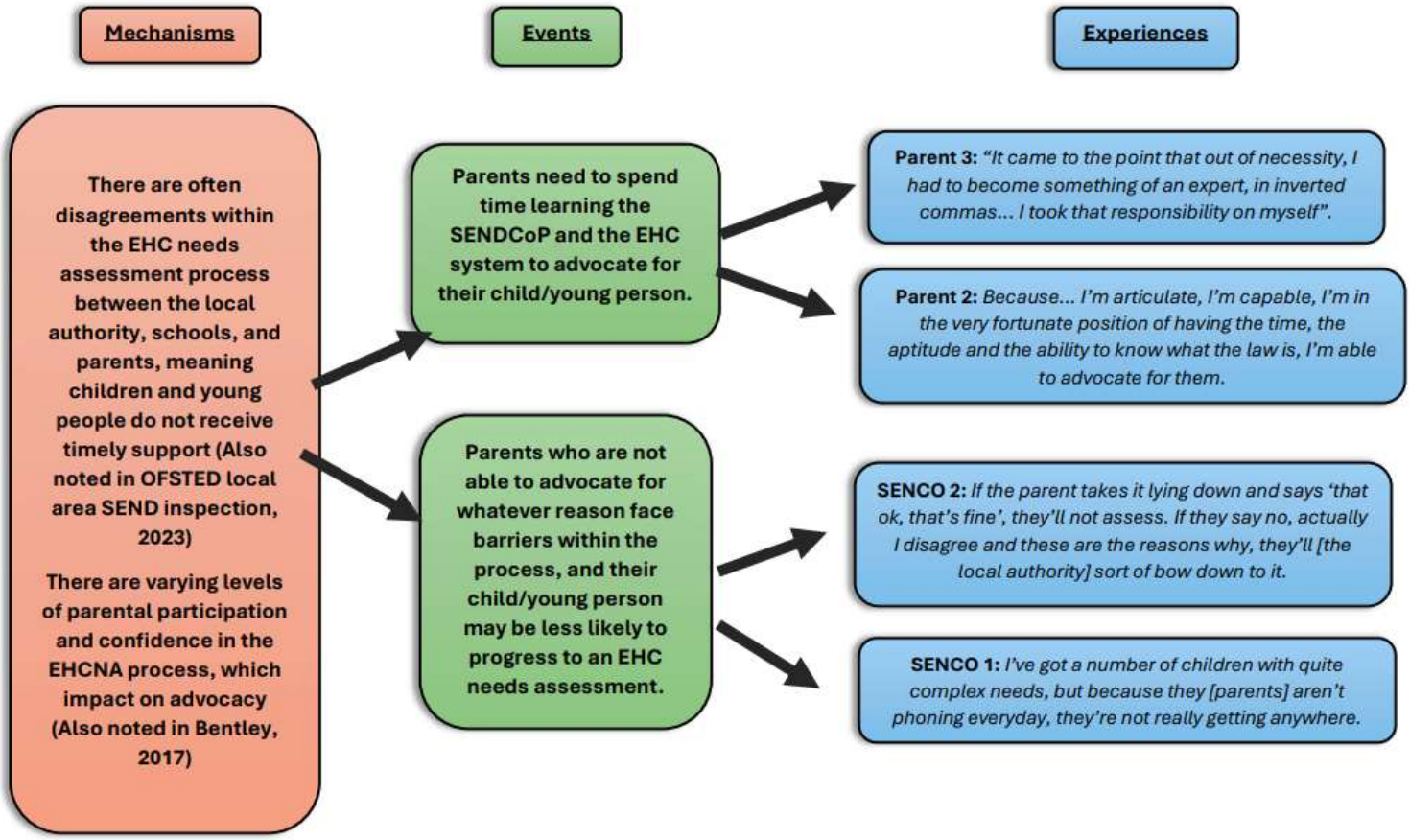
SENCO 3: *[The application] was denied… She [mum] knows her son so well, but she admitted herself she lacked the terminology or the wording. The forms are sadly geared towards a certain level of education. [He] really does require specialist provision.*

Some participants also spoke to the individual needs of parents within the EHC process. While many professionals tried to overcome barriers to parental advocation by providing adjustments, this was not always enough. SENCO 4 recalled trying to help parents by dictating their views, but even with this adjustment some parents did not appear to find it helpful.

SENCO 4: *Sometimes parents have their own needs… some parents really struggle to put their [child's] needs down on paper. There have been times when… they've dictated their views to me and that's helped. But for some, that doesn't help either.*

Figure 15:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme D: Without an engaged parent or the SENCO on board, the child has no chance



Note. Figure 15 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme D '*without the SENCO on board or a proactive parent, the child has no chance'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature.

Subtheme E: *The School are an Obstacle, So I Made the Decision to put in the EHC Request Myself.* This subtheme also considered the conflict between advocacy and 'expectations' of the system. Boesley and Crane (2018) noted that 'managing parental expectations' was a continual challenge for SENCOs within EHCP processes. While these expectations were not often seen as unreasonable, they were simply not possible within a constrained system. Curran et al. (2017) also noted the role of parental expectations, however, took a different analytic approach in suggesting a possible gap between and *'what parents expect' and 'known good practice'.*

Within my research, some parents reflected on a common narrative that high parental expectations and low confidence in the system is driving an increased need for EHCPs. However, this was challenged by suggesting that 'poor confidence' was a surface observation, concealing an iceberg underneath of poor experiences within education. In this sense, a focus on parental expectations was felt to be a red herring which detracted from failings within the education system by antagonistically shifting blame onto parents. Indeed, the SEND review (DfE, 2022) noted that many schools were ill-equipped to support pupils needs adequately, which was one explanation it provided for low parental confidence and therefore increasing 'demand' for EHC plans.

> **SENCO 3**: *It's appeasing those parents and addressing the parents demands, if that makes sense. That's the problem here at the moment.*

> **Parent 2:** *It drives me nuts when you read [that] parents' low confidence is causing the need for an EHCP…not the fact they are not confident because of the experiences that they've got… but because they are saying we need to reframe parental expectations.*

Further, at times the narrative of high parental expectations was felt to be stigmatising, hostile, and at worst derogatory, minimising the underlying reasons as to why parents of children with special educational needs might experience despair and reach out for support.

> **Parent 2:** *This idea that people are choosing to be aggressive and to fight for something because they want more…it's really, really offensive. As if parents are trying to get hold of more than they're entitled to… rather than just stop their child from self-harming in the bedroom because they can't cope in school.*

However, the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) actively encourages holding high aspirations and expectations for children and young people.

> **1.31** *[Educational settings] should establish and maintain a culture of <u>high expectations</u> [for] children and young people with SEND or disabilities.*

> **8.49** *Local authorities should be ambitious for children and young people with SEN, raising their aspirations and promoting <u>high expectations.</u>*

Considering therefore the governmental and political focus of holding high expectations for children and young people with SEND, it is a curious scenario whereby parents are not encouraged to hold those same high expectations of the system that

supports children and young people. In this sense, it might be seen that whilst the stated policy promotes high expectations, the reality as lived by parents does not match.

I therefore wondered about 'demand ideology' and how the language around this contributes to a construction of SEND. Viewing children's needs as a '*demand'* appears to encourage connotations of market forces (i.e. supply and demand), therefore drawing from and replicating a social construction of children with SEND as *'consumers'*. This aligns with wider literature which suggests that EHCP reforms have drawn from and reinforced a marketisation of not only education but also the wider SEND system (Hunter et al., 2020). Riddell (2020) has noted that this marketisation has required the 'market' to assess each customer for their perceived value, which has led to children and young people with SEND to be *'generally regarded as unattractive customers within the education market'.* This further suggests a marketised and economic view of children and young people with SEND, as well as their parents, whose may be implicitly or explicitly asked to link their expectations to the 'demand' and 'supply' within the SEND system.

When holding high expectations for their child or young person, many parents felt their advocacy was met with dismissal of their concerns, or resistance in the form of parent-blaming. They described seeking support from the school or other services, and not being believed, or being directed to parenting support. Whilst parenting courses are not a built-in expectation or part of the EHC process directly, the experiences shared by parents suggested that they already reached the point of an EHC request feeling judged by professionals.

> **Parent 1:** *The school seemed to sort of blame myself and my husband as parents… I've done like 3 parenting courses, so to be absolutely honest I haven't found them helpful.*
>
> **Parent 2:** *The parent blaming is a huge problem. I've done four different parenting courses, because that's the absolute minimum that you have to do before you get any support anywhere, is to prove that it's not you know messing your child up.*

The views of the participants therefore diverged with research suggesting parenting courses have significant improvements in parental efficacy (Lindsay & Totsika, 2017; Sanders et al., 2014). Further, the views of participants in this context diverged from research suggesting parenting courses have positive impacts on mental health (Gray et al., 2018), with some suggesting that parental stress could be exacerbated by the blame associated with parenting courses. While the EHC needs assessment process mainly focuses on the child's needs within an educational setting, it might therefore be suggested that parents felt that they had already been assessed as much as (or even more than) their

child. This connects with a literature which has noted that blame is often laid with parents for their child's needs (Francis, 2012; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

Keville et al. (2024) also noted experiences of parental blame and judgement within the EHCP process, noting specifically the impact of masking with autism, where children may mask at school, which in turn led to heighted distress and meltdowns at home. This was felt to reduce professionals' willingness to support an EHC application, since the impact was masked within a school setting. Parent blaming has also been noted within the literature to encourage parents to seek a label and/or a statutory assessment for special educational needs (Broomhead, 2013) to legitimise their child's needs, and as an act of resistance against parent blaming.

Within my analysis, parental applications were often framed as one way in which parents could take a proactive approach towards the EHC needs assessment by initiating the process themselves. Whilst this often involved a lot of work, advocacy and research on the parents' part, this was often framed as an enabling tool which could regain some control in the face of an overly bureaucratic system. By making an application themselves, parents were able to minimise what was often seen as the 'gatekeeping' role of SENCOs in EHC needs assessments, as well as challenge SENCO judgements that their child was not in need of support, or that their support needs were primarily within the home setting.

> **Parent 2:** *I said to the SENCO I would really like to put in an EHCNA for my daughter…The SENCO said well, we don't see any problems at school… It's an obstacle to get round, so I made the decision to put in an EHCNA myself*

> **Parent 4:** *I asked the school for a couple of years and was told no. I guess I politely waited…then it got to the point where I said I'm gonna put this in if you don't…*

However recent research suggests that nationally, requests from a professional are 14 times more likely to result in an EHCP as opposed to parental applications, and school applications for EHC needs assessments are more successful than parental applications in 96% of LAs (Boddison & Soan, 2022). It is therefore unsurprising that many parents within my analysis wanted to work directly with SENCOs to submit an EHC application. However, many parents were discouraged from doing so.

Parent 3 speaks to the abandonment of having to go through the process without the support of the SENCO, suggesting that disagreements between schools and parents can lead to feelings of isolation and rejection, further leaving parents with no choice but to take on the proactive role within the EHC needs assessment.

Parent 3: *I approached the SENCO and said we'd like some help with this… and she said I'm very busy and refused. I can remember feeling so abandoned… surely we should be working in partnership.*

However, on the other hand, SENCOs were sometimes reluctant to get too involved in an EHC needs requests or subsequent mediation/appeals when they did not feel it was justified, particularly as the process was framed as very labour intensive.

SENCO 1: *Ultimately, I don't want a child to have an EHCP if they don't need one because there's a lot of work in it. There's a lot of paperwork, a lot of responsibility… I wouldn't ever put an EHC in if I didn't have the conviction that they needed it.*

At times, SENCOs were taken aback or surprised by parental EHC needs requests, particularly where the child had not been identified as having special educational needs and had not followed the graduated approach.

SENCO 4: *Sometimes the first we hear about a student is a parental EHCNA application and actually… they're not even on the SEND register. We've never done assess plan review on this student. Why are we getting an EHCP application?*

SENCO 3: *Then mum said, actually I have done my own EHCP application. And I wanted to say, why did you not tell me this?*

This suggests a considerable gap between parental and SENCO perceptions of a child's SEND prior to EHC needs assessment, which raises a question as to the functioning of the graduated approach. However, the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) provides little guidance for schools in using the 'assess, plan, do, review' cycle. Lehane (2016) and Norwich (2014) both note that previous codes promoted a stronger focus on the graduated approach. For example, the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (DfE, 1994) included a five-stage model leading to statements of special educational needs. This included 'outside specialist' support for schools prior to statutory assessment. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE, 2001) also provided oversight before the SEND statement stage, in the form of school action and school action plus.

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) notes that while schools have a 'notional' budget for SEN, *'this is not a ringfenced amount'*. This therefore could create inconsistency in schools' provision for children and young people in the graduated approach. Therefore, the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) does little to provide practical and actionable guidance on what happens before an EHCP. This is further complicated within the context of austerity and challenges to school funding (Hoskin, 2019).

Whilst SENCOs had noted that parental requests were surprising when the graduated approach had not been followed, the SENDCoP and a lack of funding do not appear to support a strong graduated approach, which may lead to some children and young people with SEND not receiving adequate support. This in turn may lead to parental requests for EHC needs applications.

Whilst SENCOs often noted that parental applications were made without a graduated approach, many parents felt that even simple adjustments were not provided before an EHC needs assessment. A key driving force appeared to be the view that schools were either ill equipped to meet their child's needs or unwilling to do so. An EHC needs assessment or plan was therefore seen as an important formal way of gaining appropriate support.

> **Parent 2:** *He just needed somewhere quiet to go and to be able to calm down. If the support was given in the first place, none of this would have escalated. When schools are not able to make reasonable adjustments, then they cause more problems.*

> **Parent 4:** *I didn't feel that very much support was happening for him at school. Quality first adaptations weren't in place… As a family we became very frustrated and disappointed… We just wanted it laid out.*

Many parents felt their requests for adjustments or support went unheard. When there were disagreements between parents and schools, some SENCOs felt that by putting their contrasting opinions forward in an EHC request, they would be seen as unhelpful or acting to effectively 'block' the child's progression through the EHC process, which would create further conflict between schools and parents.

In this sense, SENCOs were aware of their potential power within the EHC system, since providing 'unhelpful' or conflicting information could lead to rejection of a needs assessment or EHCP. This was also perceived by some parents, who suggested that the LA capitalised on a SENCO's lack of support.

> **Parent 2:** *The council refused to do the EHCNA, on the grounds that the SENCO had written back to say there are no problems with this child.*

> **SENCO 4:** *There will be times when we say to a parent our presence is not going to help your case. We will say actually, the evidence we are going to provide is going to contradict what you're going to say. In some ways it's better for them to know in advance that we're not gonna be on their side.*

SENCO 4 talks about having to pick a ‘side’ during a mediation which followed a parental request. This conjures a narrative of a binary choice between being either with or against the parent. Whilst a spectrum rather than a binary choice could have been an alternative narrative open to the SENCO, LAs must either make a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ decision when determining whether to proceed with an assessment or issue a plan, which is a clear binary choice. In this sense, SENCOs may feel conflicted by needing to fall on one side of this argument.

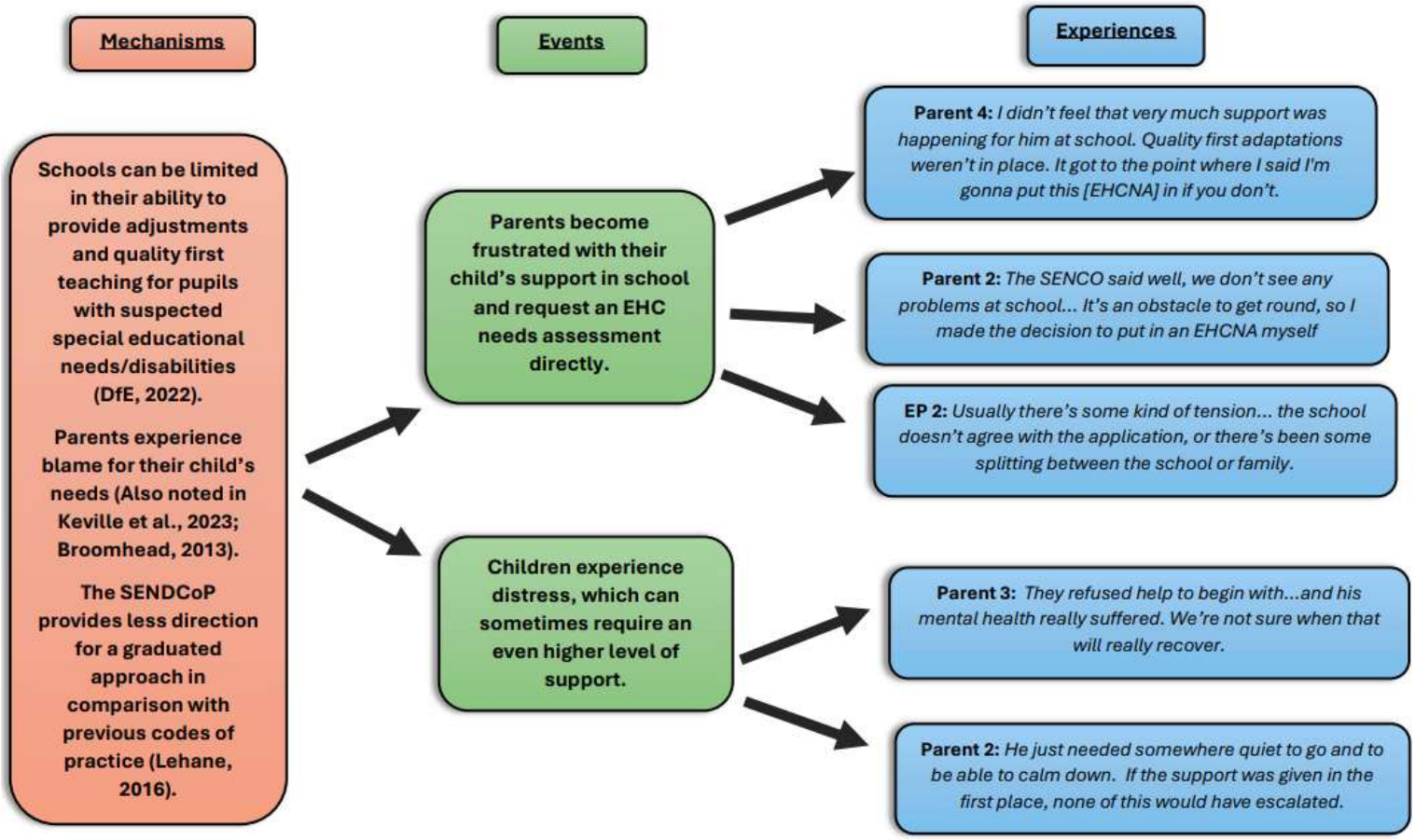
Participant experiences also suggested that parental EHC requests were often a sign of disagreement between parents and schools. This was felt harder to get a ‘buy in’ from schools, who were seemingly reluctant to support a process they had not initiated and did not see as a valuable use of time.

> **EP 4:** S*ometimes when a parent has put an application in themselves, that is because school aren’t on the same page…when I approach schools in those situations, they’re a bit annoyed, or reluctant to speak to me, or share information, because they don’t see it as a valuable use of their time.*
>
> **Parent 3:** *When she [the SENCO] left, the other professionals at that meeting both sort of openly said, oh my goodness, it’s been a lot of years since I’ve seen somebody so disinterested.*
>
> **EP 2:** *I have to say I bring an expectation that with parental applications, there might be some friction. Usually there’s some kind of tension… maybe the school doesn’t agree with the application, or there’s been some splitting between the school or family.*

The use of the term ‘splitting’ is an interesting choice. Plender (2019) suggested psychoanalytic principles (including splitting) held relevance to SENCOs experiences in managing the emotions of the role, however in this instance EP 2 expands this possibility to families going through the EHC needs assessment process. Considering the ‘binary’ choices explored earlier (such as SENCOs feeling the need to pick a side) might support a parental view of SENCOs as either ‘good/bad’, or ‘helpful/unhelpful’, and therefore contribute towards a perception of splitting. Further, the principle of splitting may be theoretically linked to SIT (Tajfel & Tuner, 1979), suggesting a separation of identity and therefore a disconnect between SENCOs and parents in the EHCNA process.

Figure 16:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme E: The School Are An Obstacle, So I Made the Decision to put in the EHC Request Myself



Note. Figure 16 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme E '*the school are an obstacle, so I made the decision to put in the EHC request myself*'. This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature.

Subtheme F: It was the Local authority Vs the Local Authority. This subtheme notes the adversary and challenge within the LA itself, suggesting it is not exclusively parents and SENCOs who are working in an adversarial context. SENCOs and parents considered how the LA would contradict itself at times, with different departments espousing different philosophies and approaches to the EHC needs assessment process. **As SENCO 3** noted *"you get different views from different professionals… they're all saying something different".* At times, this was noted to lead LA staff into direct conflict, for example, when two departments disagreed on an EHC decision. **SENCO 1** spoke to how the LA's social worker

said it would be hard to challenge their own LA's EHC decision making when a care experienced child was refused an EHC needs assessment.

> ***SENCO 1:*** *They turned it [the EHCNA] down… the social worker said it was really hard for the social worker to appeal because it was [the local authority] vs [the local authority]. It was just beyond the pale… It's the social care ones that are really hard to get picked up.*

Given the importance of parental advocacy highlighted within this analysis, this scenario raises questions of who takes on the role of advocating for care experienced children. LAs are expected to apply the principle of 'corporate parenting' meaning that all staff should ask themselves *'would this be good enough for my child?'* (DfE, 2018). This suggests that LA staff hold a dual role in advocating not only as a professional, but also as if they were a parent. However, many professional participants noted that a high turnover of social workers often meant social workers were not able to build a relationship with children and young people and accordingly advocate for their needs.

> **SENCO 1:** *They have about five, you know, the social worker moves on… [the] social worker has to get to know the child again and again and again.*

> **SENCO 2:** *The social workers can come and go. If the social worker is seemingly not doing a good job, then it can be quite challenging. These are the most vulnerable children.*

In the previous theme (person centred-vs-system centred), some participants felt that private services were able to provide a higher quality of support and advice. In judging the professional relationships within the LA, some parents felt there was a conflict of interest for EPs due to their employment status. This led some parents to draw direct comparisons with the advice they had received for their child/young person from the LA EP and a private EP.

> **Parent 2:** *The [LA] EP will report within what the Council is able or willing to provide. They said my child would benefit from support by a known worker, when actually my private EP report is saying that this child needs one to one in every session.*

This mirrors similar findings within the Lamb report (2009) which highlighted a parental mistrust of educational psychologists, who were sometimes felt to be conflicted due to their LA employment. Lamb's report identified considerable variation between local areas. In some authorities' EPs were able to practice without undue influence, although in others there could be a *'settled professional culture'* whereby it would be expected EPs would not make specific recommendations for certain support. Lamb (2009) highlighted this culture might short-change children from accessing support. The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) note that

advice from professionals should usually be specific. Whilst the Joint Professional Liaison Group (JPLG, 2020) agree, it is noted that this can be challenging for EPs due to the time limited nature of their advice, and the complexity with which different schools organise their SEND provision.

Exploration with EPs highlighted experiences of being challenged by LA SEND staff on the contents of their EHCNA advice, on the grounds that their recommendations were excessive or unrealistic.

> **EP 1:** *[The SEND] coordinators came back to me said well, we can't put any of these in the EHC plan. I had to be very clear with them, very explicit…that's what I think she needs. My role is not to write what you think you can offer.*

> **EP 3:** *I've written something in my report and they [SEND co-ordinators] don't like it. If I think that they [CYP] need XYZ, then I still think they need XYZ…Whether that makes into the plan or not. That is my advice. And I think that's something that's still not very clear.*

The findings within this analysis therefore suggest unresolved conflict within the LA including unclear principles of EP independence, and a form of attempted *'fettering'* of EP advice *(*Lamb, 2009). Whilst the EPs above noted resistance to influence of their advice, they talked about this principle being *'not very clear'* or needing to be *'very clear, very explicit'*, suggesting that it was not common knowledge amongst other LA staff that EPs have a duty to act in the best interests of the child/young person, over and above any obligation to the LA.

This contrasts with Capper and Soan's (2022) analysis of EP and SEND officer relationships during statutory assessments, which found that SEND officers viewed EP advice as independent and objective. However, the context of this was that EPs and SEND officers worked closely together (both in location and professionally) and had co-constructed an operational development of psychological assessment.

Some EPs described a sense of apprehension in their interactions with LA SEND staff, anticipating that most interactions would be contentious rather than collaborative. Whilst a level of challenge and criticality between professionals might sometimes contribute to improved outcomes for children and young people, in this instance it appeared to contribute to difficult professional relationships rather than common ground. This leads for a consideration of what might be underlying or 'underneath' this, particularly when using a critical realist perspective. Further exploring the relationships between LA SEND staff and EPs was therefore particularly salient within my analysis.

EP 3: *I'd love to be able to just pick up the phone and not see a message from them (LA SEND staff] and think, oh, gosh, what have I done wrong? I think there's kind of some historic stuff, in terms of relations haven't always been great, and I think there's a bit of a anti-EP team kind of mentality.*

From a theoretical perspective, the reference to an 'anti EP team' mentality suggests role conflicts arising from 'in'/'out' groups, as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Most EPs described how they had very limited contact with LA SEND staff, and there were few opportunities to work together to co-construct a definition of 'good' psychological advice towards EHC needs assessment, unlike that noted in Capper & Soan's (2022) analysis of EP and LA SEND staff relationships.

EP 1: *I rarely know the name of the coordinator in charge of drafting the plan. [Working together is] non-existent.*

EP 2: *I have very little to do with them [LA SEND team] which is a shame.*

Questions around co-working and co-location were explored with EPs. Co-working is a model of working together but not in a physical space, and co-location is working in the same physical space. Despite sitting closely together in a shared office, EPs often felt that this alone was not enough to encourage close working relationships with LA SEND staff, therefore leading them to work in a siloed approach.

EP 1: *As it stands, you don't talk to each other. You can be sitting next to each other and not talk the whole day. The difference between… you and them [LA SEND staff] could be depicted by the Channel Gorge. Different bubbles, completely.*

EP 3: *In theory, they sit next to us, but I couldn't tell you a single name of any of them. I know the names based on the [Microsoft] team's icon, but I wouldn't be able to put the names to the people.*

In considering co-working and co-location, Leadbetter et al. (2007) noted that being co-located could encourage communication and information sharing between different professionals, although this was not always the case. This suggests that there are other important factors to consider. Accordingly, within this data, EPs questioned the culture within the LA and did not feel it was conducive to strong working relationships, despite some strategic initiatives to improve this, such as inviting LA SEND staff to team meetings.

EP 1: *You can have all these strategies and plans. But if the culture isn't there, the relationships aren't there, and the motivation to engage is not there. it takes an effort if the culture is not embedded.*

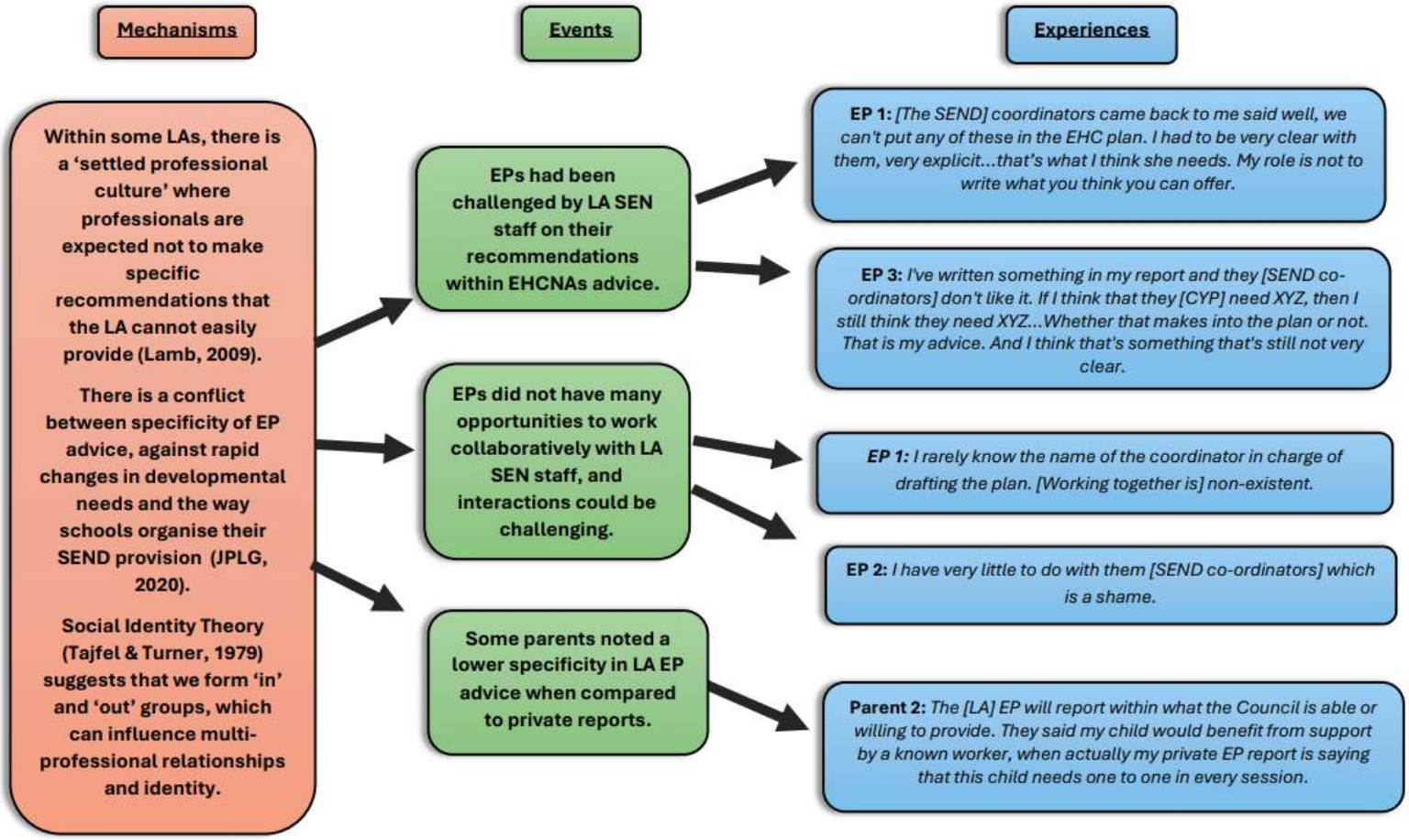
EP 3: *We've tried to invite them to team meetings. They haven't come.*

Communication at a management level however, between senior EPs and LA SEND staff was felt to be somewhat stronger, and this allowed for the prioritisation of workload, as well as support from a senior EP to help LA staff interpret EP reports. However, as the stronger links between management in these two departments did not correlate with open communication between frontline staff themselves, the communication was seen by some EPs as coming through a hierarchy, with messages being passed through management rather than to the source.

> **EP 3:** *Sometimes it comes through line management, that can feel a bit more… I don't want to use the word threatening, but it can feel a little bit more like a critique. Then it just sounds like a bigger problem rather than something we could hash out together.*

Figure 17:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme F: It was the Local Authority Vs the Local Authority



Note. Figure 17 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme F '*it was the local authority vs the local authority'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature and theoretical base.

Subtheme G: Co-production: We Don't Really do it Yet. Amid the conflicts noted above, many participants felt strongly that a higher focus on co-production would be fruitful to build relationships and work together, both with families and professionals. In theory, this was felt a critical way to reduce dissatisfaction and disagreement within the EHC process. However, many participants noted a co-production approach was very rare and often reserved for resolution of significantly complex disagreements. Whilst Boddison & Soan (2022) coined the *'illusion of co-production'* within the EHCP process, participants here seemed to be under no illusion in recognising a significant lack of co-production. The capacity of the LA and time were often cited when noting a lack of co-production.

> **Parent 3:** *I pointed out we needed to do a co-production. And she [LA officer] started making excuses as to why we couldn't do that, you know, timings and it will only delay things.*

> **EP 4:** *We don't really do it yet. Co production meetings are only used when it's to prevent an escalation. Each of those case workers is dealing with hundreds of cases, and so if I was to start suggesting we did a co-production for everyone, they just simply would not have time to do it.*

A lack of co-production was felt to mean professionals, parents and children/young people were less likely to work together, but instead each person made their contributions in isolation, adopting a 'siloed' approach. This was seen as further inducing conflict and disagreements.

> **EP 4:** *Why don't we just get together? Because then you haven't got parents or school coming back and saying 'I don't think this is right. I don't agree with this'. You know, we could hash all that out and avoid it again. Escalation, complaints, all that sort of stuff.*

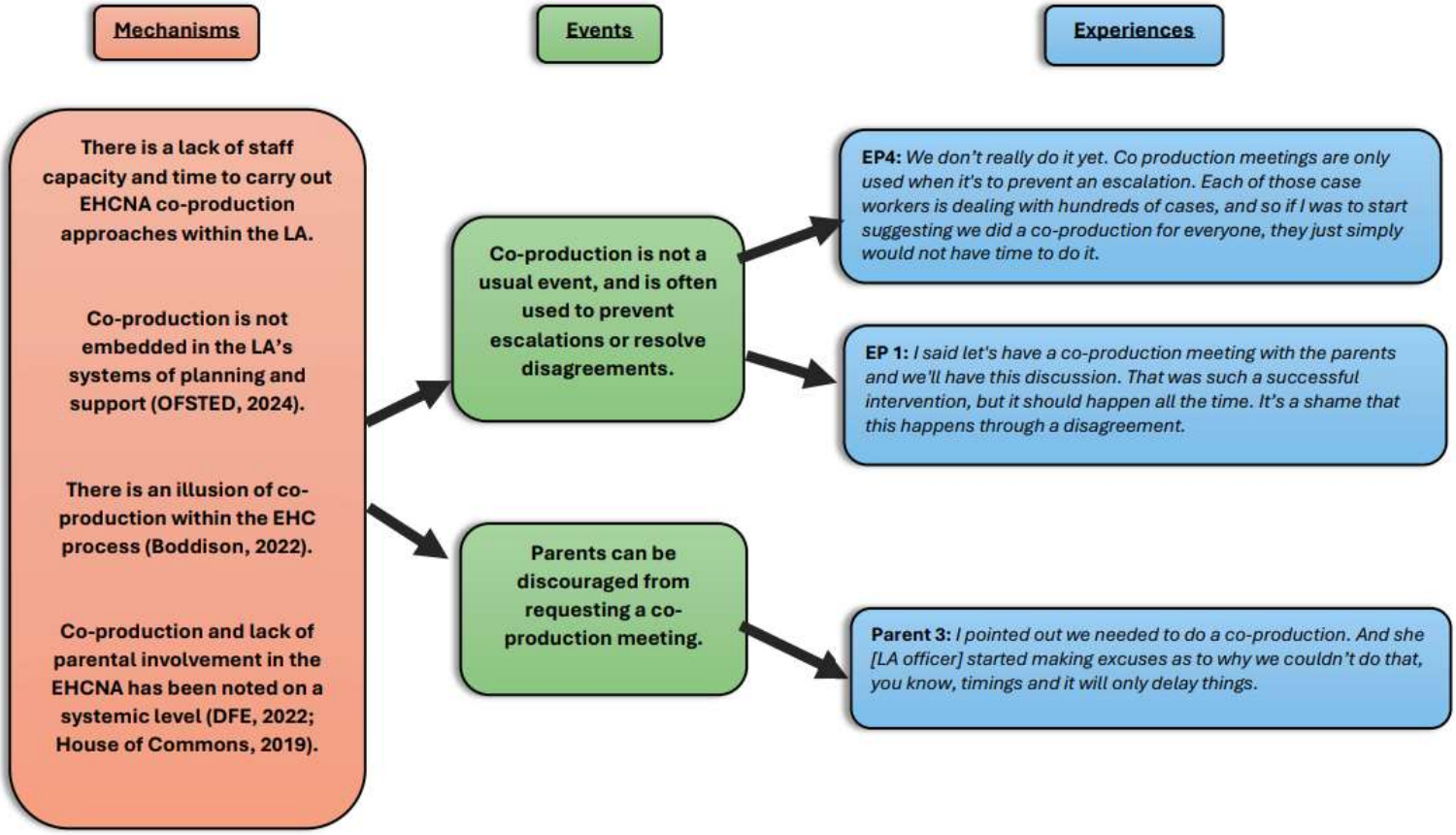
Where co-production had taken place however, it was noted to be a positive experience, despite resulting from initial conflict.

> **EP 1:** *I said let's have a co-production meeting with the parents and we'll have this discussion. That was such a successful intervention, but it should happen all the time. It's a shame that this happens through a disagreement.*

A lack of meaningful co-production and parental involvement has also been noted at the government level (House of Commons, 2019). This is one motivation for reform of the EHCP process, as cited by the SEND review (DfE, 2022). However, the SEND review does not shy away from a key motivation for cost efficiencies, even though genuine co-production requires time, resources, and money (Boddison & Soan, 2022).

Figure 18:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme G: Co-production: We Don't Really do it Yet



Note. Figure 18 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme G '*co-production: we don't really do it yet'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature

Theme Three: The Digitalisation of the EHC Needs Assessment: Forgotten Human Needs

This theme explores the continually evolving role of technology within the EHCNA process. Participants across cohorts identified the various ways in which technology was both a help and a hindrance. The technology related to the EHCNA included the use of online EP assessments and consultations, the online portal through which the EHCNA

request could be submitted and tracked, as well as the role of search engines/social media as a way of understanding the process or special educational needs more generally. EPs and SENCOs often caveated their views of technology working or not working with the wording *'sometimes'*, highlighting that it required careful analysis of the benefits and risks, because what might work in some cases could be inappropriate in others.

Critically, the analysis suggested success depended on the way in which technology was employed, the thought that had gone into deciding when and how to use it, and continuous reflection on practice. Professionals and parents often spoke about how an online style of work required an adaption to individual circumstances. Both curious and critical views were expressed of technology, suggesting it was still a learning process for many.

Key points of the analysis led me to consider the role of self-determination theory in the use of technology, since the key concepts I identified within the analysis of technology often related to choice and control, relatedness, and mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Whilst I did not set out with an aim to deductively apply self-determination theory, I appreciate this is the result of my interaction with the data as a subjective and active researcher. Further, I felt that this theory helps to explore a crucial question as to how human needs can be met within an ever increasingly technological context. This is particularly relevant given the ambitions to create a *'standardised and digitised EHCP process'* as per the SEND Review (DfE, 2022).

Subtheme H: Choice and Control: We Were Told This is How it is. This subtheme outlines the role of choice and control within the EHC needs assessment. This includes choice over a virtual or in person EP assessment/consultation, and a choice of how parents access information, either digitally or through other means. Some participants spoke about a lack of choice/control in the use of online EP assessments as part of the EHC needs assessment, despite their concerns as to how well this would work for every child. For example, the wording of being *'told this is how it is'* and *'that's that'* suggested a lack of shared decision making, and the reinforcement of a power imbalance between parents and professionals. A lack of choice in using technology towards assessment might also be seen to reduce truly genuine and informed consent, since this was often not framed as an option.

> **Parent 3:** *I queried whether doing it [EP assessment] online was the best for a child with the complex diagnosis that he has got, whether that was the right way to do it… We were told this is how it is.*

> **SENCO 1:** *Some of them [EPs] can only do it online, and that's that.*

During the COVID pandemic, online EP assessments and consultations became the 'norm' as in many cases this was not a choice. Since then, the use of online technology has continued to be a common way to conduct EP assessments. This has recently prompted the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) to issue guidance for remote assessments and involvements (AEP, 2024). Whilst the AEP does not stipulate a direct choice should be provided, it does say state remote assessment **must** be in the best interests of the child, which includes consideration of their wishes. The AEP notes this is particularly important in the EHC process, since it can be a '*potentially significant and life impacting event'.* From a rights-based perspective, the United Nations Convention also suggests children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, including during statutory assessment processes (UNC, Articles 12.1/12.2, 1989).

Where choices were offered in the use of technology, this was felt to be an empowering tool. In some circumstances, online EP assessments for children and young people were the favoured method and were purposefully chosen for ethical and person-centred considerations. For example, being online could afford more autonomy and less pressure for some children and young people.

> **EP 3:** *They have an element of control over that in terms of do they want to appear on the screen? Do they want to have their microphone muted? In person… just puts a lot of pressure on. The fact that they can get up, leave, walk out…there's not that kind of social awkwardness of being able to do that in person. I think that's a real benefit.*

One EP noted virtual means could be a more familiar and natural form of communication given the popularity of online communication, particularly for teenagers for whom this could be an important part of their identity, which may in turn inform young people's decision making if they are offered the choice of an online assessment. To my knowledge, there is no research exploring the use of virtual EP assessments. However, there is broader research suggesting that online communication with professionals can alleviate the anxiety of a face-to-face meeting and allow children and young people to feel empowered (Hudson, 2006; Van der Kleii et al., 2017).

> **EP 4:** *There's definitely some young people, probably more teenagers I've found, have preferred to work online. There's something about not having to sit in a room with a stranger… it's their preferred mode of communication, isn't it? Their whole lives are online.*

> **SENCO 2:** *It really depends on the child, and you've got to seek the advice from the parents and the staff who know them to make that decision.*

Furthermore, EPs sometimes felt that online assessments could be less intrusive for children and young people given the often-one-off nature of EHC assessments. This was particularly the case in where children were not in school. In this sense, being online was felt to be a less invasive alternative to home visits.

> **EP 3:** *Home is their safe space for a reason… and being a professional that arrives, does something on a one-off basis, and then leaves again.. I'm really conscious of intruding their safe space.*

Professional participants found that giving a choice to meet online could also lead to better availability of the important people involved in the EHC process, and therefore more stakeholders could contribute their views. In particular, the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015, 9.22) stipulates that *"assessments should be organised in a way which minimises demands on families"*. Online meetings also did not require a physical space (which could be limited in some schools). When online meetings were well planned and co-ordinated, it was felt to allow for a richer conversation.

> **EP 4:** *It's definitely better for some parents, for example if they've got other children who they were would have to otherwise get childcare for. And for some schools…they haven't always got a room we can use, so it's easier if the SENCO can be online.*

> **EP 3:** *I find consultation online actually sometimes can be better… I haven't had to grab a teacher for 20 minutes and actually all they're thinking about is the next lesson. Online ones tend to be a little bit less distracted and more in the moment. Sometimes I find that can be a bit richer in terms of discussion.*

> **SENCO 1:** *Even remotely, if they give you the opportunity for a conversation, it's just that you can talk about a child and have the class teacher in at the same time.*

Some parents spoke about drawing on technology to enhance their understanding of their child's diagnosis, needs, or the EHC process. At times this was helpful, but at other times it could be intimidating and anxiety provoking process. However, participants were often driven to do so in feeling they didn't have the support elsewhere, reducing the element of choice. Parents sometimes felt overwhelmed by the amount of information online and wanted the choice of more personalised advice and guidance. This chimes with the recommendations by Lamb (2009), which called for great engagement with parents in favour of standardised and generic advice (Daniels et al., 2019).

Parents often spoke about being 'signposted' to information online after reaching out for support, including from the independent advice service, but how this could leave them no

better off, particularly if the information was generic. The provision of generic advice was felt to be inadequate by Lamb (2009), who recommended personalised advice and support for parents.

One parent spoke about being sent electronic link after link, although they were either not age appropriate, not available within the local area, or did not address the specific concern that was raised (in this case, that the child didn't have any friends).

> **Parent 1:** *They sent me a list of links. The majority of them only deal with children up to 12. One of the links didn't work in [this local authority]. I was after suggestions of things that would do with helping [my child] make friends. They sent me some more links…but it didn't have any of that.*
>
> *All the needs, all the plans…I would write it all down then I would go away and google what it was, to access it like that… but I think it would be more helpful if there was more of a solid communication.*
>
> **Parent 4:** *I don't wanna be a Google warrior, cause if you read it all sounds very horrendous and we're fortunately not on that end of the spectrum that he has.*

This aligns with Crane et al. (2023) who noted that the internet is a common source of information for parents within EHC processes, although can be confusing. **Parent 2** also spoke to the importance of parent-led online resources, such as the 'special needs jungle', noting that *"their responses are very on the nail".*

This might be associated with a lack of personalised support that is accessible to parents, for example, **SENCO 1** noted "*there's no one really there to reassure parents*". Within my research, participants did not directly reference the local authorities' online local offer of support. However, wider research suggests that there is considerable variation between local authorities, with many local authorities failing to outline information accessibly and in adherence with the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) (Matthews et al., 2024). This suggests further work may be required in terms of a strong offer of online support for children, young people and parents/carers.

Subtheme I: Virtual Relationships: Are we Connected? A key question for the use of technology is how well it can support the building and maintenance of relationships. Within the literature, relationships are a key mechanism that can either support the EHC process, or be a barrier (Gore, 2016; Richards, 2021). However less is known about the way in which the evolving use of technology mediates relationships within EHC processes. Participants in this research sometimes framed being 'in person' as the default and preferred method for building relationships and supporting creativity in interactions.

SENCO 4: *Being online is a completely different kettle of fish to being in a classroom. Some of our students really struggled to be online, but actually find it quite easy to communicate person to person.*

EP 1: *The best work, the most creative work is done in person in these rooms, you know, in collaboration.*

In person activities also allowed for a physical presence which was felt to add value, particularly for EPs who are in short supply (Atfield et al., 2023) and had a reduced 'in person' presence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that it is now possible to consult and assess online, making the decision to share a physical space might therefore communicate that a conscious effort has been made to build a relationship.

EP 2: *The feedback I often get is, oh, it's so nice to see an EP in person. It's something that that I can offer. I feel that that's something that's valued and appreciated.*

SENCO 1: *If you're lucky, you get a nice EP that you can have a conversation with, but a lot of them are miles away and it's an online assessment. You don't really have a lot of input.*

EP 4: *Before the pandemic schools were very used to EPs going in for a morning… when everything went online during the pandemic, it became very bitty and split up.*

EPs also drew on their psychological training, knowledge and personal qualities to consider emotional containment within online working. Online meetings and assessments were sometimes framed as more challenging to build relationships, particularly in the context of contentious or sensitive topics. Some parents also put forward similar reflections, sometimes feeling that virtual means of communication could sometimes blunt emotional attunement and therefore connection.

EP 2: *My nature is to support the relationships around the young person, and I feel that that involves building a relationship with parents and schools…I feel that it's easier to do it in person.*

Parent 3: *I don't think you can pick up on everything in a teams meeting… I don't think you can pick up more of the nuances of the conversation.*

EP 4*: It's like online some of the meaning sometimes get a bit misconstrued and people take things the wrong way… In the room it just it feels easier for people to get their messages across and to feel heard. You can tell a lot more about body language, and I think it's easier to have difficult conversations in person.*

However, one EP noted that the flexibility of being online could be harnessed to build a relationship with children and young people over a course of short meetings. This might also mean that the EP could build a richer picture of a child or young person on different days, rather than the single snapshot gathered in one meeting. Given that time constraints and capacity are a common limiting factor for EPs within EHC needs assessment (Atfield, 2023), online working could be one tool to mitigate this factor and still build a relationship over a period of time.

> **EP 3:** *You've got the benefit of time. I could do six 10-minute video calls, but I wouldn't be able to go into a school six times for 10 minutes. It's building that relationship because if I say I am going to call them at this time and I do it, I'm following through… that helps build trust.*

Whilst being in person was often a personal preference for most EPs, many considered that some children/young people could better express their feelings online, perhaps suggesting there was less pressure and therefore more open communication. This was often spoke about as relying on the verbal abilities of children and young people, as an important consideration for online activities.

> **EP 2:** *My need to be in person is something that I've kind of noticed that actually isn't necessarily always the case in order to build relationships. I'm starting to wonder whether some families actually feel, and some young people, feel more able to say what they feel or to show some of their feelings online than in person.*

Subtheme J: Skills and Accessibility: They Don't Engage in Front of a Camera.
When reflecting on the use of technology, many SENCOs reflected on the suitability for online assessments for children and young people. At times, online assessment was portrayed as an artificial method which was inaccessible for some children and young people. This was often described as being unfair, since they did not have a chance to showcase their skills and ability in an environment that was natural for them.

> **SENCO 1:** *I had an EP assessment where the child was just running around the room because they engage in their communication book, not in front of a camera. It was such a false setup. I've had non-verbal children who wouldn't even acknowledge or look at the monitor during a virtual assessment…what are you getting from that?*

This suggests that online assessment could be outside of some children and young people's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is defined as what a child can do with help. However, despite trying to help children access virtual assessments, many SENCOs described struggling to do so. This might suggest that either online assessments could be

beyond some children and young people's current ZPD, or that professionals might need to develop ways to make online assessments more accessible. This also raises questions as to how meaningfully an EP could capture a child's strengths, despite this being an expectation within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015).

> **SENCO 2:** *So, for him that [EP virtual assessment] worked really well… if I was to try and get some other children on there, it probably wouldn't work. It just depends on the child, how much they like to converse.*

Online assessment also raises questions as to the context of assessment and applicability to a school context, leading some participants to conclude that online assessments were not reflective of learners within a school environment. This goes to the heart of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) critique of the way psychologists understand child development. Through an ecological systems theory lens, it was argued at the time that the decontextualised assessment of children leads to *"the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations, with strange adults, for the briefest possible period of time".* Instead, Bronfenbrenner's model argued that understanding a child (and by implication their needs) needs to happen within a *'natural setting'*.

Decontextualised assessments (such as those within a clinic setting rather than school) have since been noted to contribute towards a deficit model and lead to an over focus on the individual rather than their environment (Norwich, 2016). It is therefore possible that online assessments may lead to a skewed picture of a child and run the risk of minimising environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystemic model was also developed in critique of understanding child development in unfamiliar circumstances, which adds theoretical weight to this point. However, further research is required since I am not aware of any research looking at online EP assessments specifically.

> ***SENCO 4****: You're not actually seeing what they're like in the situation you're supposed to be viewing them in, so you end up getting a skewed picture.*

> ***SENCO 2:*** *Some children need to be observed, and others need to have little practical tasks… it really depends on the child.*

While EPs might be able to consult with school staff to 'fill in the gaps' left from a virtual assessment, it was felt crucial that they speak with whoever was best placed to understand the child.

> **SENCO 1:** *Sometimes the EP can only spare a phone call. And you're like, well I don't know [the child] very well…. I'm not in there all day, every day with the children, you know?*

As well as considering the skills required for children and young people to access virtual assessments, this analysis also considered the skills that the adults around them needed to develop. EPs considered how their role had developed with the move to online assessments and consultations, and how this required the development of new skills, as well as an effortful application of their existing skills.

> **EP 3:** *If I'm going to do something online, I would always then work harder with that connection… in terms of sending my one-page profile, maybe having an introduction before I had the proper meeting, which I probably do so less in person.*

The use of technology required EPs to attend to emerging ethical considerations, so that they could practice competently and safely. One EP raised questions around safeguarding during virtual assessments. Whilst being online could afford autonomy to children and young people who could decide whether to turn on their camera, this could make it harder to ensure both physical and psychological safety. This was particularly problematic when discussing sensitive topics. Further, EPs may also find it harder to assess ongoing consent when they cannot attune to children and young people's body language and emotional state.

> **EP 4:** *I do worry sometimes about the safeguarding issues…How do I really know they're ok and they're really safe? They can just disappear and turn the camera off.*

As well as the use of technology for assessment purposes, some participants also commented on the increasing use of technology for administrative purposes within the EHCNA process. SENCOs noted this required continuous development of their skills. One recent change within the LA is the use of an EHC portal. This allows the online submission and tracking of an EHC needs request. However, SENCOs noted that they were often not consulted on such changes, and therefore these could come as a surprise. Further, SENCOs noted a lack of training for new systems such as the portal. While training has often been often recommended for professionals on the procedural elements of the EHC process (Adams et al., 2017; Cochrane, 2016; Gore, 2016), there has not been the same focus on training of the 'digitalisation' of the EHCP process, despite this being a part of the planned SEND reforms (DfE, 2022).

> **SENCO 1:** *There wasn't any training. You're just shown how to login and you have to work it out yourself. There's bits on there, like working towards adulthood, and I don't know if I should be filling that out.*

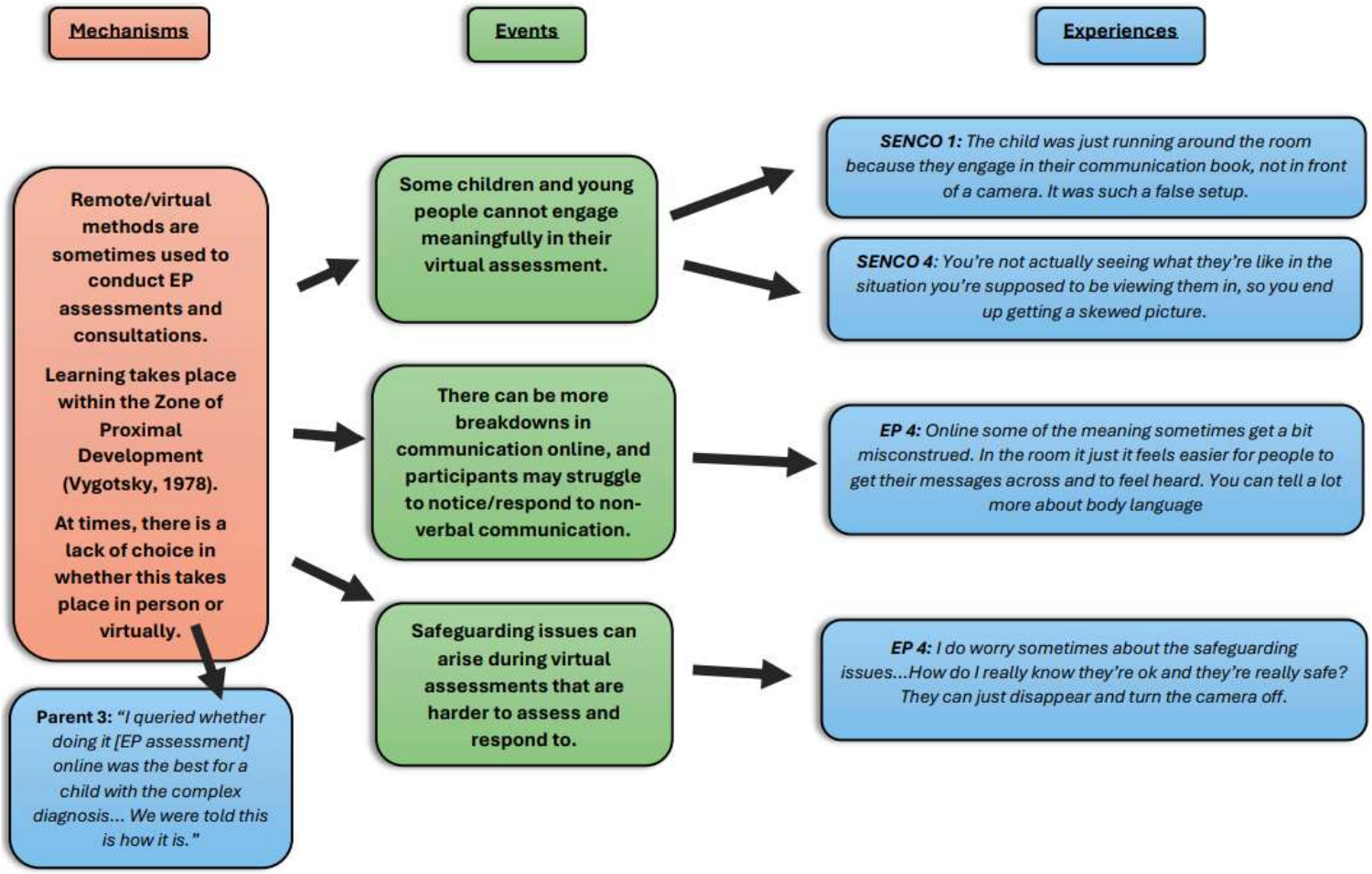
One SENCO also reflected on the use of technology to keep SENCOs informed about changes to the EHC process within the local area, for example, e-mails and

newsletters. Mass communication methods were felt to contribute to information overload at times, with important information therefore becoming buried under a barrage of information.

> ***SENCO 2:*** *I didn't even know it [the portal] was a thing until I happened to just look at one of the newsletters. There was no training. They do like to spring stuff on us, and say, oh, well it was in the newsletter. But SENCO's get millions of emails and we don't always have time to read every newsletter that comes through*

Figure 19:

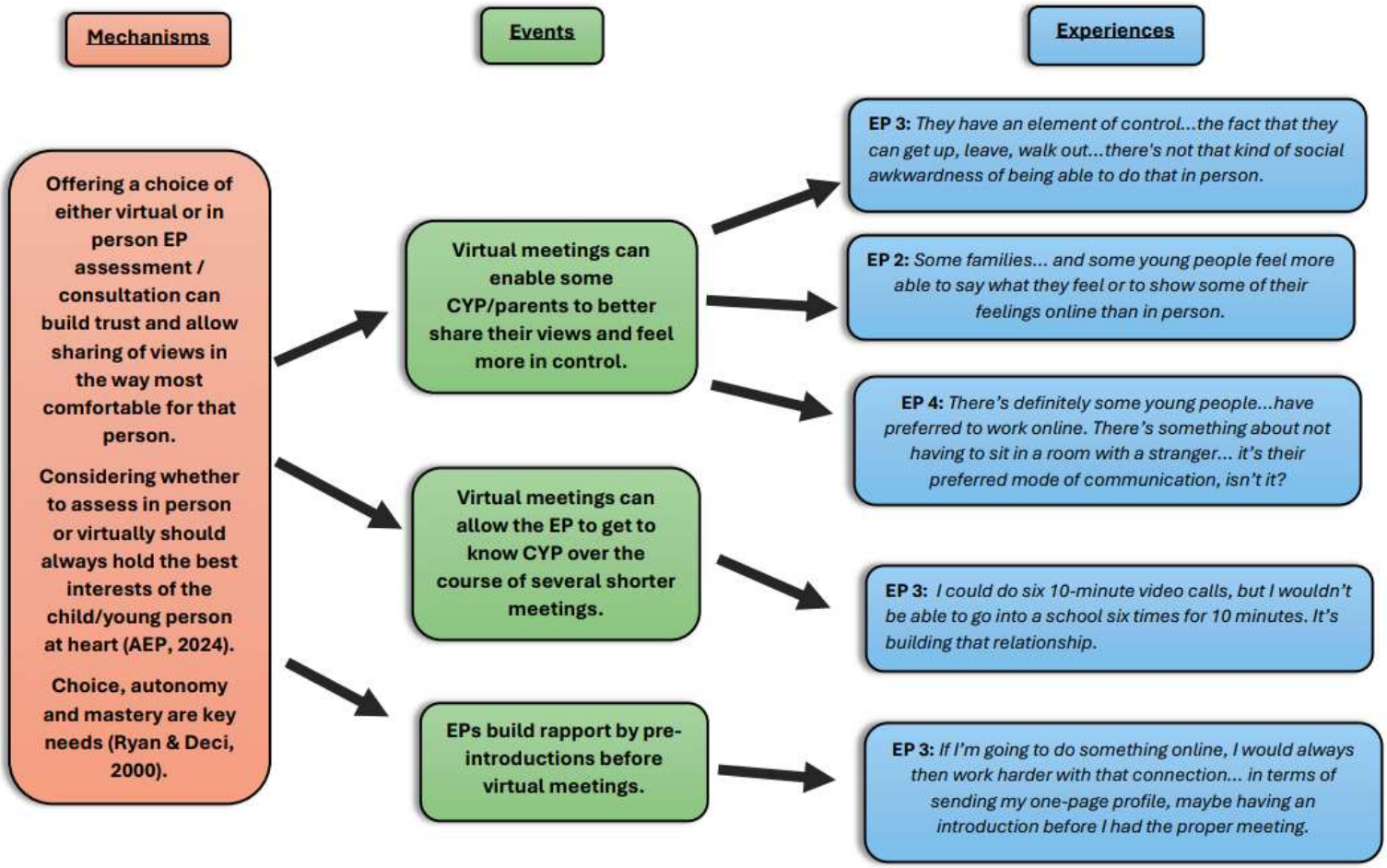
Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Theme 3: The Digitalisation of the EHC Needs Assessment: Forgotten Human Needs (1 of 2)



Note. Figure 19 presents the first of two critical realist thematic analyses (Fryer, 2022) of theme three, *'the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment: forgotten human needs'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature and theoretical base.

Figure 20:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Theme 3: The Digitalisation of the EHC Needs Assessment: Forgotten Human Needs (2 of 2)



Note. Figure 20 presents the final critical realist thematic framework analysis (Fryer, 2022) of theme three, *'the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment: forgotten human needs'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature and theoretical base.

Theme Four: It Can Make a Difference: But it's Not a Golden Ticket

This theme explores participant's views of the impact of the EHC needs assessment process. Mixed views were gathered from participants on the difference it could make. Participants often cited ways it could help such as extra support, or a specialist placement. However, the assessment (and subsequent EHCP) was by no means considered a guarantee of improving a child or young person's situation. Even with a completed EHCP, some children and young people remained out of education or not receiving the support detailed in their plan. In this sense, EHCPs were not a 'golden ticket' that automatically

ensured appropriate support for children and young people, despite this being a reference within governmental departments (Ofsted & CQC, 2017, par 30). This has since become a somewhat notorious phrase, as explored within the parent forum Special Needs Jungle (SNJ) article entitled *'uncovering the origin of the evil EHCP golden ticket narrative' (*Smith, 2023)

> **Parent 2:** *The mentality that an EHCP is a golden ticket is an absolute slap in the face to the people whose children are not getting the education they're entitled to.*

Subtheme K: Action and Accountability: We are Realising we Have a Duty of Care. The EHCNA itself was often not considered to be the 'intervention' which made a difference, but instead it depended on the follow up and implementation that mattered most. This subtheme therefore explores the actions and accountability resulting from the EHCNA process. For example, **Parent 4** described how their child's EHCP was not followed in full following the assessment but noted "*that's not the fault of the plan, is it?"*

In this sense, the EHC plan was a mechanism by which to potentially increase accountability. However, parental views of the completed EHCP ranged from adequate up to not even recognising their child in the document. This then required further intervention from parents in challenging the contents of their child's EHCP.

> **Parent 3:** *We literally didn't recognise him [in the EHCP]. There was no mention of the last three years. He refused to go to school… that wasn't in there.*

A key outcome of the assessment was seen to be the 'formalness' and legal status of the EHCP. Having an EHCP was noted to prompt more frequent contact and planning with parents, which has also been noted by Riddell (2020). SENCOs often noted that the formality and legal status of an EHCP increased the schools' sense of duty towards children and young people. This suggested a more pro-active role for SENCOs and teachers for children with an EHCP, as opposed to children and young people still going through the graduated approach.

> **SENCO 3:** *Once there's a legal document in place, I think SENCOs are realising, right, ok, we have a duty of care to carry out these targets.*

> **SENCO 1:** *It means that teachers can step up a bit more and pay a bit more attention. We have more regular meetings with parents, more considered meetings with parents.*

This usually prompted for a higher level of scrutiny over the child's provision by schools and parents, and at times increased support. Many parents felt that having the

formal document was a strong foundation by which to advocate for their child's needs, although this suggests that advocacy does not start or end with an EHCP, but instead is an ongoing journey. In this sense, an EHCP was not a golden ticket, but instead a route by which decisions could be challenged, either by advocacy or through formal legal routes.

> **Parent 2**: *Having it has made a big difference because obviously it's a legally binding document, and if it says in it that this child needs support, then that support has to be put in place.*

Marsh (2023) has noted an increase of 250% for appeals to the SEND first tier tribunal between 2015 to 2022. This suggests that legal routes are increasingly resorted to as a means of meeting children and young people's needs. This further suggests that the EHCP is not a golden ticket, nor the end of a 'battle' for parents and carers, but instead just the start. Within my analysis, some SENCOs and parents reflected on their experiences in mediation and how this was an unfortunate but necessary last resort.

> **Parent 3:** *We hoped they would have not made us go through the mediation process. They should have seen that you have a child who has a significant need, and not pushed our son to a point where he has refused school.*

A completed EHCP was also felt useful to support accountability within the secondary transition process, since it encouraged more involvement and collaboration during planned transition reviews. One primary SENCO noted that it made it easier to challenge secondary schools who planned to change a child's support from what they currently receive, and therefore hold secondary schools accountable to the EHC plan during transition reviews.

> **Parent 4:** *As a transition document, it's served it's purpose brilliantly. The high school SENCO came and picked things out of it, which was really useful for someone else to be doing that.*

> **SENCO 1:** *It certainly helps in transition. When you're transitioning a child who's already got an EHCP, some schools say they won't be doing that [provision]. And you say, what? It's in the EHCP, they do need it.*

On the other hand, however, this had sometimes appeared to create a barrier to entry for mainstream schools for children who did not have EHCPs. Whilst the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015, 1.27) notes that *'schools must not refuse to admit a child on the grounds they do not have an EHC plan',* this was unfortunately noted to be the experience sometimes. While the EHCP could increase accountability under a legal framework, participants did not reflect upon why or how refusing children with an EHC plan might be challenged. This is one area

of the analysis which would particularly have benefitted from the views of LA SEND staff who send school consultations, receive responses, and ultimately determine which school will be named.

> **SENCO 3:** *One particular primary school said, well, you can only send your child to us if they've got an EHCP. And this child didn't need it [an ECHP].*

At times, some SENCOs noted that an EHCP did not actually change anything for the child or young person or their support, but instead was simply a document recording what already happened. In this sense, the impact of the EHC needs assessment was ensuring a continued accountability of their current support through a legal framework.

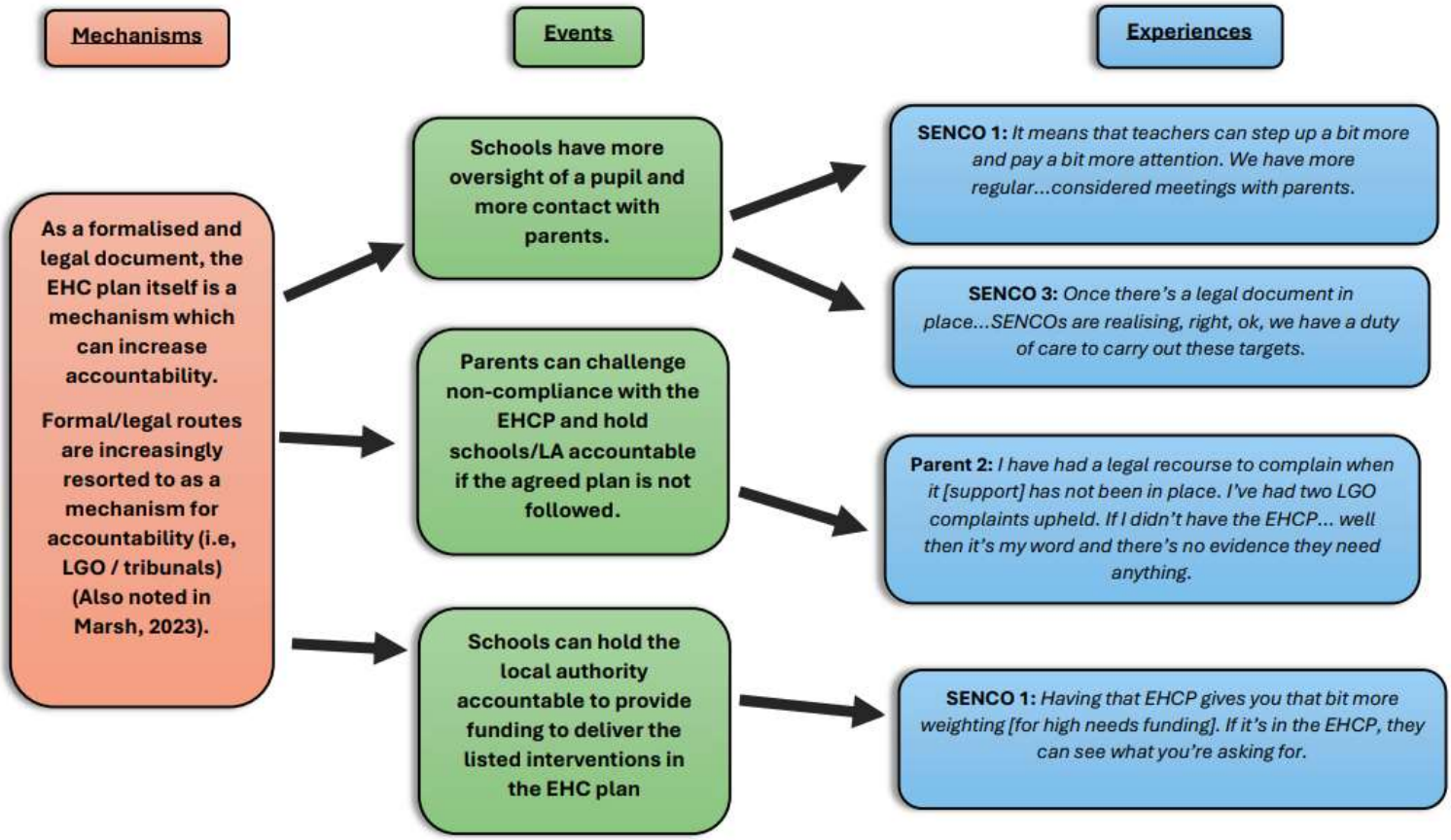
> **SENCO 4:** *Sometimes it's no different at all. It's just legalising what they already get.*

EHC needs assessments or plans did not automatically provide any additional funding, and the onus was on schools to apply for this following the issue of an EHCP. However, when additional funding was required, the EHC plan could be a mechanism by which schools could use as evidence for a higher level of funding, and therefore hold the LA accountable for delivering provision. While schools can apply for high needs funding prior to an EHC plan, many SENCOs felt that gaining the EHC plan was a requirement to access higher levels of funding

> **SENCO 2:** *If we need to apply for more funding, we can in terms of the high tariff needs. I mean we could do that anyway, but actually having that EHCP gives that bit more weighting as well. If it says it in the EHCP, they can see what you're asking for.*

Figure 21:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme K: Action & Accountability: We are Realising we Have a Duty of Care



Note. Figure 21 presents a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) of subtheme K *'action and accountability: we are realising we have a duty of care'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature.

Subtheme L: Too little, too late. This theme reflects a common participant view of the 'stuck' situation that children and young people were in by the time they reached an EHCNA, for example, being excluded, or a significant escalation of their needs, due to a lack of earlier intervention. In this sense, the EHCNA was felt to have limited impact because it was too little and too late.

> **Parent 3:** *They refused help to begin with. Then, once they had been forced to assess, again they did nothing. And his mental health really suffered. We're not sure when that will really recover.*

> **P2:** *Delayed support put in place causes immense trauma…And that's trauma that is happening [at] absolutely key developmental stages.*

Many participants described an ambition that having an EHCP might change a school's mindset of a child or young person, for example, a hope that a school would become more proactive and 'step-up', or that the EHCP plan would bring a sense of optimism, now that a plan of action had been formally devised. However, most participants found the EHC needs assessment process was not well equipped to change what were seen as fixed narratives about children and young people. One such narrative that some parents found it hard to battle with was that there was nothing more that could be done for their child or young person.

> **Parent 4:** *I don't think it had the impact I would have hoped in primary school… The school's view of 'it won't change anything' remained regardless.*

> **EP 4:** *I've been in some meetings where it feels as though the teachers, or the SENCO don't really want to be there. They don't really think that it's going to make any difference.*

Some parents also noted that their child has been excluded or close to exclusion before the EHC needs assessment was considered, again suggesting that a formal assessment of their educational needs had come too late. The SEND review (DfE, 2022) noted that this meant that some children and young people had to be placed in alternative provisions due to a breakdown in their placement.

> **Parent 2:** *It took for the actual school placement to become untenable before any EHCNA was even considered. So, his placement kind of broke down and he was no longer in school.*

EPs often noted that the EHCNA process was helpless in terms of reframing what were seen as unhelpful narratives around children and young people with SEMH needs. Underlying this was also a feeling that the EHC process was a means by which to move children to support an exclusion of the child from the school in some cases. This further suggests that the EHC process was 'too little, too late' in some circumstances.

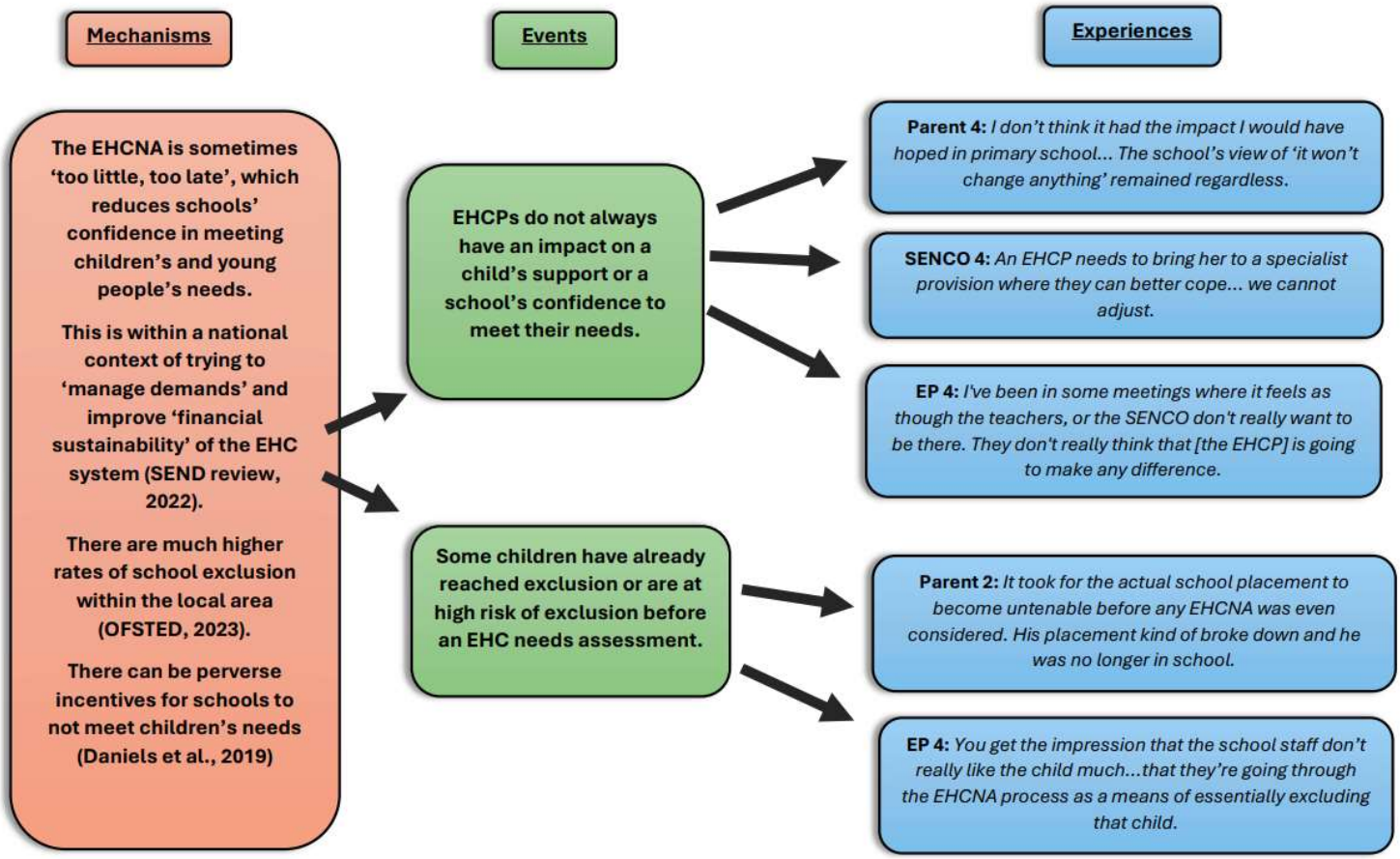
> **EP 3:** *I try and present the needs in terms of trauma or adverse childhood experiences, but sometimes the narrative is already set. And If I write it on a piece of paper, it doesn't change that…. I don't know that any EHCP [that] does that.*

> **EP 4:** *You get the impression that the school staff don't really like the child much, they're kind of fed up with them, and they're going through the EHCNA process as a means of essentially excluding that child from the school… I struggle with that.*

It is noted within the Ofsted SEND inspection (2023) that children and young people within the LA *"have fared less well in academic outcomes than similar pupils nationally".* It was also noted that there are *"high proportions of children and young people with SEND being excluded".* Further, due to significant delays, *"needs are not identified early or well".* This suggests considerable wider educational difficulties for those with SEND, including those at the graduated level of support.

Figure 22:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme L: Too Little, Too Late (1 of 2)



Note. Figure 22 presents the first of two critical realist thematic framework analysis (Fryer, 2022) of sub-theme L, *'the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment: forgotten human needs'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature.

From all the participant groups, EPs were least likely to comment on the impact of EHC needs assessments, due to their time limited involvement. This may appear logical since parents and SENCOs would best see the impact, since they have more contact with children and young people. However, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)

Standards of Proficiency (2023) still requires that practitioner psychologists *"gather and use feedback… to evaluate the response of service users to their care"*. This suggests EPs are expected to broadly evaluate how children have responded to EHC needs assessments and advice.

> **EP 2:** *I can't see whether there's any progress or change in either direction for that young person. So yeah, it's a bit of a sad answer really. In an ideal world I'd love to be part of the drafting.*

> **EP 1:** *I don't know what it achieves. I can only hope, because we don't see the [final] plan…I don't even know whether my advice has been taken and included in the plan.*

Further, many EPs identified a need for more robust feedback from schools, families and children/young people. While feedback was sometimes received, this was usually described as ad-hoc and often skewed towards either very positive feedback around their involvement, or a complaint. The feedback was often regarding the EP involvement, rather than receiving feedback as to what difference the assessment or EHCP had made, which again made it harder for EPs to comment on the impact of the EHC needs assessment process.

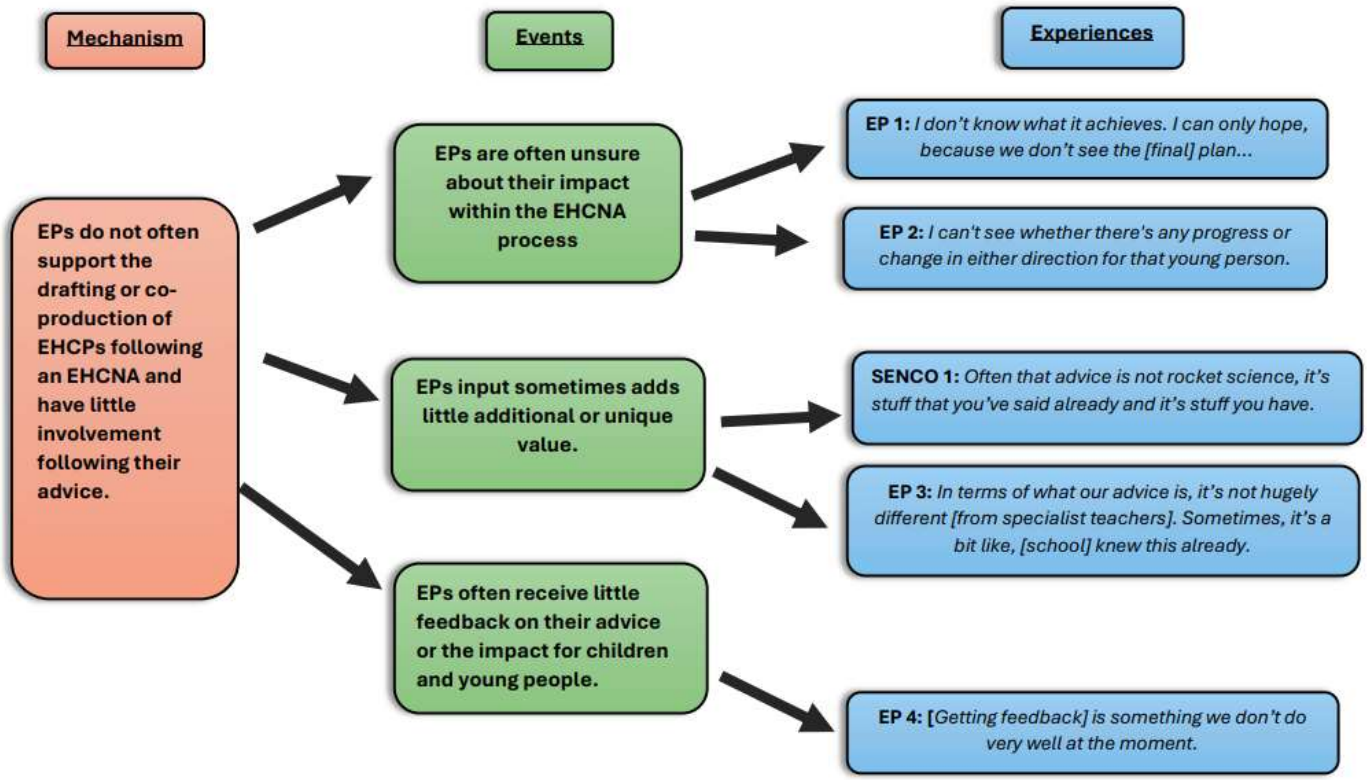
> **EP 3:** *Getting feedback is something that I don't do enough of at the moment, if I'm honest.*

> **EP 4 :** *[Getting feedback] is something we don't do very well at the moment. The only feedback we get is if a parent or school e-mails and say you know, really appreciate what the EP did for us. Or the opposite, if they have a complaint.*

When EPs considered their impact within the EHCNA process, they often commented on their lack of involvement in co-production or contribution towards drafting of the EHCP (as considered in subtheme: co-production). This therefore drew me to make the link between co-production and the potential impact EPs do or could have in the critical realist thematic analysis below.

Figure 23:

Critical Realist Thematic Analysis, Subtheme L: Too Little, Too Late (2 of 2)



Note. Figure 23 presents the final critical realist thematic framework analysis (Fryer, 2022) of sub-theme L, *'the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment: forgotten human needs'.* This tentatively suggests mechanisms connected to the events and experiences noted by participants, as well as considering possible links to the wider literature.

Summary

Within this research, I explored parental, EP and SENCO views of aspects of the EHC needs assessment within the identified LA. Key themes relate to the dominance of a system-centred model, the need for advocacy and adversary within the process, the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment, and the impact of the process as a whole. I employed an initial RTA to gather rich data around the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and consider how I am situated within the context I am researching (Pilgrim, 2014). I then organised the data into a visual critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022) which has suggested tentative mechanisms and events which influence the EHC needs assessment process and the experiences of participants.

Within my research, I set out to explore the mechanisms that may influence the EHC needs assessment process. The identified mechanisms are highlighted within the critical realist framework thematic analysis at the end of subthemes/themes. These aim to provide a tentative explanatory view, i.e., to attempt to explain the events and experiences noted within the data. In a critical realist framework, mechanisms are hypothetical causal factors that may exist under the 'iceberg' and influence events that are experienced by actors (Stutchbury, 2021). These mechanisms therefore include the values and beliefs which can constrain or enable actors within a setting, and therefore impact on their agency (Tao, 2016).

The mechanisms identified both wider national systemic pressures, as well as mechanisms that were more specific to the LA. However, I acknowledge that my research and analysis is accessed through a subjective and critical realist lens. Therefore, mechanisms are intended to be tentative and open to further discussion. The analysis has been considered in relation to the wider literature and research findings. This summary will revisit the research questions to consider my analysis in relation to the initial questions posed.

Overall research question: What might be the important mechanisms that influence the EHC needs assessment process within the identified local authority, and how are these related to the experiences of parents, SENCOs, and EPs? In particular:

Research Question One: Are There any Factors That May Create Inequalities for Children and Young People Within the Assessment Process, And if so, Who Might This Impact, and What Impact Might This Have?

With regards to **RQ1,** I aimed to explore the mechanisms within the EHC assessment process, and therefore whether the process worked less well for some cohorts of children and young people. Wider systemic mechanisms relevant to this question included the influence of statutory guidance. For example, **theme one** considered that the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) does not necessarily support a systemic view of the child (Buck, 2015) which encourages a medicalised model of assessment within the EHC needs assessment process (Lehane, 2016). This was noted to draw the EHC away from person-centred practices in order to meet the requirements of the system.

Within the identified LA, participants therefore suggested that a diagnosis smoothed the process, although this meant that participants often noted barriers in accessing and progressing through the EHC needs assessment for children and young people without a

diagnosis. This connects with Boyle & Lauchlan's (2017) observation that funding in education authorities is '*inextricably linked to a diagnosis'*.

Another wider systemic influence was an emphasis on academic progress within EHC processes, particularly at the cost of SEMH needs. This has been noted within the wider literature (Atkinson et al., 2024; Boesley & Crane, 2018), suggesting this is not unique to the local area, but instead a wider issue. A government agenda which leans towards marketised education services has also been attributed to place an emphasis on academic progress (Goodley et al, 2014). Within my analysis, participants often felt that children and young people with SEMH needs could be disadvantaged within the process. This was also linked to difficulty in evidencing SEMH needs, due to a lack of external input and services, particularly those that support mental health.

In **theme two** children and young people were also felt to be disadvantaged when they did not have a strong advocate (i.e., parent or SENCO) to challenge decisions that were made on their needs. However, this does not necessarily represent a homogeneous group. Further research is therefore indicated around how parents can be supported to advocate, either through sharing of information or more hands on advocacy, such as through independent advocacy services or parent/carer forums.

One consideration within this analysis was a difficulty faced when social workers were involved in supporting children going through an EHC needs assessment. Some SENCOs noted this could be challenging when there was a disagreement about the EHC needs assessment. For children in care, social workers arguably have a critical role in the process as a corporate parent. However, SENCOs had noted that at times that social workers could not effectively advocate for children and young people. This related to issues with staffing turnover, as well as conflicts of social workers having to go against their own LA when challenging a decision. From a SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) lens, this might suggest a conflict of social workers being in the 'in group' through their LA employment, as well as in the 'out group' as a (corporate) parent. However, I do acknowledge that since social workers were not recruited to this study, that the analysis is limited in this respect.

Theme three considered the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment process. This suggested that children and young people could be disadvantaged when they were unable to access virtual EP assessments. Some participants suggested that language abilities of children and young people could impact on this. This does not represent a homogenous group. Further research would be beneficial to explore what factors are important in considering the appropriateness of virtual assessments, particularly from a SDT lens (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Theme four suggested that the EHC needs assessment process could be too little and too late for some children and young people. This was particularly the case for those at risk of permanent exclusion, or those that had already been excluded, which was noted to primarily impact on pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. This was sometimes linked to a perception around control and behaviour vs emotional needs, suggesting the two groups hold different status from a SIT perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Research Question Two: What Role Do (or Could) Parents and SENCOs Play Within The EHC needs Assessment, and What Factors may Influence Their Involvement?

With regards to **RQ2,** I wanted to explore the role that parents and SENCOs could play within the process. **Theme one** suggested that parents and SENCOs could be disempowered by a medicalised approach to SEND, since they often felt discredited when trying to seek support for children and young people without a formal diagnosis. This was seen to influence functioning within the local area, whereby schools and parents often felt pressured to seek private advice. This has also been noted more widely within the literature (Starkie, 2023). Further, parents felt 'ping-ponged' between schools and health services, to seek reasonable adjustments within school for their child/young person.

Theme two suggested that parents and SENCOs play a variable role within EHC needs assessment processes. While some parents noted they were able to advocate for their child and young person, it was felt that parents who were not in the same position would be disadvantaged within the process. Some parents were noted by professionals to lack an understanding of roles and processes within the process.

SENCOs were also noted to have an important role in advocating for children and young people. This included the need to chase the process up, as well as advising parents. However, at times there could be conflict when there was a disagreement between schools and parents as to the identified needs of children and young people. This meant that in some cases, SENCOs were reluctant to contribute to the process. This was noted to encourage parents to request an EHC needs assessment directly to the LA.

There was also a noted conflict between SENCOs and parents, in that high 'parental expectations' and 'low confidence' were sometimes framed as driving an increased need for EHCPs. This was also found within Boesley & Crane's (2018) analysis of SENCO views in the EHC process, although this research did not gather parental views directly. Within my analysis, parents noted they had low confidence within the system, however this was explained by their previous experiences of battling and fighting the system, as well as a lack of support pre-EHC needs assessment.

Parents could also feel blamed at times when highlighting a difficulty that their child may have, which is also a similar finding within the literature (Francis, 2012; Keville et al., 2024; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008). This could be a disabling factor within the EHC needs assessment since it stigmatised parents, however, as Broomhead (2013) noted, it could also encourage parents to seek statutory assessment to legitimise their child's needs and resist oppressive narratives of blame.

Co-production was noted to be significantly lacking within the local area, despite a wish for parents and SENCOs to be involved in the co-production process. In some instances, parents were discouraged from holding a co-production due to time pressures and capacity within the LA.

Theme three considered the digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment. For parents, this included the use of virtual tools for consultation with the educational psychologist. While online methods could provide more flexibility for parents, EPs noted that discussing sensitive topics could be difficult, since it was more difficult to provide emotional attunement and containment online. Another consideration within this theme was parental use of the internet to access information, either regarding their child's needs or the EHC process more generally. While this could add value at times, this could also be problematic since information was often generic and lacked the personalisation that parents required to their child's situation. The analysis suggested that parents needed more control and say over how they accessed information, as well as options for a personalised approach.

Considering the role of SENCOs, there was felt to be a lack of consultation and subsequent training on digital EHC processes, with many having to learn as they go and teach themselves. This could make an already confusing process more demanding and is a key area of consideration for future practice, given the governmental aims to further digitalise the EHC process (DfE, 2022).

Theme four considered the impact of an EHC needs assessment. While one narrative is that EHCPs are seen as a 'golden ticket' (Ofsted & CQC, 2017), parents often refuted this idea. Some noted that the EHC plan was barely adequate, or worse that it was wholly unreflective of their child. In this sense, the EHC needs assessment was not the 'mechanism' or intervention itself that made a difference, but instead it was the quality and implementation of the EHC plan. The EHC needs assessment was therefore not the 'end' of a difficult journey of advocacy, but instead perhaps felt closer to the beginning. However, as a legal document, some parents and SENCOs felt that this could afford them some power in challenging EHC decisions and securing the agreed upon provision, ultimately through legal routes if all else failed.

Research Question Three: What Contribution Do (or Could) Educational Psychologists Make to the Process, and Which Factors may Influence the Success of their Involvement?

Theme one highlighted the medicalisation of children within the EHC needs assessment process. Within a medicalised model, EPs also noted the power imbalances within the process. This meant that they could sometimes be viewed upon as the 'expert', although this could disempower the views of SENCOs and parents.

EPs often felt that their role was to understand the child holistically, as suggested by Farrell et al. (2006), although it was noted that they could find it difficult given their limited prior involvement and time to gain child's views. This finding is also reflected in the wider literature (Capper & Soan, 2022; Smilie & Newton, 2020).

Some EPs also noted that unfortunately, children without a diagnosis could be disadvantaged within the process. However, since EPs were noted to spend a significant amount of their working time providing advice towards EHC needs assessments, it may be that the true scale of the problem is unrealised by EPs. This is because EPs would only provide an EHC needs assessment for those that had already passed the first threshold (a decision to assess). This means that some EPs may be unaware of the scale of children and young people who have not been able to reach this process.

Some participants felt that EPs were therefore conflicted by their employment within the LA, as was noted in Lamb (2009). At times, there was also a parental or school perception that private advice could be of a higher quality, as well as providing a higher level of specificity. This contrasts with Lee & Woods' (2017) finding that LA services were perceived by schools as being more robust in their quality assurance of EPs work.

Theme two highlighted that one factor inhibiting EP practice within the local area was a lack of relationships with LA SEND staff. This included many EPs not knowing colleagues within the SEND department, and sometimes only coming into contact due to disagreements. The analysis suggested a clear lack of communication and co-ordination between LA SEND staff and EPs, as well as theoretical principles of 'in' and 'out' groups under the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, one EP felt LA SEND staff had an *"anti-EP team"* mentality.

This included conflict regarding the independence of psychological advice, which was sometimes noted to be challenged by LA SEND staff, despite this being a clear principle within professional codes for an EP (HCPC, 2023). This was an earlier finding of the Lamb

(2009) report, which noted that in some local authorities there could be an attempted *'fettering'* of psychological advice.

The BPS (2021b) code of ethics and conduct calls on psychologists to maintain their integrity in the face of potentially competing duties and conflicts of interests. The analysis suggested that ethical principles surrounding an EPs work were not clearly defined or understood outside of the EPS itself, despite EPs noting resistance to undue influence over their recommendations.

This meant EPs sometimes had to justify their decision making around suggested provision on an individual basis, rather than reaching a collective understanding with LA SEND staff around the independence of their advice. Complicating this was a lack of general contact with LA SEND staff, since that it was usually adverse situations and challenges that tended to bring them into contact, rather than a proactive and joined up approach to working together.

However, a key limitation here is that this research did not directly gather the views of LA SEND staff directly, due to difficulties recruiting to this participant group. I have also recognised that I hold an 'insider' status as a TEP myself (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Given the subjectivity and active involvement I play in forming the research analysis, I acknowledge that others may view my analysis by different lenses.

However, other research has found examples of positive working between LA SEND staff and EPs. For example, Capper & Soan (2022) noted that EPs and LA SEND staff worked closely together and had managed to co-construct an operational development of psychological assessment, as well as working together in a co-production model. Currently, the analysis noted that a lack of co-production means EP involvement can be limited within the identified LA.

Theme three holds important considerations for the EP role in EHC needs assessments, when considering the increasingly virtual tools which are used in assessment and consultation. On one hand, virtual assessment can lead to greater accessibility for some children and young people, who might prefer this approach. However, for some children and young people this may be a less accessible way of gaining their views.

EPs are perhaps well placed to consider psychological needs using current frameworks, such as Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, which suggests that learning requires the right amount of challenge and familiarity. The analysis suggested that remote assessment could be inaccessible for some young people, and therefore currently outside of their ZPD. Therefore, it is incumbent on EPs to reflect on their use of virtual assessments carefully,

particularly in light of recent AEP guidance (2024) on virtual assessment and consultation which requires a decision on virtual assessments to be made with the child or young person's best interests at heart.

Another important psychological framework is Ryan & Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, which outlines a need for control, relationships, and mastery. The analysis suggested that virtual working was not meeting all these needs within the EHC process for all children and young people, although this is an area for future research to explore in more depth and scope, particularly with children and young people.

Theme four holds considerations for the EP role in terms of the impact they can have within the EHC process. Many EPs felt unsure as to the impact of their involvement. A limiting factor is that since EPs are not involved in a co-production approach, they are often limited to the impact of their report. This has led some schools and parents to find there is not always an added value of the EP, although this was not always the case. Some SENCOs also noted they seldom ever saw a copy of the EP's original report, instead only seeing a draft or final EHCP. This holds importance for the EP in terms of communicating their recommendations and supporting schools to understand and deliver support.

My analysis therefore suggests that there is potential role for strengthening feedback mechanisms, including from children and young people, parents/carers, and schools. There is also a role for working towards a co-production model. Currently, this is heavily based on EPs professional judgement. The AEP (2024) encourages EPs to consider the best interests of children and young people when considering if a virtual assessment is appropriate, however, this is likely open to a large amount of interpretation, particularly in the absence of specific research. This is therefore an area for future research which I have highlighted.

Implications for Educational Psychology and Local Authority Practice

The LA has had three local area SEND OFSTED inspections since 2017. All of these have noted considerable faults, with the most recent concluding that there *were 'systemic and/or widespread'* failures. The LA has publicly accepted these findings and is currently implementing an updated SEND strategy to address this. Therefore, it is likely that the LA has a level of awareness of the challenges within the EHC process.

My research has aimed to supplement this by providing a 'rich picture' of the EHC needs assessment within the local area, using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Further, I have aimed to tentatively and subjectively suggest what may be *'under the iceberg'* (Stutchbury, 2021) through a critical realist thematic framework (Fryer, 2022), which

has suggested examples of mechanisms that may influence the LA's success in addressing identified challenges.

There are several key implications for the LA and the EPS resulting from this research. I have broken these down into the three key areas:

1. Co-production
2. Creating shared values within the organisation
3. Digitalisation of the EHCNA process

1. Co-production. Co-production is an important mechanism that cannot be overlooked within the EHCNA process. Taken seriously, this has the potential to genuinely involve parents, schools, children and young people. It is therefore suggested that the LA and the EPS review their co-production processes, in consultation with parents, children and young people, schools, and other professionals.

It is acknowledged that as a recipient of the 'Delivering Better Value' (DBV) programme, the LA is under financial constraint. However, despite financial difficulties and a lack of capacity, co-production is not an optional add on (DfE, 2015). It is not therefore an unreasonable 'expectation', but instead an important requirement. Recent recruitment drives are attempting to address the capacity issues within the LA, which may go some way in developing a co-production model.

However, given that co-production is not a normal way of working, increasing capacity alone is unlikely to deliver a meaningful co-productive model. My analysis might suggest that training on the 'how' and 'why' of a co-productive approach is important for all LA staff, and it would therefore be a recommendation that this is delivered with LA staff (in consultation with staff as to any training/development needs). This could also include a role for the EP in sharing the psychological principles behind a co-production approach with stakeholders, as well as considering how EPs can support/contribute to a co-production model. There is also a need to consider the systemic pressures beyond the EPS which hinder co-production models, especially given that this research was not able to gather the views of LA SEND staff.

The local area could also consider the significant waiting lists for diagnosis within the area, and how this may disadvantage children and young people who are unable to 'evidence' their needs under a diagnostic criterion. Co-production as an approach listens to and values children and young people (where they are involved), as well as parents and schools. This may go some way in addressing fairness within the system and reduce reliance on a medicalised model of educational assessment.

For example, co-production may be a supportive tool to help explore the complexities of a child or young person's social, emotional and mental health, and understand how this may impact education for the individual. By adopting a co-production model for each child, the LA might better understand the holistic challenges that the individual child requires support for, rather than relying on medicalised shortcuts as a heuristic tool. This will also require a more proactive co-productive approach prior to the EHC needs assessment, as well as further considering what early intervention the LA can offer.

It is hoped that the authority's involvement in the DBV programme may support earlier intervention. My analysis suggests that children with social, emotional and mental health are less well served before, during, and after the EHCNA, and therefore this should be one consideration when targeting early intervention, as well as strengthening mechanisms during and after an EHC needs assessment. There may however be other areas of underserved need that has not been considered within my analysis.

It is also acknowledged that some parents and carers may be disadvantaged when they are not empowered to advocate for children and young people. Some parents who had used the independent advocacy service noted that they were often 'signposted' rather than receiving the personalised approach they needed. Therefore, an implication would be to review the capacity of advocacy services available, as well as ways in which the LA can reduce power imbalances to better involve parents and carers in co-production.

Further, the analysis noted that it was not an inbuilt process whereby EP reports would routinely be shared with schools following an EHC needs assessment. SENCOs found this often hampered their efforts to meet children and young people's needs, as well as their ability to co-produce with EPs. SENDCoP (DfE, 2015, 9.32) notes that *'information sharing is vital to support an effective assessment and planning process'* and that *'local authorities…should establish local protocols for the effective sharing of information which addresses confidentiality [and] consent'.* It would therefore appear a sensible recommendation that the LA considers building in consent processes within EHC process to allow the sharing of EP reports with schools.

Finally, it might be suggested that EPs review the medicalised nature of the EHCNA system within the LA and more broadly, to consider how they might address the inequalities this analysis suggested.

2. Creating Shared Values Within the Organisation. The analysis has suggested that there is a lack of co-ordination and communication within the LA, specifically between EPs and LA SEND staff. There are therefore implications the professional culture within the

LA, to support a system that works together meaningfully to support children and young people. As one EP noted:

> ***EP 1:*** *You can have all these strategies and plans. But if the culture isn't there, the relationships aren't there, and the motivation to engage is not there. it takes an effort if the culture is not embedded.*

EPs described often not knowing the names or faces of LA SEND staff. Where communication did happen, this was often described as resulting from contentious circumstances. Collaboration was noted to be happening at more senior levels between departments. However, the research analysis has also suggested a need for collaboration at the 'frontline' level, so that individual casework can be progressed. My analysis would therefore suggest a higher level of communication and collaboration between EPs and LA SEND staff, which might be theoretically influenced by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This might initially include collaborative team meetings and shared training opportunities to build relationships, and may draw on EPs knowledge and training in the psychology around multi-agency relationships, as well as LA SEND staff knowledge of the system they work in.

Further, the analysis has also suggested an attempted *'fettering'* of EP advice (Lamb, 2009). Therefore, it is suggested that the ethical principles around the independence of psychological advice are not clearly established recognised outside of the EPS (BPS 2021b; HCPC, 2023; JPLG, 2020). Some participants also felt that private services were of a higher quality than the LA. This suggests that the EPS might consider how to develop stakeholder confidence in their assessments.

Capper & Soan (2022) identified that co-constructing an operational development of psychological advice had been supportive in working towards shared goals between LA staff. It would therefore be recommended that the LA considers a similar activity which respects ethical practices such as the independence of psychological advice, as well as creating shared goals and values to support children and young people. There is also a need to strengthen feedback sought and received by EPs through their EHC needs assessment involvement.

3. Digitalisation of the EHCNA Process. The LA has implemented digital changes to its EHC assessment process. This includes the use of an 'EHC Hub'. The analysis has suggested that some SENCOs had a lack of training and support in understanding the new system. Therefore, it would be recommended that training is provided, as well as consultation with stakeholders on how well this system is working/not working.

Further, it would be advisable to consider EP involvement in light of the recent AEP virtual assessment guidance (2024). My analysis suggested ethical implications in terms of choice, control, relationships, and accessibility (Ryan & Deci, 2000) within a virtual assessment framework. Crucially, some children and young people may be less able to access virtual assessments in a way that meaningfully allows them to have their views heard. This is despite the potentially significant and life changing impact that an EHC needs assessment might have. Such changes can include a change of school which is arguably a significant event for children and young people and may have a lasting impact on their life.

I appreciate that in some respects, the LA has a lack of control itself. There is a national shortage of educational psychologists (Atfield et al., 2023), and therefore there has been an increasing need to use virtual assessments to support capacity. However, I feel that my analysis supports a review of virtual assessment practices so that the authority is compliant with AEP best practice guidelines (2024), and that the best interests of children and young people is a forefront when making decisions to assess children and young people virtually. There is therefore a role for the EPS to consider the ethical principles of virtual assessments.

I note that the AEP (2024) guidance is recent, and therefore it may be the case that work is already underway in this respect. I also note that virtual EP assessment is an emerging area of practice, and there is very little specific evidence-base by which to make decisions. I have therefore made a recommendation for future research within this area in the following section.

Executive Summary for Educational Psychology Service

I have provided an executive summary of the research for the Educational Psychology Service within the identified LA, which aims to provide a solution focussed approach to the practical implications raised within this research.

- This research considered the EHC needs assessment process within this local authority. This included gathering the views of parents, EPs and SENCOs who had all had some level of involvement with the EHC needs assessment process.
- It is noted that prior inspections of the LA's SEND services have continuously highlighted the need for changes in practice, including within the EHC needs assessment process.
- **Person-centred practice.** Participant views often suggested there was an appetite for a stronger person-centred offer within the EHC needs assessment. This re-iterates the need to centre the process around children and families, over and above

the needs of the system. EPs are well placed to consider the role of person-centred practice within the EHC needs assessment process. This might include training/development for other professionals on PCP practices, as well as a review of EPs use of PCP frameworks in EHC processes.

- **Co-production.** The research suggested that co-production within the LA's EHC needs assessment was emerging, although often it was used as a tool to try and mediate disagreements that had been escalated within the LA. Where co-production practices had been used, participants often spoke positively about these. Therefore, embedding co-production practices as a standard into the EHC needs assessment is advisable to ensure every child, young person and their family is involved in creating a shared understanding of needs and required support. This could involve EP attendance at co-production meetings, or EPs co-producing their initial advice.
- Further, to support co-production between EPs and the wider LA, it would be advisable to consider ways to support closer working relationships between EPs and other professionals (particularly SEND officers), as the research suggested an appetite for closer relationships at times. Therefore, encouraging strong working relationships may support a meaningful and productive co-production approach. This might include inter-team building activities, EPs attending the team meetings of other professional groups, and utilising activities between professionals to jointly construct a shared understanding of EHC needs assessment practices.
- **Digitalisation**. The research noted a developing landscape to the EHC needs assessment process, including an increasing orientation towards digital tools. This included online applications for an EHC needs assessment, as well as virtual methods of consultation and assessment by EPs. The feedback from participants was mixed, suggesting positive aspects of digitalisation as well as a need to review digital practices including virtual consultations/assessments to ensure the best experience for all involved. The research highlighted examples where virtual EP assessments and consultations was beneficial, and building on this would be advisable. The research suggested that offering increased levels of choice and control to children, young people and families over the use of virtual methods would improve their experience of the EHC needs assessment.

Future research

A key area for future research is the national digitalisation of the EHCP process, as is an aim within the SEND review (DfE, 2022). In my previous experiences as an EHCP co-ordinator, I have noted that this is not necessarily a 'new' area, since many local authorities

are increasingly using digital tools to manage EHCP processes. This includes the use of EHC portals which allow the submission and tracking of an EHC needs assessment, as well as EHC annual review paperwork. However, when it was recently introduced within the identified local area, SENCOs within my research noted there was lack of training for this, which made a confusing process even more challenging. I feel this is an important area for future research as well as training. Future research should also include the views of other users of EHC portals, such as young people, parents, and professionals.

Beyond this there is a much wider 'virtualisation' of the EHC needs assessment, including the use of remote EP assessments. I feel this is a critical area for research which I am not aware of having been explored before. This research has provided an insight into the views of EPs, parents and SENCOs regarding virtual assessments; however, it would be useful to understand these on a wider scale. It will also be important to gather the views of children and young people who have had a virtual EP assessment to understand their views, as well as children and young people's views of in person assessments.

A key feature of my analysis within theme one was the medicalisation of the EHC needs assessment process, which many felt required children to have a diagnosis before more thorough support or assessments could take place. This might not come as a surprise to many stakeholders, although I feel that there is an area for future research to explore, possibly in terms of alternative models that provide support before diagnosis, or while a child/young person is waiting for assessment. This is particularly important given long waiting times and local variation between health services. Ultimately, I feel that it should not be a barrier to the EHC process and would therefore encourage future research which explores how this could be better addressed in practical terms, alongside the co-production model for which I have advocated.

Another key feature of my analysis was the need for parental advocacy within the EHC process. Within my research, many parents had researched the process or had come to gain an understanding of it through their lived experiences. However, the looming question is how parents who do not have experience or understanding of the process can be supported to share their views and advocate. This might also include research into the functioning of independent support services and parent carer forums, since I am not aware of previous research exploring this in depth.

Chapter Three: Reflective account

Outline

This chapter aims to provide a reflective and reflexive account of the research process. This includes a critical analysis of the research using Braun & Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG, 2024), and Yardley's (2000, 2015) principles of quality within qualitative research. I have also reflected on my use of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978, 2008), considering where reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) complements or contrasts with critical realist principles. I have therefore discussed how using a critical realist lens and framework alongside RTA has influenced the decision points within my research analysis and discussion.

I have also reflected on the specific limitations and potential strengths of the research within this reflective account, and specifically the approaches to the research I might have changed were I to repeat it again. I conclude by outlining my hopes for dissemination and impact, which have been a critical motivation for undertaking this research. Braun & Clarke (2024) have recently devised the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) to support researchers to improve their methodological coherence and reflexive openness in their reporting of thematic analysis. I have therefore offered a self-assessment of this research against these guidelines. Braun and Clarke (2024) also recommend that the RTARG is not applied in a void, but with reference to wider literature. Therefore, I have also drawn on Yardley's (2000, 2015) principles for judging the quality of qualitative research throughout. These principles are sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. I have also drawn on guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2014, 2022, 2024) when critically analysing my research.

It is of particular relevance that I have adopted a critical realist lens, which can hold tensions when applied to RTA (Fryer, 2022). For example, Wiltshire & Ronkainen (2021) interpret that Braun & Clarke's (2019) vision of RTA is one which tells stories and rejects the concept of truth in a realist sense. Critical realism also acknowledges that 'finding a truth' is problematic due to inherent subjectivity within research, although still believes that there is indeed an underlying reality. I note that RTA can deviate from its own guidelines, since Braun & Clarke (2022, pp. xxvi) offer a recipe rather than a strict methodology. Throughout this reflective chapter I have therefore reflected on the ways the RTA and critical realist thematic approaches have complemented or conflicted with each other, and the decisions I have made with regards to the research process.

Self-critique Using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines

Background and Rationale

Sensitivity to context is an important indicator of qualitative research quality (Yardley, 2000) and RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 211). Understanding the context of the research is also an important consideration for critical realism, due to the interaction of multiple actors within a complex social world, which can produce different outcomes in different contexts (Tao, 2016; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). I therefore outlined the context of the LA within the empirical introduction to situate the research. This includes its semi-rural nature. It is also worth noting the LA participates in the DfE's Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme, which is offered to LAs with significant budgetary concerns. This programme provides targeted support for early intervention, in response to the SEND Review *'right support, right place, right time'* (DfE, 2022).

Further, I have referenced findings from the local area SEND OFSTED inspection (2023) where it holds context to the data analysis and generation of critical realist tentative mechanisms. This is relevant to the sensitivity of the research to the local context (Yardley, 2000, 2015). For example, noting an OFSTED finding that there is insufficient planning in the local area to meet SEMH needs added relevant context when reflecting on wider research data, for example research suggesting that children with SEMH needs can find it more difficult to obtain an EHC needs assessment (Boesley & Crane, 2018). I have also pointed to the results of the last three local area SEND OFSTED inspections in supporting a justification for psychologically informed research of the EHC needs assessment process within the local area, since the required improvements suggested in 2017 and 2019 have not materialised within the most recent 2023 inspection.

Owning Your Perspective

As per the RTARG, I intentionally adopted a first-person style of reporting the empirical chapter, to actively situate myself in relation to the data. I found this to be an incredibly useful tool in supporting the reflexive process, and this helped me to avoid 'detaching' myself from my analysis. I have also reflected on my own experiences and how this influenced my analysis, for example, my professional experiences. This has also supported transparency in the reporting of the research (Yardley, 2000, 2015) by acknowledging how I am situated within the context I wish to understand, rather than an external observer (Pilgrim, 2014).

My current experience as a TEP within the identified LA, as well as my prior experience as an EHCP coordinator were key motivations for choosing this area of research.

Through these experiences, I have often encountered what I consider inequality within EHC processes. In my experience as an EHCP co-ordinator, I often felt that the role was too focused on resource allocation rather than genuine person-centred practice. At times, I felt uncomfortable with some of the resource allocation practices within this role, although in hindsight I feel that I did not have the reflective space to meaningfully consider some of the values and ethics within this role, although note the literature constructs this role as being somewhat of an ethical minefield (Hellawell, 2015, 2017).

My experience as a TEP has made me revisit and question my prior professional experiences as an EHCP co-ordinator through a new lens. For example, as an EHCP co-ordinator a medicalised model was often promoted as an 'objective' and therefore 'fair' process, which appeared to hold some validity at the time. On reflection I feel this relied on a 'pragmatic' lens to meet the challenges of large caseloads. For example, there was the need to make quick decisions based on sometimes limited information, which could promote a medicalised model as an 'objective' way of determining support.

However, my learning and development as a TEP, including during this research process, has developed my view in recognising that perhaps this does a disservice to many children and young people who do not neatly fit within the medicalised model for whatever reason. I feel that this reflection has been influential in my theme development, for example, particularly in my analysis of system-centred practice in **Theme 1,** when considering the ways the dominance of the medical model can disadvantage some children and young people, such as those without a diagnosis (subtheme A) or with social, emotional and mental health needs (subtheme B).

I also acknowledge that some of the experiences of participants felt particularly salient to my practice as a TEP. For example, some SENCOs noted that EP reports were not routinely shared with schools as part of the process. This was also a shared experience and concern of mine, which I feel drew me to 'lean into' this during my analysis and motivated me to consider this within my interpretation. This again was considered through a thorough process of checking in with the data frequently, and questioning the meaning I drew from participants transcripts.

Whilst my active role as a researcher is considered a strength rather than a limitation, I acknowledge it is still important to be transparent about how this impacted my analysis (Yardley, 2000, 2015). I found it more 'natural' to interview EPs and apply my interpretation to this participant group's data, which may be due to an 'insider status' (Kanuha, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, I had a level of familiarity with the psychological theories that

EPs discussed, as well as being an 'insider' to some of the debates of the EHC process within the EPS.

However, this familiarity required reflexivity to ensure that I did not make draw instinctive assumptions within my analysis, nor fit the data to tell my own story (Braun & Clarke, 2024, p202). This was balanced through a thorough process of familiarisation, re-familiarisation, coding, re-coding, and frequently checking back in with the data to reflect on the participants meaning, to ensure research rigour and transparency (Yardley, 2000, 2015). To this effort, I have included appendices detailing the coding process and thematic development in further detail (Appendix 5 & 6).

I have also aimed for transparency in acknowledging that that a critical realist and reflexive lens means I am offering my own theoretical interpretation of the data, and considered how this has shaped my data analysis. For example, by employing a spectrum of latent and semantic coding I am open about the role of my subjective interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 57; Yardley, 2000, 2015).

Participant Data

In line with Braun & Clarke's RTARG (2024), I aimed to balance the need to contextually situate the participant group (Elliott et al., 1999) with ethical respect for the participants' confidentiality. This meant that within the methodology section I aggregated participant data, in order to minimise the likelihood of participant identification. This was particularly important where there were a very small number of people within a role. For example, there are only a small number of newly qualified EPs within the LA, therefore I have not tagged each EP to their specific role within the dataset, since this could increase the likelihood of pinpointing participant quotes to an individual.

Within the methodology section, I have also provided information on ethical approval including key ethical considerations, in relation to BPS (2021a, 2021b) codes of ethics and human research ethics. I have also provided the criteria for selection as well as my recruitment strategy within my methodology, which further aids transparency. Further, within the appendices I have included supplementary materials such as the consent form template for each participant group, as well as the approved ethical application to support openness and transparency (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Yardley; 2000, 2015) (Appendix 1, 2, 3 & 4). I have also included a reflection on the possibility of recruiting children and young people to my research, and the ethical considerations for this (Appendix 7).

Data Generation

The use of a semi-structured interview was useful in asking open ended questions. I also encouraged participants to co-construct the research agenda, for example to raise points that I might not have considered or asked about. This is useful in being sensitive to participants' perspectives and socio-cultural context, which is an important principle for quality of qualitative research (Yardley, 2000, 2015). As per the RTARG (Braun & Clarke, 2024), I have provided supplementary materials which evidence the semi-structured tools developed to generate data. I have also commented on the variable timing of interviews within the methodological section, which adds transparency in supporting readers of the research to understand my process of data generation (Braun & Clarke, 2024) as well as the unpredictability of interview approaches (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Within my methodological section, I have also outlined a rationale for gathering data virtually via Microsoft Teams. To summarise, while participants were offered a choice, all participants opted to participate remotely. The choice was offered to provide agency to participants, and hopefully support participants who require either an online or in person forum to share their views.

Data analysis

It is an important feature of RTA that the researcher is active. This means that themes and the research output is not a 'finding' or a 'discovery', but instead a product of researcher-data engagement and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 199). Whilst I had this principle in mind when starting data analysis, I did sometimes note a feeling the data was speaking for itself rather than being the product of my engagement with it. I aimed to address this by personal reflection, reflexive memos, and monthly research supervision.

For example, it felt an almost natural conclusion from the data that advocacy was a central tenet of the EHC process, and at the surface value this instinctively appeared unquestionable. However, through reflexive engagement I considered how I had developed this view through my experiences as a TEP and EHCP co-ordinator. This included reflecting on examples of how I had professionally advocated in these roles, as well as supported parents and carers to advocate. I had also developed this view through my engagement with wider literature. This supported me to realise I was actively making and constructing meaning by engaging with the data through my subjectivity. As per the RTARG, I have adopted language which reflects this. For example, I have referred to developing themes, generating data, and data analysis, rather than research findings or discovering themes (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

I also avoided developing research themes around singular research questions, since this is felt to hinder analytic development (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 89) and pull the researcher towards surface level meanings. This decision felt justified when I reflected on the final research summary, since each research question could be explored in the light of several thematic points. For example, implications for EPs were drawn across themes, similarly to the reporting of parent and SENCO experiences within the final research summary.

I also purposefully avoided positivist approaches to coding such as inter-coder agreement, consensus coding, and quantitative measures to coding. For example, some codes were not found widely within the dataset, however added analytic value and could still be connected in some way to other codes through the generation of themes.

One conflict I felt during theme development was the need to make judicious use of subthemes to avoid fragmentation (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 88; Trainor & Bundon, 2020) whilst also developing a thorough analysis which respected the significant complexities of the EHC needs assessment process. I was also mindful of the readability of the analysis and discussion and felt that subthemes were useful in this respect. Further, subthemes were useful in developing critical realist thematic maps in response to the large number of 'events' and 'experiences' noted in the data, and I feel the critical realist thematic maps may been overly simplified without the number of subthemes used.

I also note that the ability to provide analytic justice to subthemes can depend on the length of the report (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 89). I therefore felt that given the relative length of a thesis, it was possible to justify a richer analysis through subthemes. Further, I therefore felt that the included subthemes added to the breadth and depth of analysis, which is considered an important quality marker for qualitative research (Yardley, 2000, 2015).

Braun & Clarke (2022, pp. 88) note that the aim of RTA is to *'tell a particular story about the data'*, rather than representing everything within the data, and therefore themes should usually avoid presenting contradictory data within its analysis. There are however some exceptions to this, such as when inconsistency in practice is what the theme is about (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 108). Further, inconsistency in EHC practice is common between and even within local authorities (Palikara et al., 2018; Sales & Vincent, 2018). Inconsistency was also noted in the local area SEND OFSTED inspection (2023). Given that an overall aim of the research project was to inform the LA of EHC needs assessments practice, I took the decision to highlight some exceptions and inconsistency within the data, even where such contradictions did not augment towards a particular thematic argument.

For example, I have reflected on the use of participant quotes within some of the themes/subthemes. While brief quotes can be useful to vividly capture an essence or story of a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 112), I acknowledge there are some exceptions to the developed themes at times. For example, within the subtheme G *'Co-production… it doesn't really happen yet'*, a central organising concept was a significant lack of co-production, which was widely reported by many participants across the dataset. However, within the data I noted limited exceptions whereby a co-productive approach had been applied, for example in response to complaints or escalation. I felt that while it might have been possible to develop a particular story around a lack of co-production, and this would have been in line with the research output not needing to represent the whole data (Braun & Clarke (2022, pp. 88), doing so would have hindered offering a more nuanced view.

One alternative I considered to using participant quotes within subthemes was a concise descriptive outline of the specific area of analysis. For example, subtheme G *'Co-production... it doesn't really happen yet'* might have been renamed to *'co-production'*, and subtheme H *'choice and control: we were told this is how it is'* might have been renamed to *'choice and control'*. However, I felt that this would provide little insight or thematic explanation, and instead might be considered a 'topic summary' which is strongly discouraged within RTA since it does not offer analytic insight or orientate the reader to the thematic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2024, pp. 77).

Therefore, themes and subthemes were organised around a central concept, although exceptions or nuances to this central concept were explored within the analysis. Further, whilst contradiction is only recommended in certain instances within RTA themes, it is an important facet of a critical realist approach. This is because critical realism explores exceptions and contradictions to tentatively explore the boundaries of mechanisms (Stutchbury, 2021). For example, it can ask which contradictions or factors are relevant to successful implementation of a programme in complicated social settings (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Exploring contradictions is also advocated within the specific critical realist thematic framework I employed (Fryer, 2022). Further, being 'sensitive to qualitative data' requires being open to the complexities and nuance within it (Yardley, 2000, 2015).

Given that I had explored the relevant mechanisms and factors (such as which factors influence the success of EP involvement in **RQ3**), I felt exploring exceptions and nuances added to the analysis. For example, while co-production was not widely adopted, noting the impact when it was adopted supported the strength of including co-production as an important mechanism within the EHC process.

Further, I felt that avoiding contradictions or nuances within the data could have led to a narrow view of the EHC needs assessment process, which I did not feel was in the spirit of either RTA or a critical realist lens. I also felt it was important to note contradiction and exceptions to respect the views of participants, noting that not everyone shares the same experience of the EHC needs assessment process. Ultimately, I therefore felt that including the limited contradictions within the dataset was the most ethical way to avoid misrepresenting analytical points as unchallenged, and therefore support the trustworthiness and transparency of the research (McLeod, 2001; Yardley, 2000, 2015). This ethical argument is particularly important given that this research has a responsibility of care towards marginalised and vulnerable people, given that it explored SEND (BPS, 2021a, 2021b; Yardley, 2000, 2015).

Discussion

In line with advised practice for RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024), I have embedded the discussion into the analysis to situate the wider literature and psychological theory in relation to the data. This also aided the creation of critical realist thematic maps, since the wider national context beyond the local area could potentially be a tentative mechanism that influences the local area. For example, the SENDCoP provides less direction for a graduated approach than its predecessors (Lehane, 2016), which felt relevant to data exploring parental frustrations with a lack of support and identification of needs pre-EHC needs assessment.

The RTARG (Braun & Clarke, 2024) promotes discussing the implications of research, and advises these should stem directly from the analysis. Impact is also an important mark of quality for qualitative research (Yardley 2000, 2015). I have therefore aimed to draw implications relate to the research questions and respond directly to the data analysis. For example, this includes implications for advocacy services in relation to **theme 2,** and consideration of technology and a digitalised EHC process in relation to **theme 3.**

Research Limitations

One limitation might be the relatively small recruitment of 12 participants. This contrasts with a potential pool of thousands of parents/carers within the LA, hundreds of SENCOs, and tens of EPs. Another limitation would be that to my knowledge, no carers participated within this research, despite being invited to do so. I also acknowledge that inviting a wider pool of participants may have enhanced analysis of the EHC process from a multi-agency perspective. This might have included social workers or healthcare professionals. This means that there may well be a much wider diversity of views than was gathered through this research. However, the perspective of this limitation relies on a more

quantitative than qualitative stance to research, which is not the approach I have taken. Generalisability is not considered a common standard of reflexive qualitative research. For example, Braun & Clarke (2024) suggest that acknowledging a 'small sample' as a limitation is a practice to be avoided within reflexive TA.

However, I have acknowledged the size of the sample as I appreciate some may judge the research through a generalisability lens. For example, leaders within the LA may judge generalisability when considering wider practice within the area, and stakeholders may ask whether this research chimes with their own experiences. This is particularly the case since I have adopted a critical realist lens which intends to tentatively theorise casual mechanisms and hypothetical explanations. In acknowledging the small sample, I recognise a sense of purposeful but considered pragmatism to the political context which may influence how the research is received and the impact it might have.

When considering generalisability, Braun & Clarke (2022, p281) do not completely exclude the usefulness of research to wider contexts, specifically noting Yardley's (2008) point that '*there would be little point in doing research every situation was totally unique, and the results in one study had no relevance to any other situation'.* I have therefore situated the context and background of the LA to support readers when assessing the 'transferability' of my analysis to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2022, p282). For example, the analytical points regarding the use of technology **(theme 3)** may hold more value to rural local authorities who rely on virtual means of assessment, more so than urban local authorities who hold most of their assessments in person. The analytical output however may form part of a starting point for local authorities to assess and contemplate their use of virtual EP assessments, in relation to their specific context for practice. Similarly, the analytical output in **theme 2** around the need for a co-production approach may hold less use to local authorities where there this is already well embedded. I have also drawn on wider literature and theoretical bases and tentatively suggested connections to my data analysis.

Further, while my analysis has suggested implications for the LA (for example, to review the professional culture regarding the independence of psychological advice), my analysis has not been able to generate views from LA SEND officers, who may have offered alternative analytic perspectives. I also acknowledge that as an 'current insider' to the EP group of participants (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) my lens may align more now with EPs than LA SEND officers, however I appreciate this is the nature of my subjectivity and active role as a researcher, and therefore not necessarily a limitation. However, the inclusion of LA staff

remains an area for further exploration given the limited literature to date (Ahad et al., 2022; Capper & Soan, 2022).

Another limitation regarding recruitment was a primary reliance on online methods to share the research poster, which may have encouraged participants who are more familiar with technology to take part, as well as impacting on the socioeconomic status of some participants who may have less access to technology (particularly parents). Whilst SENCOs and EPs were asked to share the research by word of mouth, I cannot be sure as to if/how often this happened, and with which parents/carers it was shared. I have tried to speak to equality and equity within the data analysis, and where participants have noted positions of relative advantage (such as an understanding of the law, being able to advocate, or being able to access private support), I hope the analysis has spoken to the inequality for those who have not been in such positions.

All parent and SENCO participants' spoke to experiences of children and young people pre-sixteen. SENCOs were all drawn from mainstream settings. Whilst alternative and specialist settings were invited to apply, it may have been that their experiences of going through the EHC assessment process was more limited, either due to children already having an EHCP or only being educated for a short period at their setting (such as in alternative provision/fixed term placements). All parents had children who were of legal school age at the time of the EHC needs assessment (i.e., in primary or secondary schools), although some participants' children/young people had experience of alternative provision. This analysis may therefore hold more relevance to children and young people in mainstream settings of school age, rather than those in specialist settings or children and young below below/above school age.

Whilst EPs occasionally drew on their experiences of working with young people post-sixteen, the collected data is limited in terms of considering post-16 EHC needs assessment experiences. Again, whilst Braun & Clarke (2024) advocate against referring to the 'representativeness' of the sample, I feel that it is crucial to be transparent about what this analysis can and cannot offer, especially given that I have adopted a critical realist approach and intended to offer theoretical casual mechanisms to the LA In this instance it does not offer the views of parents/carers of those who are Post 16, nor Post 16 young people's views.

It is also worth considering the political context at the time of data generation. One noteworthy consideration is that the interviews were undertaken shortly after the release of the local area SEND OFSTED inspection (2023). This was always a possibility, although was out of my control and I could not be sure when/if it might happen during the research

process. Some participants directly referenced this report and the failings of the LA. This may have influenced some participant's views of the EHC process and the LA at the point of data generation. This may have also encouraged or discouraged some participants to take part in the research, depending on their views of the report.

For example, it may have been the case that some parents or professionals felt that the OFSTED report reflected their experiences accurately, and therefore they may have felt participating in my research would not add much further insight into the EHC process. Further, the OFSTED inspection has led the LA to review their processes, and as such it may be that they have acknowledged or responded to some of the implications for practice that were developed within my analysis.

Alternatively, the OFSTED report may have also discouraged some participants from taking part. Some professionals may have been reluctant to contribute to research due to the media attention of the report, as well as being occupied with responding to the findings of the OFSTED report. A key limitation with regards to recruitment is that only one LA SEND officer expressed an interest in participating. This required adjusting my research question, for example, I had originally intended to explore relationships between EPs' and LA SEND officers in more depth. Instead, the final research question was around EPs' contribution to the EHC needs assessment process and the factors that may influence their involvement **(RQ3).** However, generating LA SEND officer views may have added more insight into pressures such as how they view the shortage of EPs as impacting the process, views on barriers to co-production, as well as possible financial or capacity pressures.

Research Strengths

A key strength of the research is that it has generated several implications for educational psychology and LA practice, which are tailored to the identified LA. I feel that using a critical realist lens and critical realist thematic framework has furthered strengthened the implications for practice, by suggesting tentative mechanisms to be considered alongside other information, such as the local area OFSTED inspection report. I feel it is also a strength that I have considered EHC needs assessments across the early years, primary, and secondary ages.

I also feel that a strength of this research was the exploration of the virtual processes within the EHC needs assessment. This research begun to explore views of virtual direct EP assessment, which I am not currently aware of any prior research having done so within the UK. While there are guidelines for best practice in remote assessments (AEP, 2024), to my knowledge these are not based on specific empirical evidence of direct EP assessments, but

instead well-established principles of psychological involvement. I therefore hope that this research can be a starting point for further research considering virtual EP assessment.

Further, while there is a considerable body of research into the EHC process, there is limited research post-covid, which this research helps to address. For example, Ahad et al's. (2022) systematic literature review evidences a significant literature base on service users' experience of the EHC process, although there is a 'gap' in terms of understanding this post-covid. This is important since while the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) remains largely unchanged, the context for practice itself continues to change, including an ever-increasing number of EHC needs assessments and tribunals (Marsh, 2023). The justification for researching the EHC process post-covid is also theoretically supported by the concept of Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem (1979), which suggests that events and changes over time interact with and impact upon the entire ecosystem.

I also feel that the critical realist framework supported me to make links to the local and national contexts of practice, for example, by incorporating elements of the most recent OFSTED local area SEND inspection and the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) within the mechanisms where appropriate. I feel this has added an additional analytical layer by which to view the EHC needs assessment processes. This analysis supports that the LA does not exist within a political vacuum, but instead is interconnected to national policy and cultural values, highlighting the limiting or enabling impacts of the ecosystem and macrosystem on individual LAs practice (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

I also feel a strength of this research was that it considered both professional and parent views. I did not develop a list of separate codes when coding transcripts from different groups of participants. I was also able to ask participants about their experiences in relation to points raised by other participant groups, by using semi-structured interviews and developing interviews over time in response to participant data. For example, some parents had noted a lack of choice in virtual assessments, which allowed me to explore this with EPs and SENCOs to understand shared or differing views from the professional perspective. From a SIT perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) this allowed me to understand the different dynamics in different 'groups' of participants.

I also feel that a strength of this research was the ability to capture participant views alongside a critical realist framework. In particular, I feel that the critical realist thematic framework was a useful visual representation of both participant experiences, as well as the subjective interpretation I have brought to the research analysis in the development of mechanisms.

What I Might Have Done Differently

I have reflected on how I might manage the research process differently were I to repeat it again. If I were to repeat the research, I would have liked to have pro-actively shared the recruitment poster with organisations or agencies supporting carers, to increase the likelihood of carers' participation. I would also have liked to present an outline of the research aims more widely to parents and avoid a reliance on using online methods of recruitment. I feel this could have added further insight and a wider range of views. This is particularly the case for **theme 3** which explored virtual and digital aspects of the EHC process.

I would also have liked to have made more attempts to engage with LA SEND officers. On reflection, I did find it quite disappointing and demotivating that I was unable to gather their views, particularly given that I have previously held this role myself. I actively avoided personally inviting individual officers to participate, since I did not want to put anyone on the spot or make them feel obliged to participate. While this could have increased participation, I feel this may have crossed ethical boundaries, particularly given my dual role as a TEP and researcher.

However, if I was to repeat data collection, I would have liked to have present an outline of my research aims to LA SEND officers to explain the rationale behind the research and the intended research aims. Further, I feel there may have been a case for considering a style of participatory research, either in part or full. While LA SEND officers might not be considered marginalised and a 'typical' group with which to conduct participatory research (Asaba & Suarez-Balcazar, 2019), Capper & Soan (2022) noted that SEND officers often view EPs as 'the expert', suggesting possible power imbalances between the two roles. Therefore, involving SEND officers within participatory research may have supported their agency and minimised some of the conflicts that I held in my dual role.

Conversely, this may have attracted criticism in terms of 'skewing' the research towards a particular professional stance and prioritising the needs of the system. Nevertheless, given the lack of research with this participant group and their relative 'power within the system' to make changes (Ahad et al., 2022), participatory research may be a future direction for research.

Dissemination

Dissemination has been a key consideration from the beginning of this research. As I have previously reflected, I align with the argument that research should be judged by its impact and utility (Yardley, 2000, 2015). Having an impact was often a key motivation for

participants who took part, many of whom asked if the findings would be shared with the LA. While EHCP process have been widely researched, to my knowledge this is the first time there has been psychologically based research within the identified LA.

The first way in which I intend to disseminate this research is through an executive summary (Robson & McCartan, 2016, pp. 498), which all participants requested a copy of. The executive summary will also be shared with the LA. Further, I intend to present the research to the LA's EPS at a research development/team day, where I hope it can stimulate further conversation and possible ideas for continuing to develop our service. I hope this research will support a move towards co-production in our practice, stronger relationships with professionals within the LA, and reviewing how we seek and make use of feedback from all stakeholders.

To encourage reflection and engaged participation, I intend to present the findings in an active session, for example, by also encouraging EPs to reflect on the mechanisms/events they have noted themselves, and perhaps creating their own realist evaluation thematic map to visualise their experiences. Further, I would also like to present the findings more broadly within the LA, including with the LA SEND team, the senior leadership team, the independent advocate service, and the parent-carer forum. I will also request to share these findings with the councillors in the LA, so that it can have the widest impact at a senior level. The LA currently shares research findings from previous TEPs on their website, in the form of a summary. I will therefore offer the executive summary for inclusion on the LA's website.

Further, I reflected on a comment by one participant: *"The system is broken".* While some of the conclusions of my analysis may be unique to the identified LA, many of them were reflective of wider systemic national issues. This felt clear when considering the wider discussion points within my analysis, particularly with the aid a critical realist framework which aimed to connect tentative underlying mechanisms to explain participants' experiences. Therefore, I aim to work in or alongside the Department for Education in my future career, where I hope my experiences as both a SEND caseworker and a TEP will be useful in actioning systemic change within EP and EHCP practice.

Through my dissemination, I would also particularly like to advocate for further research into the digitalisation of the EHCP process, to ensure that this does not isolate anyone from taking part meaningfully.

I also note the delay in dissemination of the research, which was originally anticipated for August 2024, although participants were informed via the consent form that this timeline could be extended. Due to circumstances outside of my control, an extension to

delay the submission of the research was approved. This included difficulties with participant recruitment as well as the process of gaining ethical approval. I note it will therefore be important to situate the chronology of the research during dissemination, for example, considering any changes already made within the local authority since the time of data collection and analysis.

This reflective chapter has outlined my critical assessment of the research process, using the RTARG as a foundation, and incorporating Yardley's (2000, 2015) principles of quality within qualitative research. I have further considered the impact of a critical realist lens, and how this has influenced the decision points within my research. I have highlighted the key strengths and limitations of the research, as well as considering my intentions for dissemination. Overall, I have found the research process to be demanding and challenging, but also an enjoyable one which I hope will have an impact for children and young people with SEND, parents and carers, and professionals. It has also renewed my passion for research.

Final words

Vulnerability and Power Dynamics

I was acutely aware of the social and political implications of the chosen topic of the research, although my understanding and sensitivity to this evolved throughout the process. From the beginning of the research process I was conscious that the views of many participants may be critical towards the identified local authority and EHC processes. I felt it was important to not shy away from this within the research, so that participants experiences were representative of their lived experiences. This was also important given that I aimed to use an emancipatory approach which empowered stakeholders within the EHC needs assessment. At times I reflected on a feeling of vulnerability, given that I was training and on a work-placement in the identified local authority during the research process. It was therefore important to continually reflect on the importance of the research topic, and the aim of empowering others through an emancipatory approach.

While there may have been perceived power dynamics between myself and participants (i.e. the power dynamics of being the 'researcher' and 'participant'), I also reflected on the power imbalances between myself and the identified local authority. This was managed through supervision both from the university and the identified local authority.

One reflection I had during previous research was that I felt I took a more passive role in the research process, particularly when I perceived I had a lower status or position of power. In the current research, I noted that as a TEP I held a lower status of power when

compared to qualified EPs. In this current research I managed this by taking a more active role during interviews. The use of a semi-structured interview was useful in this sense.

Telephone Call Considerations Before Data Collection

Parents were invited for a brief telephone call prior to data collection in order to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria (i.e. a parent or carer of a child/young person who had already been through the EHC needs assessment process), as well as to outline the nature of the research and highlight wider support available where indicated, including advocacy services. Two parents had expressed an interest in the research, although it was determined during the telephone call that their child/young person had not yet had an EHC needs assessment. Signposting was therefore provided to support these parents.

Flexibility of Interviewing Techniques and Timing of Interviews

The semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed me to consider the individual needs of each participant. I particularly reflected that parent participants leaned towards a narrative approach to telling their story. This often included providing a detailed background of their child's educational history. Further, at times parents discussed the emotive impacts of the EHC process and their child's needs. This meant that the timing of parent interviews varied, and in some instances went beyond the expected length of the interview. During the interviews, I reassured parents that there was not a strict timing to adhere to. Many participants felt that they had not been listened to during the EHC process, and I therefore felt it was important to provide the space and time to listen to their views in a way which was most comfortable for them.

Socioeconomic Factors in the EHC Needs Assessment Process

A particular struggle I reflected on within the research process was the role of socio-economic factors within the EHC needs assessment process. Much of the literature suggested that socio-economic factors influenced the success of the EHC needs assessment process and parental advocacy. I therefore reflected on neoliberal attitudes to education, whereby accessing choice and control within the EHC process often appeared to rely on parental understanding and advocacy. However, I reflected on how the discourse around socioeconomic factors could unfairly encourage blame, by laying the responsibility for systemic failures with parents who were trying their best to navigate the EHC process with the resources available to them, which in some instances included private healthcare or assessments. I therefore felt it was important to be acutely sensitive to socioeconomic factors that may influence the research, whilst being mindful not to draw unsupported

conclusions, particularly since parents were not asked about their socioeconomic status as part of the research.

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Appendix 1: Approved Ethics Application

Project start date
30 Oct 2023
Project end date
30 Sept 2024
Describe the scope and aims of the project in language understandable by a non-technical audience. Include any other relevant background which will allow the reviewers to contextualise the research.
Context:
Children and young people who may have special educational needs, and who may require a higher level of educational support (beyond that usually offered) have a legal entitlement to an education, health and care needs assessment ((EHC) Department for Education, 2015).
This process is co-ordinated by local authorities. 72,695 EHC assessments were carried out in England in 2022. A systematic literature review (Ahad, 2022) found that the quality of these processes was highly variable, with both positive and negative outcomes reported. It also found that there was a significant lack of research into the views of local authority staff, including Educational Psychologists (EPs).
Research questions:
The research aims to evaluate the impact of the EHC assessment process. Influenced by a realist evolution (see below for methodology), the researcher will explore how and why it has the potential to be impactful, and to whom.
1. What is the impact of the EHC needs assessment in terms of:
-Short: Understanding a child's strengths and needs
-Medium: Planning appropriate support for a child
-Medium to long: Producing an EHC plan that supports educational settings to deliver effective intervention that leads to a child's progress.
-Other: Other outcomes desired by key stakeholders
2. What contextual factors are related to the outcome of the EHC needs assessments:
-Individual capacities of key stakeholders
-Interpersonal relationships (between individual stakeholders and agencies)
-Institutional setting (local authority in charge of the process)
-Infa-structural system (Legislation, government policy)
3. What mechanisms are relevant to effective outcomes of the EHC needs assessment process?
-Reasoning (i.e. values, beliefs, attitudes)
-Resources (i.e., information, skills, financial support, workforce)
4. What impact do EPs have, and what facilitates this?
-What outcomes can/do EPs support during their involvement in EHC needs assessments?
-What contexts and mechanisms enable/inhibit EPs in achieving desirable outcomes?
Provide a brief explanation of the research design (e.g. interview, experimental, observational, survey), questions, methodology, and data gathered/analysis. If relevant, include what the participants will be expected to do/experience.
Research design:
A realist evaluation is the overarching research framework. This type of evaluation not only evaluates the impact of a programme/intervention, but also asks how it works, whom it works for, and under what contexts/circumstances. This approach has a pragmatic epistemology, however a qualitative approach has been determined as the most appropriate approach for these research questions.
Data gathering:
Data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews. Participants will be offered to complete this either online or in person (their preference), and interviews will be expected to last for between 30 to 45 minutes. There are 4 participant groups, and the researcher aims to gather data from three to six participants per group.

For online interviews, Microsoft Teams will be used to host the interview. A secure teams link will be sent to a private meeting that only the participant can access/join.

Data analysis:

The recorded data will be transcribed and a reflexive thematic analysis will be employed (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to analyse the data into themes. This will link to the overarching framework of realist evaluation. As such, themes will correlate to the context of the programme, how it works, why it works, and who it works for.

A minimum of three participants will be sought from each participant group, up to six participants per group.

Detail how any adverse events arising in the course of the project will be reported in a timely manner.

Any adverse events will be reported to my research supervisor on the day of any event, and recorded on the UEA ethics monitor within 24 hours.

In the unlikely event there are any safeguarding concerns raised about children or young people, these will be reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer for Safeguarding (LADO) and my research supervisor.

Participants will be provided a copy of the consent form/information sheet prior to participation, which will provide details of the researcher and supervisor's contact details, should they wish to seek any support.

Human participants - selection and recruitment

How many Participant Groups are there who will receive tailored participant information?

Four

Name of Participant Group 1.

Educational Psychologists

Name of Participant Group 2, if applicable.

Special Educational Needs Case Officers

Name of Participant Group 3, if applicable.

Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) working in an educational setting

Name of Participant Group 4, if applicable.

Parent/carer of a child/young person who has had an EHC needs assessment

Names of other Participant Groups, if applicable.

How will the participants be selected/recruited?

Participants will be recruited through:

-Email to those in the professional roles in groups 1-3 as provided by gatekeeper (sending of the poster).

-Presentation of research recruitment poster to key groups, for example at professional events (when agreed with gatekeepers beforehand).

-Posters shared by gatekeepers (should they provide permission).

-If advertisement on social media is used, only approved materials in this research proposal will be used (recruitment poster) to advertise the research project.

How and when will participants receive this recruitment material?

Potential participants will receive the recruitment material once:

-Ethical consent has been approved AND

-Permission from any relevant gatekeepers has been provided to the researcher, and this has been recorded in writing as above.

-See 'how will participants be recruited' above for information on how the researcher proposes to disseminate their research.

Participants will receive a copy of the consent form prior to their interview once they have agreed to an interview (although participants attention will be drawn to their right to withdraw at any point).

Participants will receive this material via email (as agreed with gatekeepers).

What are the characteristics of the participants?

Participant group 1: Educational Psychologists

-Registered as an educational psychologist with the Health and Care Professions Council.
-Currently working as an educational psychologist in the identified local authority.
-Experience contributing towards EHC assessments in England as an educational psychologist in the identified local authority.
Participant group 2: Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCO)
-Currently working as a SENCO within a school in the identified local authority.
-Experience contributing towards EHC assessments in the identified local authority, as a SENCO.
Participant group 3: Special Educational Needs (SEN) Case Officers
-Currently working as a SEN Case Officer within the identified local authority.
-Experience contributing towards EHC assessments in the identified local authority as a SEN officer.
Participant group 4: Parent/carers
-A parent or carer of at least one child/young person who has had a completed EHC needs assessment in the identified local authority.
N.B. It should be noted the researcher aims to complete their data collection in one identified local authority (where the researcher is currently on their professional placement). Initially, all professional participant groups will need to be working in this local authority as part of the inclusion criteria.
To support feasibility, should the researcher not gather enough participants, they will widen the inclusion criteria to other local authorities. In all cases, these will be within England. Similar gatekeepers will be used in other local authorities when necessary. All procedures documented in this ethics submission for communication/agreement with gatekeepers will be applied, regardless of the local authority. Alternative posters and consent forms have been included in this application.

Will the project require the cooperation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the individuals/groups to be recruited?

Yes

Who will be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?

Educational Psychologists:

Principal and deputy principal educational psychologists will be a gatekeeper for accessing participants within local authorities.

Special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs):

The principal and deputy educational psychologists Principal and deputy principal educational psychologists will be asked to support disseminating the research to SENCOs since they are aware of SENCOs who have participated in EHC needs assessments.

SEN Case Officers:

The Head of SEND employed at the local authority will be a gatekeeper for permission to contact SEN Case officers within their local authority.

Parent/carers:

A wide range of gatekeepers could be used to access participants. This could include parent/carer forums or the owners of social media forums.

N.B: Gatekeepers are asked to provide access to participants and not to recruit participants directly. This is the role of the researcher. The researcher retains responsibility for this and for ensuring informed consent. Further, gatekeepers will not be advised who is and is not participating in the study. Once initial contact has been made with a participant, all communication will be between them and the researcher directly.

How and when will a gatekeeper permission be obtained?

If ethical approval is gained for this research project, any gatekeepers will be contacted initially via e-mail to briefly outline the research, and if interested they will be invited to a meeting to further discuss the research (and the researcher's requirements) to obtain permission.

The researcher has outlined their research proposal to the principal and deputy educational psychologist within their current local authority placement, and they are interested to support progression of the research, pending ethical approval.

How will you record a gatekeeper's permission?

Gatekeepers permission will be recorded in an email follow up from the researcher confirming any discussion.
Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate?
Yes
If yes, provide details.
The researcher is colleagues with the potential pool of candidates in groups one and two. The researcher may have worked in a multi-disciplinary sense with participant group three. This has been considered as part of the ethical approval (see question below).
One consideration is that participants may personally feel obliged to participate out of courtesy/to be supportive of the researcher. However, the researcher will attempt the mediate this by emphasising that participation is entirely their choice. This will be emphasised at all stages from initial conversations with potential participants, through the consent form, and prior to starting the interview.
Will the project involve vulnerable groups?
Yes
If yes, explain the necessity of involving these individuals as research participants and what will be done to facilitate their participation, or the participation of people with physical disabilities.
Research group 4 (Parents and carers of children who have undergone an EHC needs assessment) may be considered vulnerable. This is because they may be experiencing distress with the process or the level of support their child has received / is currently receiving.
Information directing participants to wellbeing support will be provided (in the participant information and consent form), and participants attention will be directed to this if needed (i.e. if the participant expresses a need for support before/during/after the interview).
Further, each local authority is obliged to have an independent support service for parent/carers, who can advise on the EHC processes. Therefore, information will be provided about this in the consent form, and can be drawn upon by the researcher if needed (for example, if participants ask how to deal with a process, the researcher will advise they are not in a position to do this, however specific support services are available). Further links such as support for getting help for a child/young person's mental health are also included in the participant information sheet.
During the interview, should any participants become distressed they will be offered to take a break or stop the interview.
Will payment or any other incentive be made to any participant?
No
By which method(s) will consent to participate in the research be obtained?:
Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form [and] Verbal
Will opt out consent for participation in the research be used?
No
When will participants receive the participant information and consent request?
Participants will receive the participation information and consent request once they have expressed an interest in the research and the researcher has had an initial conversation with them.
How will you record a participant's decision to take part in the research?
The participant will be required to read and sign the participant information and consent form before they participate in the study.
Are you asking for parental/guardian (or other responsible person) consent?
No
Provide an explanation if you are NOT asking for parental/guardian or other responsible person consent.
Children are not participants in this research study.
Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:
Interview
Researcher characteristics:

There may be power imbalances in the research process. The researcher is a trainee educational psychologist and some participants will be more senior in their field (i.e. educational psychologist). Participants may therefore want to influence the reporting of the data. Additionally, the parent group (4) may hold a power imbalance between professional/non-professional. The researcher will aim to manage this by emphasising that the interview is about their views which are important to the topic. The researcher is a colleague of some of the potential participants, and this may elicit 'socially desirable' responses. Again, participants will be assured there are no 'right or wrong' answers, and the interview is about their views. Participants will be informed they can review their data and withdraw their transcripts prior to data analysis.

Will the project involve transcripts?

Yes

In-person interviews:

Voice data will be saved to the researcher's UEA's Microsoft one drive, and Microsoft word will be used as a transcription software to aid transcription. The researcher will supplement this by listening to the data to ensure accuracy and correcting any omissions/errors by hand. Should the Microsoft software prove inadequate, the researcher will return to transcribing the data purely by hand.

Online interviews:

The researcher will conduct interviews on Microsoft Teams and use this service's transcription when recording the interview. For both online and in person interviews, participants will be offered the opportunity to review their transcripts once the transcripts have been fully reviewed and completed by the researcher.

The research involves the potentially sensitive topic of discussing children and young people's special educational needs.

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?

Participant groups one to three are in a profession that involves supporting and discussing children and young people's special educational needs on a daily basis. It may be that participants draw on times when there have been barriers they have encountered in making a positive impact. It is not anticipated this will be an adverse experience for participants, however, participants will be reminded of their right to take a break from the interview, or withdraw all together.

In terms of participant group four (parent/carers), discussing their child's special educational needs may be a sensitive topic. It should be noted that as part of the researcher's role as a trainee educational psychologist, they have received training and supervision to sensitively discuss such topics with parent and carers. The researcher has experience in doing so on a regular basis over a number of years and will apply their professional knowledge and experience in doing so. Further, parent/carers will also be reminded of their right to take a break from interviews or withdraw. Any adverse effects will be reported as discussed in the relevant section of this application.

If there are unresolved grievances surrounding a child/young person's support, parent/carers would be directly signposted for additional support (this is an independent and free service which provides information and advocacy for parent/carers of children with SEND). This is also included in the participant information form.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance?

The researcher will be responsible for reporting any ethical concerns in consultation with their supervisor. The researcher will liaise with their research supervisor on an ongoing basis with respect to ethical compliance, and will adhere to the information in their ethical approval.

Remote interviews:

The researcher will ensure they are working in a private and confidential area. They will also ask participants to do the same.

What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants?

All participants will have the contact details of the researcher, should they wish to discuss anything or raise any concerns following the interview. They will also have the contact details of the researcher's supervisor, as well as the Head of School at UEA (As per the consent form).

Should participants be in need of further support and advice, they will be signposted as below).

Describe your safeguarding protocol. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?
The researcher will actively comply with:
Regulatory body:
-The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct, performance and ethics.
-HCPC Standards of Proficiency for practitioner psychologists.
Psychological Society:
-The British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct
-The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics
Professional Union:
Association of Educational Psychologists Code
UEA:
Guidelines on Good Practice in Research
Health and Safety Policy
Research Ethics Policy
Research and Integrity principles
Signposting
(These are included in the parent/carer participant information form).
-NHS counselling https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service
-Towards NHS General Practitioner (GP)
-MIND https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/getting-help-for-your-child/
- Young Minds: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-guide-to-looking-after-yourself/
Should the participant appear to (or advise of) an re-experience of trauma, the interview will be stopped, and the participant will be given the option to withdraw, continue, or continue at another date.
Should there be a reporting of abuse, the researcher will follow the UEA safeguarding policy as well as the safeguarding policy of the local authority, in liaison with their research supervisor.
What precautions will you take to minimise any possible harm to the wider community?
Pseudonyms will be used for all participants to mitigate the risk of their identity being revealed.
A pseudonym will also be used for the name of the target local authority

Will the project involve any personal data (including pseudonymised data) not in the public domain?
Yes
If yes, will any of the personal data be?:
Pseudonymised
If using anonymised and/or pseudonymised data, describe the measures that will be implemented to prevent de-anonymisation.
Participants names will not be recorded alongside their recordings or transcripts, and a pseudonym will be used. GDPR will be followed. Recordings and transcripts will be safely saved on the MS OneDrive
Will you be using publicly available data from the internet for your study?
Yes
If yes, provide details about the publicly available data from the internet you will be using for your study.
Publicly available data from the internet will be used in the form of grey literature and peer reviewed literature. This will form part of the 'realist evaluation literature review.

Appendix 2: Participant Information/Consent Sheet (Parent/Carer & Professional)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

(Separate participant sheets were generated and provided to each participant group. However, Section 1 varied in terms of the inclusion criteria of each participant group. Therefore, for the purpose of this appendix, I have highlighted the different information provided to each participant group)

You are invited to take part in a research study about Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessments. You have been invited to participate in this study because you:

1. Parent/carers:

- Are a parent/carer of a child or young person who has previously had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment undertaken.

2. Educational Psychologists

- Are an Educational Psychologist who is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and;
- Have experience contributing to EHC needs assessments as an Educational Psychologist.

3. SENCOs

- Are a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) working within an educational setting in England, and;
- Have experience being involved in EHC needs assessments in your role as a SENCO.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

✓ Understand what you have read.
✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Connor Hammond, Trainee Educational Psychologist/UEA Postgraduate Researcher (REDACTED).

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Alistair James, Academic and Professional tutor (REDACTED).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

This will involve a semi-structured interview lasting around 45 minutes. A semi-structured interview means there is a list of questions that the researcher will draw on as a prompt, but the conversation can be broadened as necessary to reflect the experiences you wish to share.

The date and time will be arranged to be mutually convenient. You can opt either for an online interview (Microsoft Teams) or to participate face-to-face. If you would like to participate face-to-face, a mutually convenient location will be arranged.

(4)How much of my time will the study take?
It is expected that the interview will take around 45 minutes of your time. You can also review your transcript should you wish (by selecting this option at the end of the document). This is optional but will take further time and can be completed at your own pace.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary, and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up until the point that data analysis has begun (this means that the researcher has transcribed the recording and begun to analyse the data).

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased, and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study, your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point that data analysis has begun.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

(Section 7 varied in terms of the risks outlined to each participant group. Therefore, for the purpose of this appendix, I have highlighted the different information provided to each participant group)

SENCOs/EPs only: Aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

Parent/carers only:

Aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any significant risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as a parent or carer there is the possibility that you may wish to share experiences which have caused you distress either currently or previously. You should be aware that it is up to you what you wish to share, and which questions you provide an answer to. Breaks can be taken at any time during the study, and you can stop the interview at any time you wish.

There is also the chance that you may be unsure of how to access appropriate support for your child or young person.

For the reasons above, signposting is provided to accessing support for your child/young person, and for yourself as a parent/carer.

For your child/young person:

Every Local Authority is required to provide impartial advice, information and support to parents and carers of children with special educational needs. This is free to use and confidential. This can be found by asking your local authority or looking at their website. They are usually called REDACTED.

Young Minds also provide information on getting help for your child/ young person's mental health:
https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/getting-help-for-your-child/

Support for emotional well-being and mental health as a parent/carer:
-NHS counselling https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service
-MIND https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
- Young Minds: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-guide-to-looking-after-yourself/

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

It is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute to positive outcomes for children and young people who have an education, health, and care needs assessment. It is also hoped this will also provide local authorities (and professionals) with information about the impact of the EHC process.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

For in-person interviews, an audio recording will be taken, which will allow the interview to be transcribed for data analysis. You can ask for a copy of the transcript by selecting the option to review it, should you provide your consent in the last section of this document.

For interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams, audio and video recording is taken, which allows the interview to be transcribed for data analysis. It is your choice whether to turn your camera on.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and a pseudo name will be used to protect your identity. The findings of the study will be shared with the researcher's placement local authority (REDACTED) and the study findings may be published publicly and/or shared with other local authorities.

Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results to those that know you (for example, due to experiences). Your name and personal information will not be used, although your role and experiences you mention will be referred to.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Connor Hammond (REDACTED) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You can indicate your wish to gain information on the findings of the study by selecting this option below. This will be in the form of a short summary. This is anticipated to be by August 2024, although may take longer.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Connor Hammond

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH

NR4 7TJ

(REDACTED)

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Alistair James (REDACTED)

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: (REDACTED)

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by Connor Hammond (Trainee Educational Psychologist (REDACTED)

This information was last updated on 02/08/2023.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.
- The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

- Participate in an interview with the researcher as outlined in the information sheet.
- Voice recording so that the interview can later be transcribed (if the interview is held in person).
- Video/voice recording where the interview is being remotely held on Microsoft Teams, so that the interview can later be transcribed. (You are not obliged to turn your camera on if you do not wish).

Please tick if applicable:

☐ I would like a copy of my transcript to be sent to me to review it, following the interview.

☐ I would like a summary of the findings to be sent to me once the researcher has completed the research.

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.
- The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

- Participate in an interview with the researcher as outlined in the information sheet.
- Voice recording so that the interview can later be transcribed (if the interview is held in person).
- Video/voice recording where the interview is being remotely held on Microsoft Teams, so that the interview can later be transcribed. (You are not obliged to turn your camera on if you do not wish).

Please tick if applicable:

☐ I would like a copy of my transcript to be sent to me to review it, following the interview.

☐ I would like a summary of the findings to be sent to me once the researcher has completed the research.

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

Appendix 3: Participant Recruitment Poster (Parent/Carer & Professional)

What is this research about?

- This research aims to explore the **impact and outcomes** of the EHC assessment process within [redacted] for example, who it does (or does not) work well for, and what factors are important in a useful assessment.
- Parent and carer views are being sought (alongside professionals' views), because parents' and carers' voices are essential to the EHC process.
- Over 72,000 children and young people in England had an **education, health and care (EHC) needs assessment** in 2022. The current national research suggests **mixed feedback** regarding how well EHC processes **support children and young people.**

What does it involve, and can I take part?

The research involves a **45-minute interview.** You can choose to complete it either **online or in person.**

Eligible participants are **parents/carers of a child or young person,** who has previously had an **Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment** completed by [redacted] You can take part regardless of whether your child or young person went on to receive an Education, Health and Care Plan.

How do I express my interest in taking part?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at UEA and am currently undertaking postgraduate research as part of my training. I am also completing a two-year placement at [redacted]

I can be contacted for an informal conversation at [redacted]

THE IMPACT OF THE EDUCATION, HEALTH AND CARE (EHC) NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

University of East Anglia

EDUCATIONAL HEALTH & CARE PLAN

PARTICIPANTS WELCOME

What is this research about?

- This research aims to explore the **impact and outcomes** of the EHC assessment process within [redacted] for example, who it does (or does not) work well for, and what factors are important in a useful assessment.
- Over 72,000 children and young people in England had an **education, health and care (EHC) needs assessment)** in 2022. The current national research suggests **mixed feedback** regarding how well EHC processes **support children and young people.**

What does it involve, and can I take part?

The research involves a **45-minute interview.** You can choose to complete it either **online or in person.** Eligible participants are **currently employed within** [redacted] They will have **experience in the EHC needs assessment** in their current role as one of the following:

- **Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)** within an educational setting for children and young people aged 0-25.
- **Family Services Officer.**
- **Educational Psychologist.**

How do I express my interest in taking part?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at UEA and am currently undertaking postgraduate research as part of my training. I am also completing a two-year placement at [redacted]

I can be contacted for an informal conversation at [redacted]

Appendix 4: Semi-Structured Interview Guides (Parent/Carer, EP, SENCO)

Parent Semi-structured interview guide

1. Could you start by telling me a bit about your child (or children) that have gone through the EHC needs assessment process?
Prompts: • *Year group?* • *Strengths/Needs?* • *Type of educational placement when they went through the process?* • *When did they go through the EHC needs assessment process?*
2. Could you tell me a bit about what was happening with your child (children) before the application was made and why an application was made for an EHC assessment?
3. Could you tell me what the process of applying for the application was like for you and your child?
Prompts: • *i.e. School/parental application* • *Ease of getting advice / knowing what to include* • *Family views sought?* • *How supportive was the school?*
4. Where your views and the views of your child sought during the process? How included did you feel?
• *Child's views – likes, dislikes, education, strengths?* • *Parent views – strengths and needs,* • *Did they contact you via preferred method or make any necessary adjustments?* • *Were your views acted on?*
5. How would you describe working with professionals during the assessment process?
6. Could you tell me about the Educational Psychology involvement during the process and if this was useful?
7. Same q for any other professional involvement?
8. What difference, if any, do you feel has happened because of the EHC needs assessment?
• Understanding of need? • Support**?** • *Change of schools?*
9. Did you use any independent advice services for advice and support? If so, was this useful?

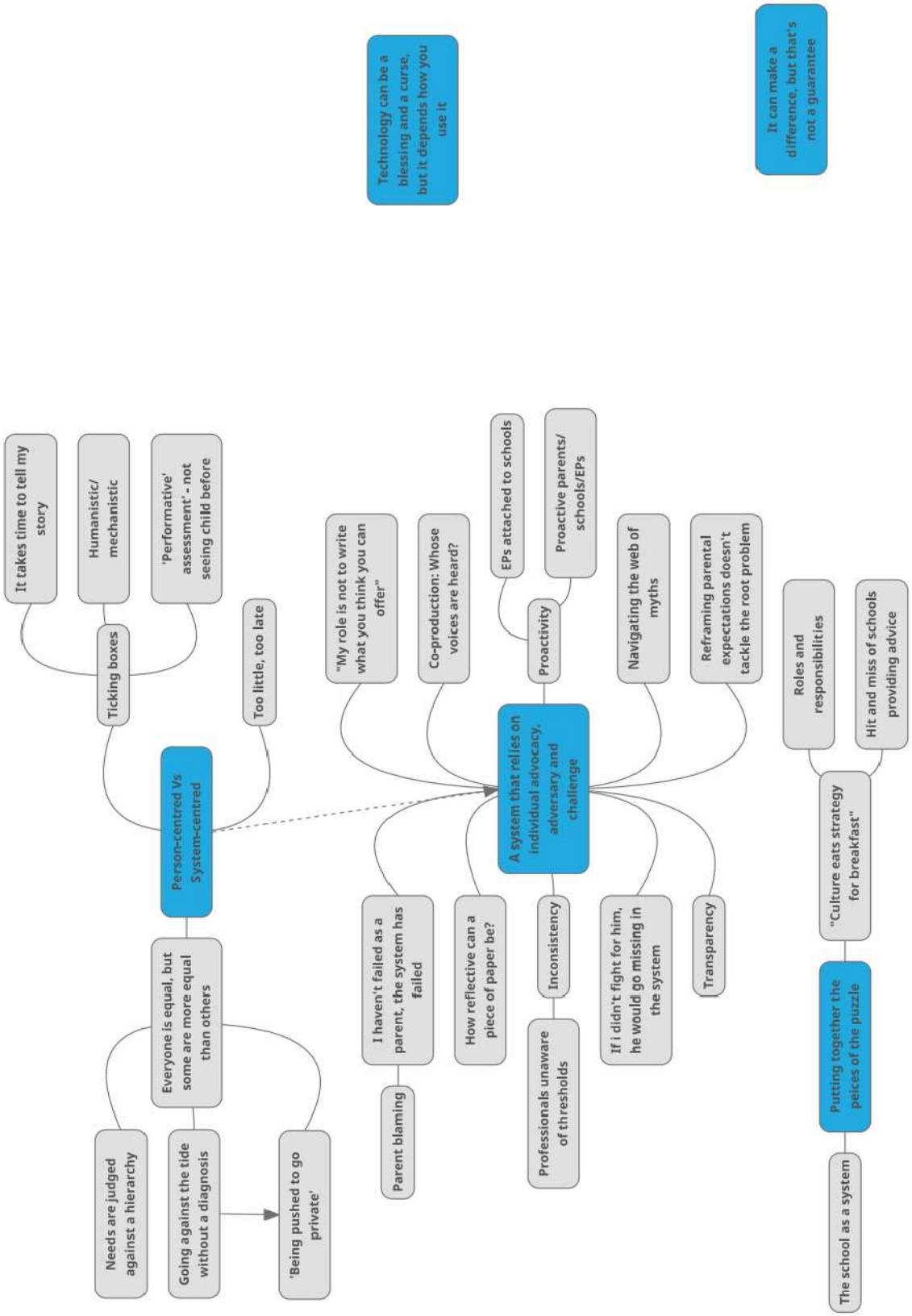
EP – Semi-structured interview guide

1. Could you start by telling me a bit about your role and experience with the EHC process?
Prompts: • *Any previous involvement with the CYP?* • *Types of need/ages/LAC status* • *Types of school*
2. Could you tell me about how you work as an EP providing advice for EHCNAs?
• *Style* • *Methods of consultation/assessment?* • *Online / in person?*
3. Do you have any experience of parental applications for EHCNAs, and if so, have you noticed any differences in the process for you as a EP?
• *Enough time to gather info/advice?* • *General ease of gaining parent views?*
4. Could you tell me about your experience in working with other professionals as part of the EHCNA?
• *SEN Team* • *School staff* • *Social Care* • *Health* • *What worked well?* • *What was difficult?* • *What would you like to change?* • *Ease of communication* • *Understanding of each other's roles*
5. Are there any cohorts of children/young people for whom it is more difficult to provide advice or assessment, and if so why? What impact has this had on the advice?
Ease of gaining views? *'Category' of SEND* *Age?* *EAL?* *LAC?* *Moved school/authority recently/frequently?* *Less identified needs?* *Diagnosis?*
6. Could you talk about your experience of person-centered practice within the EHCNA process?
7. Could you talk about your experience of co-production within the EHCNA process?
8. How would you describe the autonomy/control you have as a professional within this process? What is the impact of this?
• *Freedom to use methods deemed appropriate?* • *Access to appropriate tools?*
9. What are the potential impacts of your involvement in EHCNA, and how is this measured?
• *Understanding of need?* • *Involvement in co-production of plan?* • *Advice on appropriate provision/educational support?*

SENCO Semi-structured interview guide

1. Could you start by telling me a bit about your role and experience with the EHC process?
Prompts: Type of school, length of time, number of EHCNAs applied for/involved in,
2. Could you tell me about experiences of applying for EHCNAs and how you have found this?
Prompts: • *Contextual factors of the school (size, makeup, etc)* • *How many applied for (roughly?)* • *Was it easy/difficult to apply?* • *What factors lead you to apply for EHC process?* • *What information did you need to submit?* • *How easy/difficult is it to judge if you need to apply, and what information informs this decision?*
3. Do you have any experience of parental applications for EHCNAs, and if so, have you noticed any differences in the process for you as a SENCO?
4. Could you tell me about your experiences of working with external professionals in the process?
• *What worked well?* • *What was difficult?* • *What would you have liked to change?* • *Health, EPs, CAMHS, SLT, Social care, EHC Teams.*
5. Are there any cohorts of children for whom it is easier or more difficult to go through the EHC process for, and if so, why? What impact has this had?
• *Type of SEND?* • *Age?* • *EAL?* • *Looked after children?* • *Less identified needs* • *New to the school*
6. **What have the EHC assessments themselves been like for children in your school?**
• *EP visit?* • *Other professional input?*
7. What outcomes have you found as a result of the assessment?

Appendix 5: Initial Thematic Mind Map



Appendix 6: List of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) Themes, Codes, & Subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Theme one: System-centred: The system is stacked up against the child.
Subtheme A: We are going against the tide without a diagnosis.

71. Diagnose and discharge model means no follow up support
72. Diagnosis adds weight to the application
73. Diagnosis vs circumstances
74. Diagnostic process is laboured
128. EP as providing expert advice
133. EPs can pick out specific areas of need
172. Expert model in diagnosis
173. Expert model vs co-construction
175. Expert advice gatekeeps the process
185. Feeling morally conflicted by accessing private assessments that are not open to all
212. Health are hard to reach as part of the assessment process
213. Health journey complex and confusing
214. Health professionals more trusted to identify a need rather than school
225. Implementing provision regardless of a diagnosis
235. Inequity in waiting lists
253. Labels are not always helpful
259. Lack of diagnosis means school need to explain the impact on the child's life more so
282. Linguistic codes and cultural capital as a gatekeeper to EHC needs assessments
304. NDD pathway is not robust
309. Needing to get external input for graduated process and to evidence needs
313. No diagnosis – less support even with same need for educational support
321. Not having a diagnosis is like going against the tide
351. Parents are ping-ponged
352. Parents are the go-between
368. Pressure on parents to pay privately
369. Pressure on schools to pay privately
428. SENCOs professional opinions are not believed as much as others
430. SENCOs unable to diagnose
431. SENCOs uncomfortable with being a gatekeeper
445. Snapshot vs building understanding over time
481. The EHC process does not led to a full understanding of needs
531. Stigma of diagnosis

Subtheme B: An unfair hierarchy of needs.
5. Academic difficulties are given more priority
6. Academic progress vs emotional wellbeing.
18. Behaviour is communication
19. Behaviour Vs SEND
45. Common myths about the EHC process
179. Fail first, support later
204. Harder to demonstrate/unpick SEMH needs
221. How to evidence behaviour is a need and not just a behaviour
325. Obvious needs vs grey area needs

393. Reluctance to grant EHCPs for younger aged children
417. SEMH difficulties are not given enough weighting
459. Standardised assessments can be inappropriate
460. Standardised assessments can help explain a CYP's SEND
498. The right support makes a big difference to emotional wellbeing

Subtheme C: It's not one size fits all.

8. Adolescents need more time to open up
9. Advice is not person centred
23. Being done to, not done with
30. Building trust takes time
33. Child views hold weight in assessment
34. Child's language levels can be a barrier to accessing views
36. Children may mask their views to professionals, especially when unfamiliar
63. Creative methods of getting views
66. CYP need time and trust to share their views with professionals
78. Difficult to gather pupil views for children not attending school (inc EBSA)
92. It's difficult to judge a child's needs in the early years
107. EHC process is laborious
108. EHC process is not personalised
108. EHC process is not personalised
139. EP needs to be flexible
146. EP will try to approach direct work with an open mind
162. EPs sometimes see the child as part of other work
177. External advice isn't rocket science
187. Feeling unsure what to include in the application/ family views
205. Harder to quantify specific areas of needs in EY due to frequent changes in presentation on regular basis vs primary/secondary
232. Increased demands make it difficult to be person centred
239. Involving child/young person's siblings/wider family/ pets helps to gain child's views.
246. Jumping through hoops
273. Learning difficulties impact child's contribution
289. Mental capacity of the CYP influences level of involvement
290. Mental health in crisis
291. Mental health needs develop in response to unmet needs
293. Mental health problems makes accessing the YP more difficult
295. Missed opportunities and wasted time
311. Needs can be more apparent at secondary school
324. Observations are useful for very young children
329. One off assessments are a performative act
359. Person-centred assessment tools
370. Previous involvement of the EP makes a huge difference
375. Professional involvement can be intrusive
379. Professionals can parachute / swan in and out
388. Rapport with YP is critical to gaining their views
390. Reframing views of the child
398. Rigidity of services
399. Rigidity of the assessment process
415. Secondary schools need to do 'round robins' to get advice from multiple staff
457. Specialist tools as prompters for a wider conversation
464. Taking an interest in the whole child, not just their SEN

465. Tasks are repeated
500. The understanding of needs develops over time
501. The uniqueness of every child
503. There is an information gap when CYP are out of education
508. Ticking boxes vs being person-centred
514. Trauma experienced CYP need more time and trust to share views
517. Understanding CYP's needs can be confusing and complex
528. You are treated as a number, not an individual.

Theme two: Advocacy and adversary: Navigating the obstacle course.

Subtheme D: Without an engaged parent or the SENCO on board, the child has no chance.
2. Being at the mercy of the LA
10. Advocating can feel like rocking the boat
24. Being ignored/not responded to
47. Conflict is expected
203. Gut feelings/lived experience vs professional views
312. No chance without either SENCO on board or parental engagement
326. One bad encounter leaves a strong impression
327. One key member of staff in school can make a difference
336. Onus is on the parent to chase the process up and move things along
342. Parent expectations
344. Parent power
346. Parent relies on school to know the process and communicate updates
355. Parents know their child better than professionals
357. Parents struggling with MH
367. Power imbalance between schools and professionals
373. Process can be exclusionary to parents with their own needs
403. Schools and parents know the child better than the LA
418. SENCO as holding more info on history of child than teacher
421. SENCOs are helpful
423. SENCOS complete most of the advice
424. SENCOs having to make decision alone about whether an EHCP application is appropriate
425. SENCOs involved in appeals
451. Some parents are not always involved
452. Some parents don't understand the need for the EHC assessment
488. The journey is frustrating
491. The need for the parent to understand the system and advocate
493. The parent as the proactive stakeholder
495. The pressures on the system can be off putting to parents wanting to chase the process
499. The system has dropped the ball, not the parent
524. Working it out for yourself
529. You only get one shot

Subtheme E: The school are an obstacle, so I made the decision to put in the EHC request myself.
70. Demand ideology
77. Difficult for schools to build trust with parents at times

83. Disagreements about the child's needs
85. Disagreements with parents about graduated response
111. EHCNAs are framed as an administrative burden for some school staff
116. EHCPs are guarded behind a professional system/gatekeeping
182. Feeling guilty for accessing the system
183. Feeling isolated
219. Honouring promises
223. If application is driven by parent, there may not have been the graduated response.
263. Lack of parental awareness around what an EHCP does or doesn't provide
263. Lack of school support drives parental wishes for an EHC needs assessment
264. Lack of reassurance for parents
314. Non attendance and child mental health a factor for parental applications
341. Parent blaming
344. Parental application allows parent to take more control of the process
345. Parent applications are a sign of friction/tension between parents and school
346. Parental applications submitted by knowledgeable parents are more detailed and thorough
347. Parental requests don't have much information
353. Parents aren't sure what to include in requests
363. Political discourse is rude and offensive
404. Schools are gatekeepers to accessing information
406. Schools are having to take on more roles than ever
408. Schools are missing out on external professional experience and knowledge
411. Schools lead children to mask/withhold frustrations
412. Schools may be less invested in parental applications
493. The parent as the proactive stakeholder
519. Variability in school role within EHC process
533. Parents need to become experts in the SEND system

Subtheme F: It was the local authority Vs the local authority.

44. Collaborative culture is not embedded
49. Conflicts of having a dual role within the system
65. Culture eats strategy for breakfast
75. Different agendas and philosophies of each team
76. Different professionals creating multiple targets/outcomes VS co-production
79. Difficult to get a hold of social workers
94. Easier to communicate with colleagues when already spending time with them – co-working/co-location
156. EPs need to justify their professional opinions and advice
218. Hit and miss of schools providing information.
241. It depends on who you ask
243. It would help if everyone worked together
252. LA staff are corporate parent for CLA
257. Lack of communication between LA departments
276. Less multi-agency working leads to less oversight from professionals
283. Local authority vs local authority
286. Making an effort with other teams goes a long way, but does not come naturally.
294. Messages get passed through a chain of command, rather than directly
296. Information often gets mixed up in the process
302. Multi-disciplinary work is a community a practice
303. Multi-disciplinary work leads to richness of information

315. Non-existence of inter-agency working
362. Physical and emotional separation of inter-LA departments
381. Professionals don't speak to each other
438. Services are fragmented.
447. Social care involvement makes it harder to go through the process
479. The disconnect between services could be depicted by the Channel Gorge
480. The dots aren't being connected

Subtheme G: Co-production: We don't really do it yet.

52. Consultation as an important first step
53. Consultation as an ongoing practice
54. Co-producing creates agreement and share views
55 Co-production makes the process smoother
56. Co-production is not a one off event, it is a continuous process
58. Co-production is used as a last resort to prevent escalations
59. Co-production meetings can help resolve inter-agency disagreements
60. Co-production relies on EP getting buy in
76. Different professionals creating multiple targets/outcomes VS co-production
90. Each adult adds a new layer of understanding
125. EP as a triangulator
127. EP as a mediator
128. EP as providing independent advice
132. EP can add empathy and understanding
137. EP is a contributor, not a decision maker
144. EP weighs up conflicting advice
150. EPs can support co-production
155. EPs listen and make others feel heard
160. EPs reports are easier to read as it is broken down into the different areas
163. EPs take a systemic view
192. Formulations and priorities are better explained in a conversation
220. How reflective can a piece of paper be of a child?
258. Lack of co-production driving tribunals and dissatisfaction
279. Limited contact with the LA
349. Parents and CYP need multiple opportunities to express their opinions, not just one
407. Schools are invested in the EHC process and child
426. SENCOs not asked to provide feedback on Draft EHCPs
509. Time is a barrier to co-production

Theme three: The digitalisation of the EHC needs assessment: The forgotten human needs

Subtheme H: Choice and control: We were told this is how it is.

93. It's easier to apply for an EHCNA online
195. Giving choices to be online or in person is child-centred
227. In person = most creative work.
240. Involving wider support circle when deciding on remote or in person assessments
255. Lack of choices around remote assessment
261. Lack of face to face contact
377. Rapport is easier to build in person
486. The internet can be intimidating and a scary place to learn about your child's needs

534. Independent support services do not have the time

Subtheme I: Virtual relationships: Are we connected?
25. Being in person bring visibility to professionals
26. Being in person is valued and appreciated
27. Being online allows some young people and families to show their feelings
64. Critical and curious of online working
81. Difficulty of being person centred without having met the person
249. LA communication feels like a script
254. Lack of human elements to communication
330. Online access to the process is more accessible
331. Online assessment can be less intrusive, particularly vs a home visit
332. Online assessments can be more flexible.
365. Positive experiences of working remotely
391. Relationships can be built online
395. Remote working can provide more flexibility
395. Remote assessments can still be supportive.

Subtheme J: Skills and accessibility: They don't engage in front of a camera.
35. Children can't always engage in video calls
62. CPD is sometimes seen as a luxury
270. Lack of training for new systems
277. Less opportunities for safeguarding when working remotely
333. Online assessments don't feel natural
470. Technology can be awkward
471. Technology can be frustrating
472. Technology can fail at times
475. Technology works better for some
505. There isn't enough training/outreach for school staff
522. What can you get from an online assessment?

Theme four: It *can* make a difference: But it's *not* a golden ticket

Subtheme K: Action and accountability: We are realising we have a duty of care.
10.9 EHC prompts more frequent contact with parents
87. Documents not reflecting the child
97. EHC assessment is a time limited intervention
98. EHC can be evidence for additional funding for high needs tariff
99. EHC can be evidence for bespoke/individualised curriculum
100. EHC can be evidence for specialist provisions
101. EHC can be important document to note emergency protocols
102. EHC doesn't come with additional funding automatically
103 EHC is an important document
104. EHC leads to improved transitions
105. EHC plan helps to identify support for exam access arrangements
110. EHCNA will provide detailed and in-depth assessments
113. EHCP gains extra help
114. EHCP helps writing of IEPs
118. EHCPs aren't the answer to everything
190. Formal document adds weight to parents' views and conversations
191. Formal document protects the child

207. Having an EHC can provide additional layer of reassurance
208. Having an EHC can provide more choice and control over placement
209. Having an EHCP is not the golden ticket…but having a document with multi-agency advice is a useful tool.
400. Schools advise parents that EHC won't change anything
467. Teachers step up more when there is an EHC plan
489. The journey starts before the EHC process and continues after it
494. The plan is only as good as its implementation
532. Resulting EHCP does not represent the child

Subtheme L: Too little, too late

68. Delay is creating uncertainty and difficulties for students
69. Delayed assessment/EHCP can lead to not attending school
91. Early intervention arrives too late
134. EP doesn't know what happens after their advice
136. EP holds limited information on the wider context
138. EP loses contact with CYP and their journey once they submit their report
157. EPs not just 'distributors' of a product, but a facilitator
158. EPs not receiving feedback on their ideas/opinions due to a lack of co-production
164. EPS unsure how their advice is 'received' by stakeholders
168. Even the formal EHC doesn't guarantee adaptations will be made
196. Going around in circles
197. Going missing in the system
260. Lack of external agencies for parent
272. Lack of wider support leads to increased needs
443. Simple /QF adjustments are not put in place leading to EHC needs assessments
444. Simple fixes aren't enough
463. System is buckling under pressure
485. The help isn't there
496. The process doesn't change fixed minds
502. The workload is like a treadmill

Appendix 7: Reflection on Ethical Considerations for Recruiting Children and Young People

Initial consideration was given to recruiting children and young people who had been part of an EHC needs assessment, particularly since they are often underrepresented in this research area. On the one hand, it can empower participants' voices and enhance educational interventions. On the other hand, it can raise ethical questions about making the research genuinely accessible to participants and true informed consent. I was mindful of previous thesis research into EHC needs assessments and the considerations when recruiting children and young people as participants. For example, Redwood (2015) recruited one child participant out of five possible case studies. The British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021a) notes that research involving some groups would typically be considered to involve a higher level of risk. I considered which risk factors would be likely or possible were children and young people to be invited to participate. I concluded that multiple and intersecting likely/possible ethical risk factors were involved; these are explored in Table 1.

Table 1:

Examples of Relevant Risks When Recruiting Children and Young People to This Research (Adapted from BPS, 2021a)

Examples of moderate/higher risks within human research	**Likelihood of encountering risks should children and young people be recruited**		
	Very likely	**Likely**	**Possible**
Children aged under 16	*X*		
Those lacking mental capacity.	*X*		
Prior experience of psychological or physical harm or adversity in its broadest sense.		*X*	
Potentially sensitive topics.	*X*		
Research that might induce psychological stress or anxiety for participants.			*X*
Research that may lead to labelling by the participant (I.e., I am stupid).			X

Note. The possible likelihood of encountering moderate/higher risks should children and young people are marked as either very likely, likely, or possible. The most likely higher risk factors included research with children aged under 16 years, those lacking mental capacity and potentially sensitive topics.

Further, the BPS code (2021a) stipulates research that might prompt participants to label themselves negatively as higher risk research. This has been relevant in my literature review from a SIT lens (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). I wonder if gathering data about the EHC needs assessment process might inadvertently lead some children and young people to label or categorise themselves negatively. The BPS code gives explicit examples of *"I am stupid"* or "*I am not normal"* as labels that research may evoke from participants, which I felt were possible responses when, for example, asking a child about their needs. I have reflected on my role as a Trainee EP during EHC needs assessments and how I have encountered similar labels from children and young people during this process. Further, I was hoping this research would not only explore what worked well, but also what did not work well. I felt that this carried a higher level of risk when researching directly with children and young people and may be better suited to a positive psychology/solution-focused lens.

I also wondered to what extent children and young people could meaningfully comment on processes they may not been involved in, given the following three points:

1. The lack of co-production noted within the LA by Ofsted.

2. The complex stages and steps of the process that the child/young person may not have been involved in. For example, children may not have read reports about them or even explicitly known that an EHC assessment was requested (Franklin et al., 2018.

3. EP assessments are not always conducted directly with the young person since only 'advice' is required from an EP as part of the process, not a direct meeting/assessment (SENDCoP, DfE, 2015).

I was also concerned that some children and young people might form the impression that I will advocate for/support them directly rather than in the research. Therefore, ethical concerns around true informed consent, the risk of power imbalances, and doing no harm led to limiting data generation to those around the child or young person. However, I acknowledge the importance of children and young people's voices within the EHC needs assessment process and hope that I can contribute to ethical and meaningful research with children and young people in the future. I appreciate the contradiction in aiming for emancipatory impact without speaking to those for whom the system is meant to support. However, I would also argue that parents, carers, and professionals within the

system are also worthy of emancipation, and doing so may indirectly impact the emancipation of children and young people.