'What was required above all else was collaboration': keeping the momentum for SEND partnership working in the wake of Covid-19

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This article considers implications for partnership working across the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system in England, at a time when a long-overdue SEND Review is imminent and the SEND Code of Practice 2015 is awaiting a significant overhaul. It highlights the role local policy actors occupy within this system, as the progression of the Covid-19 pandemic moves SEND partnerships towards a 'new normal' and there is heightened concern about missed opportunities for reform and renewal. Previously published findings from an online questionnaire (n = 100) undertaken by the Special Educational Needs Policy Research Forum provided insight into how school staff had been supported in the teaching of pupils with SEND during periods of school closures and what lessons had been learned. The present article offers a thematic analysis of the narrative responses provided in addition to the closed survey questions. The analysis generated six statements that can be understood as lessons learned from the pandemic for partnership working, drawing on the experiences of parents, school staff, and advising professionals working in local authorities.

Key words: SEND partnership, inclusion, policy actors, learning partnerships, co-construction

Introduction

In March 2020 and January 2021, schools in England were closed to help control the spread of Covid-19 (Gov.UK, 2020). Children and young people whose parents/carers were key workers and those with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) were allowed and later encouraged to attend schools (DfE & Williamson, 2020). The parents/carers of these children and young people did, however, have the right to keep their children at home should they so choose (Gov.UK, 2020). Local authorities and school leaders, including SENCos, were 'left with responsibility for maintaining the systems of special educational "offers" … developed for their schools' (Wedell, 2020) in a constantly evolving and unpredictable policy environment as the Department for Education (DfE) responded to the situation. Concerns about meeting deadlines led to the Government's relaxation of the legislation about timescales for statutory assessments and for annual reviews, much to the concern of parents and others (Children's Commissioner, 2020).

Previously published findings from an online questionnaire (n = 100) undertaken by the Special Educational Needs Policy Research Forum (SENPRF, 2021) provided insight into how school staff were supported in the teaching of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) during school closures, what lessons had been learned, and the conditions required to enable these lessons to be harnessed in schools. This present article aims to ask, 'What else?' (Singh et al., 2014) and offers a thematic analysis of the optional narrative responses provided within the survey, which focus on partnership working across the local SEND system and the role occupied by policy actors (Ball et al., 2011) within this system.

The contributing authors share a common interest in SEND. As members of the lead group for the SENPRF, we were part of the team involved in developing the questionnaire. One of us has worked as SENCo and SEND inspector in a local authority and is a university course leader for the National Award for SEN Coordination; another works as SEND advisor, and as a teacher and lecturer has previously interrogated the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) and its implications for professionalism, partnership working and ethical concerns; the third contributor has a disabled daughter and is undertaking doctoral research approaching the subjectivity of parents of disabled children and how it relates to inclusion. Accordingly, we each handled the analysis of the survey findings from different personal and professional perspectives. In the spirit of partnership, we have respected each other's expertise and lived experience, and worked together with an open

mind, engaging in the nuances and tensions that exist within partnership working, to embrace divergent understandings.

In what follows, we will briefly review the literature on multi-agency working and inter-professional collaboration and how this is conceptualized within SEND literature, before considering the role of parents/carers in these partnerships. A methodology section then leads into a discussion of six key statements that can be understood as some of the lessons learned from the pandemic, drawing on our data and reflecting the experiences of parents/carers, school staff and advising professionals working in local authorities.

Multi-agency working and inter-professional collaboration

Multi-agency partnership and inter-professional collaboration are enshrined in the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), which requires education, social care and health services as well as parents/carers and community organizations to collaborate in the best interest of children and young people. The Covid-19 pandemic has required a system-wide response and worked best where the response to the pandemic was one of evolution, rather than requiring the creation of an entirely new way of working (Bryant et al., 2021). Where they existed, strong local support structures played an important part in facilitating good local decision-making during Covid-19 (Moss et al., 2020).

An extensive literature review on inter-professional practice (Morrison & Glenny, 2012) notes that the basic tenor of the many reviews, reports and green papers involves asking professionals 'to do better' in living up to their roles and responsibilities. The focus when researching inter-professional collaboration is on effective teamwork and the elaboration of required 'attitudes and/or behaviours to which workers should aspire and managers should bring about'. Individual behaviors of team members, their emotional intelligence, their capacity to communicate and their various roles have all been studied; however, an exploration of ethical dimensions of professional relationships, as well as structural inhibitors and injustices, appears to have been neglected.

Partnership models distinguish between economically driven partnerships which limit the potential for democratic renewal and participation and learning partnerships as 'opportunities and spaces for resisting narrow instrumentalism of the neoliberal agenda' (Harris, 2005). Learning partnerships

have legitimacy at a local level by providing accountability through reflexive practice and by being authentic. Rather than trading in certainty, which underpins the performativity culture of instrumentalist partnerships, learning partnerships acknowledge that all action is unpredictable, precarious and open-ended, which is why all collaborative efforts rely on debate and dialogue. In learning partnerships, the language of unpredictability replaces the notion of 'what works'. Collaboration is not automatic but 'achieved through a process of deliberation, debate, argument, negotiation and bargaining' (Parrott, 2008).

Working in a learning partnership 'requires new forms of negotiated professional practice' (Daniels et al., 2007). Person-centred partnership working can facilitate 'co-configuration', understood as 'the production of intelligent, flexible services with a high degree of client participation' (Daniels et al., 2007) which goes beyond craft knowledge or a menu of options that professionals can choose from and recommend. The SEND Code of Practice refers to this concept as 'co-construction'. Building on Schön's (1983) work, Daniels et al. (2007) propose 'learning for co-configuration' and 'learning in co-configuration' as a new form of professional learning which is distinguished by the 'tension between the need for certainty for immediate purposes and the need to remain uncertain for future purposes'. Co-configuration embraces the personalisation agenda, is highly responsive to customized relationships, and is ideologically and ethically focused on meeting the needs of children and young people, rather than those of existing services. This requires an organizational climate where rule-bending is allowed, understood as 'non-routine, partially improvised decision-making to meet highly personalised needs and/or rapidly changing situations' (Daniels et al., 2007). For this to be constructive, the organizational culture needs to encourage flexible and responsive action by professionals who are encouraged to learn from challenging situations for future practice. Practitioner improvisation as well as a tenacity to navigate bureaucratic hurdles, rather than a strict adherence to established processes and restrictive codes, is therefore required. It is not difficult to see that pandemic-related school closures and necessary policy accommodations would have benefited from this type of negotiated professional practice, which we will discuss further when considering our findings.

The benefit of inter-professional working in the field of SEND

Inter-professional working in the field of SEND is often understood in terms of distributed expertise where the sometimes-complex needs of children and young

people are met by professionals with distinctive skills in a 'jigsaw approach of differing contributive expertise' (Todd, 2011). Challenges faced by individual professionals engaged in inter-professional collaborations can be addressed by actively recognizing and accessing distributed expertise across local systems. In this view, 'knowing who' provides insight into the skills and expertise of colleagues and how to access these; 'knowing what' helps to understand targets, statutory guidelines and thresholds others work to; and 'knowing why' clarifies values that shape their partners' practice (Daniels et al., 2007).

Parents/carers as expert partners

The SEND reforms that led to the introduction of the current legislative framework have their 'origins in findings from the 2009 Lamb Inquiry, which found low levels of parental confidence in the SEND system' (Webster & Blatchford, 2017) and called for parents 'to be listened to more and brought into a partnership with statutory bodies in a more meaningful way' (Lamb, 2009). Improving the processes of co-production 'was seen as central to overcoming parents' frustrations with the existing system' (Webster & Blatchford, 2017).

Parent–professional partnership suggests 'cooperation and sharing of ideas and influence' with the implication of 'mutual respect; complementary expertise; and a willingness to learn from each other' (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). However, despite a shifting discourse towards parent participation, parents/carers continue to report issues in terms of their engagement with professionals, who often dominate decision-making processes. While parents/carers are now habitually consulted and invited to meetings, they often feel that their 'views are not listened to and their presence is tokenistic' (Green & Edwards, 2021). For partnerships to be effective, the lived experience of all participants needs to be recognized within a 'responsive and collaborative movement towards shared goals' (Green & Edwards, 2021). Positive experiences arise when parents/carers feel listened to, rather than feel excluded from discussions or beholden to the professionals' agenda. Parent–professional relationships need 'to be fluid, able to respond to changing and shifting perspectives' (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

Methodology

On 30 April 2021, SENPRF delivered a policy seminar called 'How are schools coping with the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching of pupils with SEN: lessons for schools' (SENPRF, 2021). The seminar aimed to address the following questions:

1. How have teachers, SENCos and headteachers been supported to cope with the teaching of pupils with SEND?
2. What lessons have been learned for the future provision for children and young people with SEND?
3. What are the conditions required to enable these lessons to be implemented in schools?

Group discussions within the seminar resulted in several emergent themes, including the narrow time opportunity for change; the risk of losing what had been achieved since March 2020; an overall rethink of the purpose of schools; resources and funding; curriculum and assessment pressures; schools needing more support; opportunities for teachers' reflective practice; and the need for special schools to be considered in all decisions (SENPRF, 2021). To explore these themes with a wider audience, an online questionnaire was developed. While the seminar mainly focused on learning originating from within schools, the questionnaire sought perspectives from both practitioners and parents/carers about how well schools coped with the impact of Covid-19, and what the lessons were for future provision.

The research followed BERA (2018) principles of ethical research and was approved by the University of Exeter. After a pilot study, the questionnaire was distributed via email to SENPRF members, as well as by SENPRF lead group members to their personal and professional networks and social media channels, over a period of nine weeks in the summer of 2021. The survey attracted 100 anonymous responses from parents/carers, SENCos, school leaders, teachers, advising professionals and local authority officers. A quantitative analysis has been published online (SENPRF, 2021), which demonstrates that respondents to the questionnaire were broadly in agreement with the themes presented at the seminar.

This article presents a thematic analysis of the qualitative responses, in which participants offered additional comments to expand on their choices. We adopted an inductive approach. Each of the three authors identified themes in the data, before discussing them collectively and identifying key themes that were evident across each individual analysis. These themes were then revisited by each of us, from our individual/professional perspective. We did not attempt to break down the thematic analysis further by types of respondents as we considered individual responses and emerging themes more relevant. As a result of this process, six statements were

produced collaboratively arising from our data. We contend that these exemplify some lessons learned from the pandemic for partnership working and seek to locate those experiences in the wider discussion about partnership working and co-construction (Daniels et al., 2007; Todd, 2011, Mann et al., 2020) and policy enactment (Ball et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2014). We draw on these theoretical frameworks in our discussion of each of the six statements. Each of the statements can stand alone or can be considered alongside one or all of the other statements.

Results: The six statements

One: Covid has further highlighted and intensified the existing problems with inadequate SEND provision, funding and accountabilities at a systemic level
Participants identified that the Covid-19 pandemic has further illuminated the fractures in local SEND systems and inadequate provision in schools that had already begun to emerge prior to the first national lockdown in England in March 2020. Participants commented that *'it has highlighted already existing inequalities within the system'* and that *'as with everything, COVID has exacerbated the inequalities for children with SEND'*. One of the participants used strong words to express their feeling that schools were not listened to: *'There was an over-reliance on what other people thought schools needed, rather than asking schools themselves'*. Another participant explained:

> *'Whilst Ofsted has moved, as a body, towards being a more supportive and celebratory accountability system, the DfE continues to ignore the experience and wisdom of teachers and education leaders, ploughing ahead with divisive and misconceived measures and policies'*.

One respondent argued that:

> *'Staff at the chalk face who know children and how they develop should have the lead in decision making – too many mistakes are made when non-experts impose systems on schools'*.

There is widespread recognition that the pandemic has intensified the pre-existing negative effects that these systemic faultlines and inequalities have on children and young people with SEND (Ofsted, 2021a), echoed in the Ministerial Foreword to the DfE's SEND Green Paper (DfE, 2022). The ongoing consultation will need to allow all stakeholders to further highlight the systemic failures of the current SEND system and, more importantly, contribute to its re-imagining (Robertson, 2022).

Two: Experiences were diverse, and provision was often inequitable within local authority areas and between neighboring schools

In March 2020 and January 2021, schools in England closed to all but the children of key workers and children and young people who were deemed to be vulnerable, including those with EHCPs (DfE & Williamson, 2020). However, as one respondent pointed out, *'many schools including special schools did not offer places to vulnerable children as per the guidance'*. Another respondent described how not all parents could be at home to support their children's distance learning (especially during the second prolonged school closure), but that their children could also not be in school: *'The key worker system did not address the needs of borderline "at risk" or "in need" students. Some students with highly complex needs lost so much input'*. Additionally, vital therapies, support and respite were withdrawn or restricted overnight, leaving parents/carers without specialist input or any break from their caring responsibilities. One parent described feeling that their child's school *'opted to have more challenging children (like my child) at home more than in school as it was easier for the school!'*

Families whose children were at home, either through their own choice or due to a lack of provision in school, reported that some schools seemed to be much better able to respond to pupils' SEND than others, meaning that home learning opportunities were not equitable within local authority areas and between neighboring schools. Respondents also noted that the smaller class sizes for those children who did go to school often had a positive impact:

> *'The opportunities for children with SEND and vulnerable children to receive flexible and personalised education in small groups in school during lockdown means that some of these children achieved real progress, particularly in Language and Communication and with social skills'.*

A parent explained that their child worked better at home due to the lack of sensory issues in the school environment, and another explained that *'students with ASC [autistic spectrum condition] found that learning from home reduced environmental related anxiety'*.

Echoing other research undertaken (Greenway & Easton-Thomas, 2020; Beaton et al., 2021), the findings from this survey demonstrate that parents' and pupils' experiences of education during school closures were varied.

When schools were forced to close for most pupils, requiring a shift to online teaching at short notice (Frederick et al., 2020), many children with SEND were unable to access remote education without significant levels of hands-on support and differentiation provided by their parents/carers. Some children with SEND became more socially isolated during this time, while others benefited from more frequent online therapy in place of face-to-face therapies (Beaton et al., 2021). McGuire (2020) argues that one of the benefits of remote learning for children and young people with additional support needs is a slower pace than in school, with reduced pressure to keep up with their classmates. Ofsted (2021b) also highlighted that children and young people were able to take a break as and when it was required. It is important that lessons learned during this period are not lost, and that opportunities for more flexible approaches to teaching pupils with SEND are now explored.

Three: Covid has made visible existing good partnerships, but also negative attitudes and inadequate local practices around inclusion

The responses from this survey suggest that the difficulties faced by children and their parents/carers simply shone a light on pre-pandemic practices in relation to pupils with SEND. One parent, whose son was not offered any online learning during school closures, stated that *'Covid highlighted the lack of support plans, goal setting or any educational targets set for my child before and during this time'*. This not only spotlights a lack of support during school closures, but also how education being located solely in the home led to a greater awareness that the school had not been supporting their child's education well before the pandemic. A teacher agreed that it foregrounded areas in which practice in schools required improvement:

> '*Covid only made very visible what clearly wasn't happening prior to Covid. So, for us Covid shone a light on poor practice and the whole-school attitude to all SEND children'*.

Schools and colleges had to transform their practice overnight, and survey findings aligned with other research describing positive outcomes achieved during the pandemic (Beaton et al., 2021). As one respondent put it:

> '*Where practice has been good, some children with SEND have had an improved experience of school. There needs to be consideration of how this can be continued and developed post pandemic'*.

Another participant added:

'I think in terms of schools coping, generally their flexibility and responsiveness and what they have done for communities has been very positive and this has been seen with the response to students with SEND'.

One participant attributed the success of school provision to the leadership of the setting:

'Schools who had great leadership supported their pupils well and were more flexible and open. Those with poor leadership simply and literally closed their doors to SEND pupils who suffered significantly as a result'.

School closures led to fewer opportunities for direct contact between parents/carers and teachers; for example, informal conversations in the playground. Where schools valued and prioritized engagement, efforts were made to continue to build a virtual sense of community and partnership; for instance, introducing regular review meetings where targets were set and feedback from teachers on work set was provided to parents/carers. One parent described how home/school communications had further improved during the pandemic. As a consequence, they now felt *'more involved in my child's work and therefore able to offer greater support'*. Another parent stated that:

'The worst thing has been the lack of communication, and poor follow up on children that have been struggling to understand work set online … she and I kept emailing school for help, but nothing'.

We know that for many parents/carers and children and young people, home schooling was stressful, time-consuming and difficult (Lunt, 2021). For some, it also increased visibility of how settings were failing to meet the needs of their child/young person. Education is not alone in this uncovering of existing inequalities, as other barriers to support for disabled people were also exposed during the pandemic (Pearson et al., 2022), potentially leaving families feeling even more vulnerable after the crisis.

Within education, alongside the necessity to improve inclusive practice, it is necessary to rebuild parental trust and confidence. Partnership with

teachers is important to parents, but parents frequently feel that education is a 'closed shop', and they are left out of problem solving (Mann & Gilmore, 2021). Rather than seeing parents as a 'resource' that fulfills the role of the teacher outside of school, it is necessary to engage in collaborative problem-solving, shared responsibility and 'mutually developed and agreed goals' (Mann et al., 2020). Where positive relationships and communication channels exist before crisis situations arise, all parties are more likely to be able to come together to find the most suitable solution through collaborative working and regular contact. A key factor here is 'the willingness of the school to listen to parents' views and respond flexibly to their child's needs' (Lamb, 2009).

Four: Policy guidance was enacted by local policy actors through 'reflexive creativity', which accounts for some of the variability of experiences, but also points to opportunities to learn lessons and inform change and development
The premise for policy enactment theory is that new policies are interpreted and translated by local policy actors who are always also policy subjects. While policy subjects might focus on performance and delivery where 'judgement is suspended and ethical discomforts are set aside', policy actors engage with 'uncertainties and their opportunities and possibilities' (Ball et al., 2011). Rather than assuming that policies tell professionals what to do, policy enactment theory posits that policies merely create circumstances where available options for action change, and often narrow, and where particular outcomes are envisaged. This understanding can account for some of the variation documented in our participants' responses and is illustrated in one parent's observation that they *still freak out that the same DfE guidance can be interpreted by my sons' different schools so wildly divergently'*. Another participant highlighted that *'reflexive creativity'* in response to rapidly changing policy announcements, rather than perfunctory policy implementation, was called for and was in fact in evidence throughout the pandemic.

Participants also recognized that:

'Gaps and duplications in government policy left LAs [local authorities], schools and parents pitted against each other at times, when what was required above all else was collaboration'.

and that: *'thankfully, the individual professionals involved were committed and pragmatic enough to work individually and sensibly together in spite of rather*

than enabled by government policy'. However, participants were concerned that now an *'opportunity to reframe pedagogy is withering on the vine'* and that *'lessons are now starting to get lost in the pressure to return to normal'*. As one respondent concludes:

> *'There has been an incredibly varied experience for children with SEND, so we need to look at the best practice and somehow share that with the schools who underperformed during Covid'*.

This is not simply a school concern but is also a matter for local authorities having to deal with *'an explosion of EHCP requests'* that are increasingly commercialized and sometimes *'ignore the successful support schools have put in place up til now'* for those on SEN support. Unless local authorities adapt their needs assessment practices, the gains made through blended learning opportunities, pupil-centred teaching and bespoke curricula developed during school closures might be lost.

Another participant commented that some *'head teachers were exemplary in navigating through the impact of Covid-19, the government was not'*. Parents/carers and their partners who see themselves as policy actors, and are enabled to act in this way, are crucial: *'Schools and LAs should be given powers and responsibilities to localise planning arrangements where the national policy is weak or irrelevant to the context'*. Some senior leaders of the local SEND system are identified by participants as influential policy actors with a desire and commitment to learn from the lessons of the pandemic:

> *'There is strong motivation amongst professionals locally for lessons learned to inform policy and practice, but how well this translates into action will depend on the quality of leadership and how well agencies work together'*.

Respondents explained that *'it takes time and bravery to personalise approaches'* and identified that many professionals *'will still follow "one size fits nobody" approaches'*. It speaks to the need to further examine the value of having virtual classrooms for academic learning for those who struggle with school environments, but who want to remain linked to schools. However, this needs careful exploration to ensure that virtual classrooms do not become a backdoor for off-rolling.

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the education of children and young people with SEND, as well as on their educators. In the words of one participant:

'It is important to recognise that the needs of every child and family are different, and to proceed with whatever works for them at the time. It will be important to acknowledge the crucial factor of whole school relational culture in this, and how the schools responding most successfully cultivate trust and work in partnership'.

Some participants alluded to a lack of trust in local partnerships, pointing to the work that will be required to restore this.

Our data suggest that the previously described process of deliberation, debate, argument, negotiation and bargaining (Parrott, 2008) became crucially important in negotiating partnerships throughout the pandemic, although this was not always welcome and left some practitioners in a state of dissonance. This may be because many of the existing partnerships at the local level are economically driven and wish to trade in certainties, which may have caused front-line staff to be unaccustomed to habitual deliberation, bargaining and living with uncertainties. In contrast, learning partnerships can be attuned to the precarious and open-ended nature of working with children and young people with SEND and enable practitioners to grow more confident that improvisation, as well as a tenacity to navigate bureaucratic hurdles, rather than a strict adherence to established processes and restrictive codes, achieves better outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Variance in experience is not necessarily evidence of a broken system but could be welcome evidence of 'improvised decision-making to meet personalised needs in a rapidly changing situation' (Daniels et al., 2007). The evidence of 'reflexive creativity' in our data is certainly to be welcomed and celebrated.

Five: Professionals who offered 'presents' instead of presence need to embrace their responsibilities and regain trust from colleagues and parents/carers
SENCos were suddenly required to complete risk assessments for children and young people with SEND to ensure that the provision made was inclusive and appropriate to their needs (Clarke & Done, 2021). The responses in the survey acknowledged the additional work that SENCos had been expected to carry out, with one respondent stating that *'SENCos' workload*

has increased tremendously during the pandemic' and another suggesting that there was increased pressure on SENCos to provide accurate assessments of children's needs and appropriate support.

Many supporting professionals, by contrast, felt unsure what to do when visits to schools were first made impossible and they quickly decided to offer 'presents' in the form of electronic resources and virtual advice to schools and families, rather than their own supporting presence. For some survey respondents, this resulted in *'every man and his dog emailing SENCos help and support and resources'* and through this *'making SENCos feel inadequate'* and overwhelmed, as they were then not only teaching, assessing and providing appropriate support under constantly changing circumstances, but also felt compelled to catch up on reading, for which there was no time.

Most advising professionals that were commissioned by local authorities moved their advice, assessment and support services online and worked from home during the pandemic. In the words of one respondent, this *'hasn't helped staff morale'* in schools, and grievances about the perceived unfairness of different expectations – where school-based staff continued to support in person whereas advising professionals were able to work from home – were expressed by a number of participants. What is more, *'LAs have been on the back foot with their support'*, when compared to directly commissioned services that tended to be more responsive and where *'private support would go into school settings at great cost to parents'*. The legacy of these Government-mandated arrangements is even longer waiting lists and a sense that the pandemic continues to be used as an excuse, as *'some agencies are still not coming into school'*. For school staff it is clear that *'assessment of very young children cannot be done virtually'* and that the place for professionals was and is in schools, not on screens.

For some staff in school, there was also dissatisfaction with their local authority colleagues with regard to annual reviews, which *'effectively vanished due to Covid'*, and this was seen as another excuse, as 'no online version [was] offered, yet parents' evenings were done online' by school staff. School staff highlighted that *'teachers and support staff also need space and time to recover'*, a luxury that they sense advising professionals did have. However, for many of the professionals involved, *'the boundaries between work and home became blurred'* in a way school staff did not have to contend with, and one participant reported finding themselves *'"on call" all the time, but I am only*

paid for 1.5 days'. What is clear is that '*unrealistic expectations and catch-up pressure create a culture of burn out and failure for all'*.

These responses highlight the imperative to re-imagine the SEND system rather than 'patching up' the deficiencies in the system (Wedell, 2020). It is necessary for policy actors inside and outside the school setting to shift towards becoming policy 'narrators' and 'entrepreneurs' who can interpret and shape the meaning and implementation of policy, becoming 'forceful agents of change' (Ball et al., 2011), rather than simply receiving policy and being paralyzed in crisis situations. Recognizing that many professionals and parents/carers are currently feeling exhausted and overloaded, it is important to identify those who are able to lead the advance, while others take the time to 'tread water' until they have their strength back (Ball et al., 2011). It will be necessary to work together – including with parents/carers – to develop a local vision for inclusion and to shape the roles of professionals within agreed values and priorities, through which it might be possible to rebuild trust within the system.

Six: Inclusion is supported when local policy actors embrace becoming experts by experience
The shift to remote education meant that many review meetings with parents/carers became virtual meetings. Although organizing annual reviews and meeting with parents/carers and agencies was seen as '*extremely challenging due to the other disruptions and support needed around the school community'* by school staff, it also led to wider multi-agency attendance, even though '*some professionals still don't attend the online meetings'*. It also reduced the need for parents/carers to take time off work and find suitable childcare for school meetings. Additionally, the virtual space not only offered a more neutral meeting ground than a school setting, it also provided a space where all participants might have a shared experience of feeling unsure about unfamiliar technology. As one respondent noted, the move to online meetings seemed '*to negate the power imbalance that can sometimes happen in face-to-face meetings'*. Of course, it is also important to recognize that the move to virtual meetings depends on all parties having reliable equipment and broadband internet access, and it can lead to a loss of 'warmth' as '*nothing can replace being in the same room'*, especially when difficult or emotional conversations might be taking place.

While funding was mentioned as an area of concern ('*Some schools have exceeded budgets to deal with Covid and now can't commission services they*

previously bought in. This has impacted further on mental health support'),
many felt that training was a priority:

> '*We could all do with more funding and more resources, but for me the
> key resource is the teaching staff. If they were better trained in inclusive
> practice, more skilled, more confident, and more supported as individuals
> then "crisis measures" would be drastically reduced*'.

A shift in thinking may be required, to recognize that referral to advising
professionals is not the first, but the final step in exhausting the gradu-
ated response, which underlines the belief that schools and families can
themselves become experts. The pandemic experience was therefore a
timely reminder that inclusion is a journey, not a destination, and that
many parents/carers, school staff and professionals were indeed on this
journey, evidenced in the comment that *'we were all much more prepared by
the second lockdown'*. The contention of this article is that the requested
training for school staff needs to be provided in the form of learning part-
nerships (Harris, 2005) that have legitimacy at a local level by providing
accountability in the form of reflexive practice and by focusing on nego-
tiated outcomes for children and young people. It is somewhat at odds
with the prevailing notion of supporting children and young people with
SEND through distributed expertise by a wide range of professionals that
has too often disempowered parents and school staff, and sometimes failed
to take a holistic view of the children and young people and their families
(Todd, 2011).

Conclusion
The qualitative analysis of the SENPRF survey demonstrates how the pan-
demic has highlighted and intensified the brokenness of the SEND system
at a systems level. It reveals inequalities in provision between regions and
schools, and it shines a light on some of the negative attitudes towards inclu-
sion. Professionals tried to compensate for their lack of presence in the lives
of children and young people, their families and school-based colleagues with
material support, which was not always well received.

However, the findings of the survey also show that good practice has flour-
ished during the pandemic – whether intentionally or incidentally. In many
cases it has led to better partnership working between parents/carers, schools
and advising professionals, and to more effective engagement with those
pupils who find the rigid and normative requirements of school alienating

and hard to navigate. Our research points to the importance of establishing communication channels and positive relationships with parents/carers and others before crisis situations arise.

Our respondents clearly articulated the desire to learn from their experiences and to have an opportunity to reframe and reshape local practices and also national policy in response to their learning. While much existing research has focused on documenting experiences, we have sought to bring those experiences into conversation with existing theoretical frameworks to better understand how to capitalize on this momentum for change. While local variance of provision has highlighted the fault lines of a broken system, this variance can also be seen as evidence that policy actors, engaged in local learning partnerships, have been at work to find local solutions and positive outcomes for children and young people. Participants described themselves as able and willing to contribute their existing and developing expertise and 'creative reflexivity'. They now want to be further enabled to operate in the context of learning partnerships where improvisation, rather than a strict adherence to established processes and restrictive policies, is welcomed and valued. Our own experience in co-authoring this article has mirrored this desire.

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