

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“We weren't listened to”: Practitioners views of navigating challenges and opportunities in special education settings through COVID-19

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Email: arif.mahmud@roehampton.ac.uk**Abstract**

With the increase of special schools in UK and around the world, this study sought to explore in-depth the reality of practitioners working with children with SEND in specialist settings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising semi-structured interviews with 11 special school teachers and leaders, this study found that professionals working in specialist settings experienced parental conflict, challenges related to personal life and working arrangements during this time, and highlighted concerns and opportunities for the future and sustainability of the SEND system. The professionals highlighted some essential components needed to support the development of meaningful careers and the reduction of attrition in the sector such as an increase in pay and greater appreciation of the role. This study has implications for policy and practice in a time of uncertainty pre-election and during national crises such as high teacher turnover coupled with low teacher recruitment.

Key Points

- Professionals working in specialist settings felt let down and left behind by the government in issuing guidance that would reflect the uniqueness of characteristics of these settings and the children and young people they cater for.
- Professionals experienced tensions in relationships with parents, challenges related to family and working arrangements during this time, in adapting provision to meet the needs of children with SEND, and highlighted concerns and opportunities for the future and sustainability of the SEND system.
- Nonetheless, professionals acknowledged the need for greater recognition of their role in supporting vulnerable children, an increase in pay and exposure to special educational needs from early days in training as key elements to support the development of meaningful careers and the reduction of attrition in the sector.

INTRODUCTION

The identification of the novel coronavirus (hereon, COVID-19) in late 2019 in Wuhan, China and its subsequent spread around the world has led to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) call for countries to

act against the spread, and to declare the outbreak of the disease as a pandemic. The UK context responded to this call for action against the spread of the disease by instating a national lockdown in March 2020. This period of lockdown translated in the closure of public places, including schools, with only the children

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of 'key workers' allowed to attend during this period, along with those children deemed vulnerable, a category that includes children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) in receipt of support under Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs), England's statutory documents for SEND. The closures included special education schools in England—settings which cater specifically to children and young people with severe or complex SEND that cannot be adequately addressed within mainstream education settings. The WHO (2020) has reported that by April 2020, schools in 189 countries had closed, leading to a fast-paced move from education settings around the world towards adopting a distance-learning format (using e-learning platforms, phone calls and paper-based learning packs for home schooling, for example) to minimise the disruption in learning stemming from school closures (Andrew et al., 2020; Canning & Robinson, 2021; Thorell et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, there is consensus that children's learning experience has been affected by the pandemic, and that this has particularly been the case for students who experience disadvantage stemming from socio-economic constraints or having SEND (Andrew et al., 2020; Crawley et al., 2020; Skipp et al., 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the international landscape, the experience of families of children with SEND has been widely documented. Evidence in this sphere suggests that the type of need of the child is a contributing factor to the differences in experiences of parents of children with SEND throughout the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020; Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021). In the UK context, Sideropoulos and colleagues conducted a survey to examine the impact of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK on worries and anxiety of individuals with SEND through caregivers. Their survey reported a progressive increase in levels of anxiety both for the caregivers and children with SEND as the first UK lockdown progressed. Moreover, the study also reported an increase in worries for children with SEND in relation to the lack of structure and loss of support due to school and activity centre's closures (Sideropoulos et al., 2021). Another study conducted by O'Hagan and Kingdom (2020) explored the experiences of children with SEND and their families in the UK during the pandemic also reported increased anxiety both in parents and children with SEND, with 67% of parents reporting having difficulties with home schooling of their children, and a significant increase in their caring responsibilities due to school closures. The detrimental impact of the pandemic in the overall mental health and well-being of parents and their children with SEND was also reported by Castro-Kemp

and Mahmud (2021), whose findings suggest that the impact was more severely felt for those experiencing deprivation.

With regards to teachers and practitioners, several studies have focused on their experiences of delivery of provision for children with SEND during the pandemic, both in the UK and internationally. Parmigiani and colleagues (2021) conducted a survey exploring the factors affecting online special education provision in Italy during the pandemic, through the eyes of teachers. Their findings suggest that relationships with families, technology (understood as availability of devices for families and teachers, materials created, digital platforms or apps, and the preparedness to use all of these) online teaching strategies and teacher collaboration were among the factors that play a significant role in effective inclusive online practice to support children and young people with SEND (Parmigiani et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 outbreak. Kim and Asbury's (2020) study on the experiences of teachers during the first few weeks of lockdown in England highlighted the uncertainty reflected by this group's narratives around the abruptness of change and the little time served by the UK Government between the school closures announcement and the move to remote learning. These feelings of unease were reportedly exacerbated when they concerned children identified as vulnerable, at a time where usual safeguarding mechanisms were reduced significantly or taken away (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Similarly, Warnes and colleagues (2021) explored the concerns of British mainstream teachers with regards to SEND, citing a lack of resources such as funding for specialist and support staff as the area of greatest concern for this group of professionals, as well as infrastructure. This is compounded with some evidence from extant literature in the field suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated and perpetuated existing inequalities experienced by children with SEND and their families (Pellicano & Stears, 2020) with regards to provision, exemplified in reported feelings of loss of school- and community-based supports, and the disruption of children's routines (Crane et al., 2021; Darmody et al., 2021).

Other studies have referred to the experiences and the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs)—practitioners responsible for coordinating the provision of special education for children and young people with SEND in an education setting (Hallett, 2022). In their survey with SENCOs, Middleton and Kay (2021) explored the role of this group of practitioners in leading special education provision during the pandemic. Their findings stressed a perceived increase in SENCOs' workload and an expansion of scope of the role; the latter expansion refers to the undertaking of tasks such as planning, managing, and teaching for SEND students, in addition to providing emotional support and sustenance to adults (staff and parents) who support pupils with SEND,

all which is not reflected in terminology used by the current SEND code of practice under the mandate to 'oversee' and 'advise' (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015). These findings could help steer the conversation around the role of SENCOs in ongoing policy debate relating to revisions and changes much needed in the SEND system.

It is striking that research done around this topic is still limited given the rise of young people in specialist settings in England over the last few years. The proportion of young people educated in special schools in England has increased over the past decade from 1.17 per cent in 2012 to 1.62 per cent in 2022, and subsequently, the number of young people with SEND attending special schools or other alternative provision rose by more than a fifth between 2014 and 2018 (Doak, 2023). In England, most children attending specialist have EHCPs, the statutory document where needs and provision of children recognised as having SEND are specified. Almost all children in specialist settings have an EHC plan which has been developed at statutory level, and almost all these children have an established diagnosis. Only 4% of pupils with SEND have an EHC plan, as opposed to 13% of pupils who have SEND but are not considered under this statutory regulation. Children attending specialist settings are mostly the former (UK Government, 2023). Given the reported and widely recognised difficulties with the EHC planning process that families and practitioners face in mainstream settings, including the issues around cross-sector collaboration, lack of resources to meet agreed provision and timeline, among others, specialist settings are in increased demand for their heightened capacity to meet these specific needs; to add to this, there is an exponential rise in the diagnosis of certain types of SEND, specifically Autism, which is the main type of need for children with SEND in England (Russell et al., 2022).

To understand the context further, in the sphere of specialist settings, Crane et al. (2021) considered the impact of the pandemic in British special schools, with a focus on those catering for children in the autism spectrum. Among their discussion points, they highlighted the challenges posed to practitioners working in specialist settings with regards to navigating government guidance that seemed to focus on mainstream provision, further exposing and perpetuating educational inequalities experienced by this group. There was consensus among senior leaders that special schools were overlooked by the government during the pandemic, arguing that the implementation of guidance issued by national authorities for all schools failed to address the unique reality and context of special educational settings (Crane et al., 2021). Furthermore, parents and carers who have children with EHCPs also reported that their child's legally binding provision and full entitlement to support had not been provided during this period (Ashworth et al., 2022; Tirraoro et al., 2020; Toseeb et al., 2020).

Despite the growing body of literature documenting the impact of the pandemic in children, young people, their parents, and education settings in general, there is paucity in research that focuses on the lived experience of practitioners working in special education settings. This study, therefore, seeks to explore in-depth the reality of practitioners working with children with SEND in specialist settings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, to articulate the singularity of challenges faced by special settings in England. This follows up from the survey findings reported by Mahmud and Castro-Kemp (2022) with a sample of participants from their study with special education professionals working in English special settings. In that research, the authors found, via a survey, that the main challenges identified by staff in specialised settings were lack of guidance from governmental authorities, staff shortages, work overload, challenging relationship with parents and issues in meeting children's complex needs. In this study, these issues are explored in further detail via qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of participants to obtain a deepened understanding of views and attitudes. This is of particular contemporary relevance given the period of pre-general election as well as national crises such as the turnover and lack of recruitment of teachers.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the views of educators working in specialist education settings in England during the COVID-19 lockdowns through semi-structured interviews, following an inductive thematic analysis (Creswell, 2012; Guest et al., 2014). The focus of this approach is that of understanding the lived meaning of the lived experiences of SEND educators in light of the school closure and learning arrangements introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in England. Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Roehampton Research Ethics Committee. This article presents findings emerging from 11 semi-structured interviews conducted between November and December 2021 with educators working in specialist settings in England.

Sample

The study adopted a purposive sample (Dhivyadeepa, 2015). Participants who took part in this study were recruited from a larger pool of survey respondents that had participated in a larger study exploring special setting educators' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures in England (Mahmud & Castro-Kemp, 2022). In this survey, participants were asked whether they would like to take part in a follow-up individual interview with the

researching team, and those who had opted in for this further involvement in the project were required to leave an email address for the researchers to contact them. Out of the 93 respondents that took part in the survey 17 participants left their contact details to partake in the interviews. Email contacts were made with these survey participants, and 11 subsequently agreed to take part in a one-to-one interview. Table 1 shows participants' demographic characteristics. In the context of the English school system, teaching assistants are often unqualified or qualifying practitioners.

Data collection and analysis

An interview schedule was developed by the research team to guide the topics to discuss. The wording of the questions took consideration of the results of the survey that needed further in-depth exploration. In the interviews, participants were asked to comment on their (and their school's) experiences of lockdown and school closures between March 2020 and July 2021; they were asked about the challenges that teachers and staff faced in the context of SEND provision during this period, and about the challenges faced by children with regards to their learning. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on those aspects of arrangements and experiences in specialist settings that worked well during that time frame. The interview also covered questions around the support that the practitioners had throughout the lockdowns and school closures, as well as the help they would have liked to receive to

strengthen their roles for this period. Moreover, the interview also considered the views of educators in SEND for the future in terms of lessons learned and opportunities that the pandemic presented to SEND schools and teachers. As for the consideration of survey results, participants were asked to present their views with regards to the finding that most practitioners expressed dissatisfaction with government support, as well as reported experiences of difficult relationships with parents during this time. The survey also reported that 35% of practitioners would consider a change of career path, while the majority would continue working in the field. Interviewees were then asked to comment why they thought that practitioners wanted to remain in the field despite the challenges described, and what would need to be done to keep the 35% working in the SEND field and attract more people to the profession. Lastly, participants were asked about their views about what the future of SEND provision would look like in the UK context.

Interviews took place online (Bauman, 2015), on Zoom, on a date and time previously arranged with participants. Given that the main aim of the study was to explore the lived experiences of educators working in specialist settings and their views and perspectives on issues mentioned in the previous larger survey, qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis following a phenomenological approach; this enables the emergence of natural themes that transpire from the data itself, interpreted through an iterative process of meaning-making and clustering of main categories of meaning (Creswell, 2012). The analysis of transcripts consisted firstly of highlighting and drawing from the data all significant quotes from participants, sentences and statements that provided an understanding of how practitioners in special settings experienced and perceived the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the challenges and opportunities stemming from school closures and teaching arrangements during the UK lockdowns. This step was followed by iterative phases of clustering these statements into categories of meaning, following an inductive process of narrowing data while interpreting its meaning (Creswell, 2012; Guest et al., 2014).

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics—professional role and years of experience working in SEND.

Participants (n=11)	Professional role	Years of experience working in SEND
Participant 1	Head of base in SEND (autism) unit	11 years
Participant 2	Chief executive of special school trust	30 years
Participant 3	Teacher in SEND school	6 years
Participant 4	Manager in SEND centre	3 years
Participant 5	Head of primary in special school	6 years
Participant 6	Teacher in SEND unit	2 years
Participant 7	Teacher in SEND unit	20 years
Participant 8	Teaching Assistant (TA) in special school	2 years
Participant 9	Head of special school	20 years
Participant 10	Teacher in special school	3 Years
Participant 11	Teacher in special school	8 years

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to elicit in-depth views of education staff working in specialist education setting that serve children with SEND in England and how they experienced working in these settings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Six themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) *frustration at the lack of support from the government and acknowledgment of specialist settings as 'different' from mainstream*; (b) *looking inwards for support*; (c) *tensions and dilemmas in staff's working and family arrangements*; (d) *adapting provision, teaching,*

and learning experiences for children and young people with SEND; (e) navigating relationships with parents; and (f) the present and future of SEND. A summary of each theme is presented below with relevant participant quotes to support them. Participants' names have been pseudonymised, so each respondent has been assigned a number to protect their identity.

Frustration at lack of direct support from the government and acknowledgment of specialist settings as 'different' from mainstream

Interview questions addressed participants' experiences in their specialist education settings during the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. The most salient theme emerging from the interviews was around the frustration with government, both at national and local level, due to the lack of specific guidelines that acknowledged the specificity of the circumstances and characteristics of special education settings (i.e., the institutions/schools that cater specifically for children whose needs cannot be met with the provision and support provided by a mainstream schools), and that could be translated by settings into practices that reflected their difference from mainstream provision:

In that unique way we were open, and we were open to much bigger numbers than our mainstream colleagues, really. All of the guidance coming from the DfE in the early days was really aimed at mainstream and it didn't address the difficulties of special schools, because it was talking about mainstream pupils who could potentially, you know, keep social distance, understand the use of PPE... we were dealing with a whole different cohort.

Participant 2

It felt like the government [...] lack understanding of the different type of settings, like a PRU [pupil referral unit], and resource centres, and special schools, etc. So [...] I would have wanted more guidance for those different types of settings, including ourselves, from the government and from the local authority.

Participant 4

In this respect, participants gave details of the challenges that they perceived were unique to children with special educational needs, which were not accounted for by local authorities and national government when issuing their guidance for schools in terms of social distancing and protective measures to prevent the spread of the virus even if children were in schools. Participants' narratives in this dimension reflect the difficulty of applying 'mainstream' guidelines in special settings:

For example, there was one student who always needed to be close to everyone, it was just the way he liked doing things and the way he felt safe. And to tell this kid 'oh no, you need to keep away from everyone now, no one can come near you know and can give you this' [...] that was really heart-breaking.

Participant 3

It was tricky really because I think, you'd recognize that most our children need that face to face. And we've got a range of needs, but for many of them... their attention and listening isn't there, and watching someone on the screen isn't very engaging.

Participant 4

One participant highlighted that they felt in a guideline 'limbo' as the provision where they worked was not classed as 'a school'. This left the organisation and staff feeling vulnerable as the local authority would not provide support or backing to their decision-making, while at the same time they were expected to make provision arrangements for children with EHCPs attending the setting, as stipulated in their statutory documents:

And that backing, like I mentioned earlier, just wasn't there. Because we all feel vulnerable to complaints, and tribunals, and the legal system or having legal action taken against you. It would have felt more reassuring if we had that [government] guidance and support.

Participant 4

I do feel like special schools are kind of in the dark. A lot like we were kind of just left and expected to be opening still [...] but really the logistics of how we were meant to be open weren't there and wasn't well thought through.

Participant 5

Looking inwards for support

Directly related to the previous theme, participants described mechanisms put in place within their settings in trying to 'make sense' and interpreting guidance issued by the government given the lack of advice for specialist settings. In this context, five participants highlighted that collegiality among staff members in their settings kept each other motivated, provided a source of support during challenging times, reassurance, and examples of good practice for their work despite the lack of clarity or applicability of guidance in their own settings:

It did feel quite a lot that we were left to do our own thing as a school – there was little to

no guidance from the LA [local authority] in terms of what do we do? How do we set this up? That's great for, you know, what the government is saying for mainstream schools. But how does that realistically work in a special school where you've got such a plethora of needs?

Participant 11

We were very supportive to each other, we started writing a risk assessment. So, one of us would write it, then would go to the next one who'd add something and go to the next one who would add something else. So, we did find each other supportive. It would have been helpful for the LA [local authority] to send us templates and give a little bit more support in that light. But there was nothing.

Participant 9

So we looked out for each other. That's as much support as we seem to feel we have, a supportive team around.

Participant 7

Practitioners described schools feeling the need to take matters in their own hands, looking at their own resources and redeploying staff as ways to honour their provision commitment, as instructed in statutory guidance at the time, and support children with SEND and their families during lockdown. For some, this meant developing comprehensive risk assessments to ensure that it was safe for students with EHCPs to attend school (e.g. participant 9); others saw their workload and responsibilities shift to fill gaps in how they could provide for children:

If I'm honest, it was staff teaching staff. So, I was having to teach staff how to use Zoom – I am not an IT coordinator, I just knew how to use it, so I became the Zoom person. And we had someone who was good at filming things, so they became the film person. So, it was kind of using skills that we had that we didn't know each other had.

Participant 2

One LSA [learning support assistant] isn't really IT literate, and she says that herself, and so she took on different roles and responsibilities, and someone else changed their own to cover that, if that makes sense, so there definitely was support among colleagues.

Participant 4

Three participants mentioned liaising and collaborating with other schools in their area as a means of support when guidance was lacking, and as a way of improving the quality of provision through the sharing of best practice:

Sharing your practice and welcoming others into your classroom is the best way to develop your teachers'

Participant 2

Tensions and dilemmas in staff's family and working arrangements

Most participants experienced some tensions with regards to their working arrangements during the school closures and lockdowns. In some cases, these tensions were around difficulties in schools keeping on top of government guidelines emerging within a tight time frame for implementation, and how to negotiate fulfilling their roles in schools while at the same time protecting their own families from harm and the spread of the virus:

The government says, we have to stay open because we're a special school. So, my children could be at home, the government thinks my children should be at home for their safety. But now I have to come into work and risk their safety, because we're a special school.

Participant 8

So unless someone was clinically extremely vulnerable and had to shield, the expectation was that staff would be on site.

Participant 4

One participant highlighted making a range of personal sacrifices to keep their job in a time of financial uncertainty and pressure, and struggling to manage their personal childcare arrangements to fulfil their role in school:

[You were] getting phone calls from your head, basically telling you that you return to work even though you've got no childcare for your two-year-old. I had to then make a decision to put my young child with grandparents, also made the decision that the day that I was working, then not seeing them for five days afterwards, so that I will protect everybody. So, I would go in work Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, but then I wouldn't see my son again until the following week.

Participant 10

Participants expressed anger about the expectations set by the government on schools, particularly with regards to the continuity of on-site provision for children with EHCPs, while simultaneously not recognising the impact of these arrangements on their family life as key workers:

Okay, I'll go in, I can look after these children during the pandemic. But it was when my son got very ill, that's when I felt like, what am I doing? You know, I'm looking after everybody's children, I'm actually wiping their noses. These children are crying because they want to go home, and yet my son is at home feeling rotten because he caught COVID from me. It did make me really question where my priorities are.

Participant 8

I personally felt like the government, they made these grand statements, you know, 'we must continue and we must support our children with EHCPs'. I think there was just a lack of consideration for other people's families. Im a single parent with two children, and I was expected to keep going at the expense of my own family [...] I felt like my family didn't matter.

Participant 7

These tensions between supporting vulnerable children and protecting their own families were exacerbated by feeling undervalued or not appreciated by the public and occasionally by parents:

I think it would have been really nice, even if the general public and the press recognise that special schools were still open.

Participant 2

'It became difficult to maintain our harmonious relationship with parents in my period, because they wanted their children in school, regardless of anybody else or anyone else's families.

Participant 7

In this sense, some participants reported differing experiences with regards to access to the COVID-19 vaccine. While a subgroup of participants acknowledged it was helpful for them to be recognised as social workers for early vaccination access, others reported feeling unfairly treated for not being prioritised as other groups were:

So we are never prioritised and we have the most challenging students, and we always seem to be an afterthought.

Participant 5

Social workers weren't going into houses at that point, but we were having children in, having to go visit families with food, who didn't have it, and needed all those things, and we

were not considered [for the vaccine]. We are kind of the front door to services.

Participant 1

I guess the vaccine, that was one thing that was helpful. We were classed as social care workers, so we've had early access to the vaccine.

Participant 9

Adapting provision, teaching, and learning experiences for children and young people with SEND

Most participants recognised the sudden move to online learning as one of the biggest challenges brought about by the pandemic. This challenge was represented in different dimensions across participants. For example, for some respondents this move highlighted issues with the lack of access to electronic devices in the home environment, while others reflected on the fact that many children in their settings did not have the necessary keyboard and device skills to navigate newly set up virtual learning environments. This led to practitioners to reorganise their priorities for teaching and learning. In many cases, participants mentioned lowering learning expectations, ensuring accessibility of material and activities, and establishing new routines for children and young people:

A lot of the teaching was done at a level that they could access easier at home. So you might have higher expectations when they're in school. I think that we did have to lower our expectations of what they do and what they will understand [...] As much as we tried, I don't think that there was a great deal of significant learning happening.

Participant 11

Academically, I didn't challenge them or anything, I just tried to give them a routine and keep them happy.

Participant 3

For me, being online with them was just a case of making sure that they were alright, they were okay.

Participant 7

Among professionals' narratives was a sense of pressure to perform, set by the government, the general public and parents in particular; in many cases, this pressure was translated into an adjustment of professionals' workloads and responsibilities for which they felt taken for granted:

I felt very much like the government just didn't care [...] we weren't listened to as a cohort of professionals. I also think that the government for a while saw us like childcare.

Participant 11

I would say, especially with online learning, that the expectations for a child at home and the expectations for a child at school were two very different things, and the parents were putting the same kind of expectations that we would put for them at school.

Participant 6

Despite these challenges, some participants reflected positively on the changes introduced in their settings because of the pandemic, suggesting a sense of improvement in their provision as a silver lining:

Thinking about how we can support parents with structures and routines at home and ways to support their child's development at home, we were forced to think about that. And I think that has made an improvement to our homework offer. And I think our ability to use technology increased our staff confidence in dealing with parents, I think increased. Website offer on our website and thinking differently about video tours, and ways of supporting families to understand what [our] school is about, which is often really tricky. For people who haven't been in a special setting before and can't understand what a school might look like, because it looks so different to their own schooling.

Participant 9

Navigating relationships with parents

The relationship with parents of children with SEND emerged as a recurring theme in exploring SEND professionals' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this theme, participants addressed the complexity of these relationships. Some professionals saw the pandemic as an opportunity to get to know families better, leading to positive changes in their ways of engaging and supporting families in the educational journeys of their children:

In terms of building relationships with families, that was a very big one because you had to be in constant contact with them, because a lot of the children weren't always able to advocate for themselves [...] it gave a lot of people a wider understanding of what it is like for a family with special needs.

Participant 11

We really got to know our families [...] in a lot more depth and found out things that we just didn't know about them. I think it strengthened the bond between staff and families [...] we are doing a lot more training with our parents, and that's helping them understand their children's needs in a lot more depth.

Participant 2

Other participants reported an increase in tensions with parents, stemming from the way government guidelines were being implemented in their settings and parental expectations around the organisation of provision. It could be suggested that the lack of specific guidelines for specialist settings may have contributed to some of the negative tensions emerging between professionals and parents:

One parent emailed quite aggressive[ly]; it was strongly worded about the decisions we were making with regards to giving prioritised spaces. We are part of a mainstream school, so some of the decisions we could follow but some we had to think differently because of our setup.

Participant 4

Some parents were obviously exceptionally frustrated and wanted to get their child back to school and because our children can't do the sit down in front of the screen and learn it was really, really challenging for them.

Participant 9

The present and future of SEND

The last theme emerging from interviews focused on the current lived experiences of professionals working in the field and their reflections around what the future of SEND should look like to improve the lives and educational experiences of children and young people with SEND, as well as to attract and retain professionals. A subtheme of professional identity was captured in some of the reflections offered by participants. Indeed, 9 out of 11 participants stressed that wanting to help children was the main reason for staying in the profession despite the challenges already existing in the sector, and exacerbated by the pandemic:

Because you can see the impact you are having on the children, and that's what people go into teaching for.

Participant 10

I think also anyone that works with children with special needs, in general, I've yet to find someone that only does it for the money. So, it's because we care about the children, we care about the families we work with, and that

caring doesn't go away [...] at the end of the day, I think it's because we care. No-one does this job because they don't.

Participant 11

Professionals' reflections led to the identification of key ideas concerning the future of the SEND system and the profession, based on opportunities and lessons learned from the pandemic. In this regard, participants highlighted that many of their settings struggled with recruitment. As mentioned in previous themes, practitioners discussed feeling undervalued and not recognised by the government and the public concerning the work they do. The topic of pay as a proxy for recognition emerged in several interviews as an issue to attract and retain professionals in the field to make it systemically sustainable, as well as the issue of raising the profile of SEND professionals at national level:

We've been looking at this in our school; part of it is pay because we are significantly underfunded, so that makes it exceptionally challenging for us to attract our teachers.

Participant 9

Why should I keep sloggng myself out, when I'm not appreciated by the government, I'm not appreciated by the country, I'm not appreciated by society. And a lot of times [staff] aren't appreciated by the families we work with. So, it's kind of, what's the point?

Participant 11

Two participants reflected on the current bureaucracy of the SEND system to identify needs and put provision in place, bringing to attention its cost in terms of staff time that could be spent supporting children, and its impact on professionals' workloads and the quality of provision:

I think it should get to a point where you're not fighting fires, you're actually preventing fires from happening [...] sometimes you don't even have time to fight the fire, you are just tidying up afterwards.

Participant 11

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of professionals working in specialist settings for children with SEND in England during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings emerging from this study reflect concerns from professionals that span from lack of trust in the government's advice and support at a macro level, to more personal and context

specific tensions in their working arrangements at a time of crisis. These concerns show the wide-ranging challenges that key stakeholders consider impactful for their practice, with significant implications for the future of children and young people with SEND and those working in the field.

There was consensus among participants that at national level, the government had failed to recognise the uniqueness of specialist settings and their inner workings when developing guidelines and support for education. More specifically, professionals highlighted a sense of loss and being left to their own devices when it came to key decision-making points in relation to the logistics of developing online provision, risk assessments and keeping their doors open for children with EHCPs, as mandated by government guidelines (Department for Education, 2020). These sentiments were coupled with the need to make significant changes and the reorganisation of their duties and tasks, which in turn often translated into an increase in professionals' workloads. These findings are aligned with previous studies in the field (Middleton & Kay, 2021). Similarly, Boddison and Curran (2022) stressed that the pandemic exacerbated the challenges experienced by SENCos in navigating 'the intersection and contradictions between needs and resources' (Hellawell, 2019, p. 24) stemming from the English SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

Findings from this study suggest that this lack of trust in the government's advice and support, perceived as too little, too late, by participants, led to specialist settings to look inwards for support. This phenomenon led to the emergence and recognition of staff skills previously not showcased at a time where settings were forced to think differently about how to navigate provision arrangements for children with SEND. This was coupled with participants' heightened sense of loss of their ways of working and the sudden need to be upskilled to respond to rapid demands for remote teaching and learning. In this sphere, participants stressed the difficulty of designing and implementing online resources for children with complex needs, who might not have the necessary computer skills to navigate virtual learning environments independently or might not be able to meaningfully engage in screen activities without face-to-face practitioner input to direct students' attention. These difficulties were echoed by parents of children with SEND and their home-schooling arrangements, as reported in a survey conducted by Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020). In this study, parents reported feelings of inadequacy to support the learning of their children at home, citing lacking knowledge on how to engage them to complete tasks online, leading to tensions in the home environment between children and parents. As a result of these tensions, many parents opted for a flexible approach to lesson and activity planning (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). A similar approach was reportedly adopted by professionals in this study. Many participants

reported reducing the learning expectations of their students and focused on providing a routine and some structured time, prioritising familiarity, and student well-being over academic targets.

Consequently, the feelings of loss around learning opportunities for children with SEND were echoed by parents and practitioners in the field, calling attention to the pressures that the pandemic may have added to an already fragile system (National Association for Special Educational Needs, 2022). Correspondingly, Skipp et al. (2021) conducted a study with 190 headteachers from special schools and 40 families of children and young people who attend special settings to examine the effect of the pandemic on pupils' return to special schools and colleges since autumn 2020. Their findings support the views of practitioners reported in the current study: pupils in specialist settings experienced a greater degree of learning losses due to the pandemic compared to pupils in mainstream settings. Furthermore, these losses were not exclusively circumscribed to academic domains, but extended to areas of development such as social and communication skills, independence and life skills, self-regulation, emotional well-being, and mental health (Skipp et al., 2021). In recognising these effects, the UK government put in place education recovery support plans to mitigate these learning losses, including funding to support tutoring training programmes, teacher training and development, catch-up and recovery premiums for schools to decide how to use according to their own local population and circumstances, to meet their pupils' needs (National Audit Office, 2023). While the present study did not explicitly explore professionals' views on education recovery plans, participants did highlight these learning losses as an area of concern, and reflected on the importance for government to adopt a closer look at the SEND system to deliver policies and services that are fit for the population they aim to serve to improve outcomes of children with SEND. In its 2019 review of SEND, the House of Commons Education Select Committee reported that 'the distance between young people's [with SEND] lived experiences, their families' struggles and Ministers' desks is just too far' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p. 3). The findings stemming from this study suggest the imperative need for the government to listen to the voices of the sector to bridge the gap experienced by families and practitioners between policy and practice, as well as to hopefully support retention of staff in specialised settings and enhance their well-being; A study by Middleton (2018) which examined the factors impacting the resilience of practitioners working in nurture groups for children with social and emotional difficulties, identified friendship, being listened to and feeling recognised and supported as key elements of support for staff. This aligns the findings of the current study which demonstrate the need for professionals to *look inwards* as a coping mechanism for practitioners. The government's SEND and alternative provision improvement

plan have explicitly recognised these needs and put forward a commitment to increase funding to stabilise the system and increase capacity (HM Government, 2023). However, the specificities of how this will be achieved are still to be clarified.

As reported by Mahmud and Castro-Kemp (2022), SEND professionals' views and experiences of pressure in the current SEND system and the lack of government recognition for their role has led to many practitioners considering leaving the sector. It has been widely documented that teacher attrition not only has many implications for national education systems and the economy (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020) but also for students (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In a recent meta-analysis, Madigan and Kim (2021) sought to investigate the role of burnout, job satisfaction and teachers' intentions to quit to better understand teacher attrition across 24 studies. Their analysis found that burnout, understood as a psychosocial syndrome developed as a reaction to chronic work stress (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) is linked to teachers' intentions to quit. It is not surprising that the challenges posed by the pandemic on special settings has exacerbated feelings of exhaustion among practitioners in the sector, leading to expressions of intention to quit their jobs, or leave the profession altogether (Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021).

Moreover, participants in this study also referred to tensions in relationships with parents as an additional challenge brought by the pandemic. These tensions reportedly denoted differences among staff and parents concerning the organisation of provision, learning expectations (both in school and online), modes and frequency of communication and accessibility issues. Some of these issues have been highlighted by Lake and Billingsley (2000) as factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. Findings from the current study suggest to some extent a mismatch in expectations between parents and professionals with regards to service delivery (i.e., what and how should be provided) during the pandemic, based on differences in their understanding of the children's needs and the resources available at a time of crisis (e.g., staffing, funding, electronic devices, to name a few).

Looking ahead

The overwhelming feeling of exhaustion, disenchantment and loss of hope in the government reported by professionals in this study suggests that the SEND system is in need of changes that recognise and value the professionals working in it, not only for the sake of its own sustainability, but also to ensure that staff continue to meaningfully engage with their work, see their status acknowledged and are provided with opportunities to grow professionally, to deliver the best quality provision for children with SEND.

While the challenges presented by the pandemic have been well documented, participants in this study have also referred to positive aspects and lessons learned. For example, the use of online communication tools facilitated in some cases communication with parents, getting to know families and their needs better, resulting in improved, more personalised provision for children and families. Personalisation of provision is not a new concept in the context of SEND; it is in fact referenced as a core principle of the current SEND Code of Practice in England as part of the person-centred approach advocated to identify and support children with SEND and their families (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015). It has also been highlighted in the current SEND and AP Improvement Plan to build parents' trust in navigating the system and supporting children's transition between all stages of education (Department for Education, 2023). The circumstances around lockdown, social distancing measures, and school closures have forced professionals to rethink their ways of doing things in response to the unprecedented challenges emerging from the pandemic, leading to perceived improvements in the quality of provision and reflections on best practice. Moreover, the use of online tools as platforms for delivery of staff training has been reported to facilitate the upskilling of a greater number of staff, reducing costs for schools for professional development at a time of heightened funding constraints.

The study presents some limitations. The sample size for this study was small and self-selected from a pool of survey respondents who agreed to take part in a follow-up interview after completing a questionnaire on the same topic. Moreover, the sample's characteristics are not homogeneous in terms of professional roles and years of experience working in specialist settings. It would have been interesting to see whether nuances in experiences existed across professional roles and years of service in SEND settings. In a similar way, comparisons with experiences of SEND in mainstream settings may have enriched the interpretation of findings. However, the study is one of very few focusing on the experience of staff working in specialised settings in England and generates unique evidence of their concerns and challenges faced, with implications for the sustainability of the whole SEND system, in practice.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore in greater depth the experiences of professionals working in special educational setting in England during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main findings stemming from 11 semi-structured interviews amplify those reported in Castro-Kemp and Mahmud (2021) survey: professionals working

in specialist settings felt let down and left behind by the government in issuing guidance that would reflect the uniqueness of characteristics of these settings and the children and young people they cater for. They also experienced tensions in relationships with parents, challenges related to family and working arrangements during this time, in adapting provision to meet the needs of children with SEND, and highlighted concerns and opportunities for the future and sustainability of the SEND system. Nonetheless, professionals acknowledged the need for greater recognition of their role in supporting vulnerable children, an increase in pay and exposure to special educational needs from early days in training as key elements to support the development of meaningful careers and the reduction of attrition in the sector.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS APPROVAL

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Roehampton. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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