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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Education as a catalyst for the social inclusion of people with learning disabilities

Decommissioning normal: COVID-19 as a disruptor of school norms for young people with learning disabilities

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Accessible summary

- The COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to live at a social distance from other people. This has changed the way people live and are included socially.
- This paper focuses on the unexpected ways schools have altered and deepened social inclusion for children with learning disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We interviewed six people: two people who work for a Local Authority, one Headteacher of a special school, one Special Educational Needs and Disability Consultant, one young person with a learning disability and her mother.
- The findings and conclusions show the "new normal" caused by COVID-19 can help to deepen social inclusion for children with learning disabilities. For example, it can help children communicate in alternative ways with their teachers and friends. It can help families to understand more about their son/daughter's educational abilities; this means they can advocate better for them. It can help professionals to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities more quickly.
- We do not enjoy living at a social distance from everyone else, but we do want to make sure that lessons can be learnt from this moment in time.

Abstract

Background: To slow the spread of COVID-19, on 20 March 2020, nurseries, schools and colleges across England were closed to all learners, apart from those who were children of key workers or were considered "vulnerable." As young people with learning disabilities, families, professionals and schools become acquainted with the Erfahrung of the new horizon brought about by COVID-19, the negativity of altered social inclusion is becoming the "new normal." Capturing this transitory moment in time, this paper reflexively analyses the curiously productive variables of altered ecological pathways to social inclusion for people with learning disabilities.

Methods: Taking a hermeneutic stance, this paper draws on Gadamer's construction of the nature of new experiences. Focussed on the experience of social inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six key stakeholders. As the phenomenon in question was new, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was applied.

Findings: The critical tenet of this paper is that the Erfahrung of COVID-19 has created the conditions for a "new normal" which have afforded children with learning disabilities altered opportunities for social inclusion, whether that be through increased power/agency for them and their families and/or new modes of connectedness leading to enhanced relationships.

Conclusion: Whilst the impact of COVID-19 has been a negative one for many aspects of society, application of Simplican and Gadamer's theories on social inclusion and the nature of new experiences has permitted the surfacing of new possibilities for the social inclusion of children with learning disabilities.

KEYWORDS

inclusive education, learning (intellectual) disabilities, teaching and learning

1 | BACKGROUND

Research from around the world has highlighted the increased challenges experienced by many disabled people during the global pandemic. Concern has been expressed that the impact of the pandemic has resulted in disabled people experiencing further marginalisation from wider society. It is acknowledged that during times of crisis, it is frequently those from potentially marginalised communities who are likely to be most negatively impacted. This article explores the experiences of key stakeholders associated with provision for children with learning disabilities; focus is directed towards their understandings of the potential impact of COVID-19 for children with learning disabilities in England during the autumn of 2020. The phrase "children with learning disabilities" is used throughout this article to refer to young people with a learning disability aged 11–16. It is proposed that by hearing the voice of a child with a learning disability, their parent and a small number of key educational professionals, that possibilities can be uncovered which point to a new horizon of social inclusion for children with learning disabilities. Giroux (2021) asserts the COVID-19 pandemic has not merely been medical in nature but has served to surface an ongoing economic and social pandemic experienced by those from marginalised groups. It is hoped that this article brings focus to underlying issues within current provision which address education as a catalyst for the social inclusion of children with learning disabilities.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To slow the spread of COVID-19 on 20 March 2020, nurseries, schools and colleges across England were closed to all learners, apart from those who were children of key workers or were considered "vulnerable" in some way (Gov.UK, 2020a); for example, those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). With the school closures, Headteachers had to swiftly reorganise staffing and ensure that educational communities still provided a sense of belonging and social inclusion to everyone. Clarke and Done (2021) outline how

schools' risk assessments, plans to make reasonable adjustments and providing access to technology were put into place to support inclusive practice. Teachers found themselves in a position of trying to maintain socially inclusive relationships with learners who were physically present in school, as well as those young people who were at a distance and learning at home (NEU, 2020). The National Education Union for teachers advised its members the first concern should be staff and pupil well-being (NEU, 2020). The importance of relationships and ensuring the maintenance of emotional well-being were heightened. In England, the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) outline how relationships are built on "mutual respect" and Hall (2009) describes the importance of positive interactions to engender a sense of belonging. In this time of lockdown, settings are constantly seeking innovative ways to value mutually respectful relationships with families who are supporting their children's learning at home (Wharton, 2020). Schools have explored strategies to nurture relationships with families and pupils whilst also implementing social distancing measures (Wharton, 2020). As Wang et al., (2020) highlight in their article about children's emotional well-being in the Chinese COVID-19 lockdown, the importance of interactions with teachers is critical.

Inclusive teacher–pupil relationships provide children with a sense of belonging (Cemalcilar, 2010) and as Simplican et al., (2015) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) outline, the ecological pathways between a child's micro-system (home) and the relationships in the meso-system (school) allow for an individual to flourish and social inclusion to deepen. However, the pandemic has led to a disruption of both the child's micro- and meso-systems. As one Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator states:

> The pupils that left us at the end of March have lived through a period of significant fundamental change that none of us has ever had to endure at their age. Each of them will have had a unique experience that will have challenged or reinforced their beliefs about their world.
>
> (Wharton, 2020, p.19)

Amanda Spielman (2020, para. 2) the Chief Inspector for Ofsted has praised school staff for the "remarkable job" they are doing as a result of "a deep sense of commitment and responsibility to the children."

The sense of responsibility that educators feel is summed up in Buber's (2002, p.53) description of genuine responsibility "in which the demander demands of me the entrusted good and I must open my hands or they petrify." The image of open hands at a time of pandemic, when human contact outside our bubble is unthinkable, highlights the challenges faced by schools to support children's social inclusion. However, through a variety of strategies, educators have metaphorically opened their hands and adopted many ways to maintain teacher–pupil relationships.

Schools acknowledge that support for academic work is important but the primacy of ensuring children's well-being is stressed (Moynihan, 2020). Mays Imad, a professor of pathophysiology and biomedical ethics, states, "right now, it's all about the technology—the mechanics of how to teach remotely. But when I speak to my colleagues who are high school teachers, it's about 'how are we going to hold our students' hearts?'" (Gonser, 2020, para.4).

As schools remain open for children classed as "vulnerable" (Gov.UK, 2020b), educators and politicians have growing concerns about the welfare of this group (Weale, 2020). The Children's Commissioner (2020) has highlighted the groups of children and young people at risk: children whose parents have mental health difficulties, young carers, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), children who are at risk of or are suffering harm, children in care, children living in poverty and children with poor access to the internet. There is a suggestion the pandemic has highlighted these inequalities further (Giroux, 2021). Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner, explains (Savage, 2020):

> I know some schools have been very active in reaching out to parents of vulnerable children and are doing all they can. I've heard teachers talking about their sleepless nights, worrying about what is going on behind closed doors in the homes of their most vulnerable kids. It's also clear from the low attendance figures that some schools are not doing enough.

In the "new normal," these inequalities will need to be addressed (The Children's Commissioner, 2020).

After almost a year of lockdowns and easing, schools continue to create innovative ways to include children in their learning and with their communities. At a time when there is strain on all members of society, schools and teachers have been faced with vilification from some elements of our press (Groves & White, 2020). Despite this, schools are working to ensure the emotional well-being and academic progress of the pupils that are absent from their classrooms (Diamond, 2020). Families of children with SEND have needed support to maintain a safe space at home at a time when the boundaries between home and school have become blurred (Canning & Robinson, 2020).

One consideration is that the pandemic may provide the opportunity for a reframing of education and the priorities that our society identify as key to successful education. Giroux (2021, p.10) describes "social solidarity" born out of the disruption of the pandemic as being vital to well-being. The "energizing discourse of concrete possibilities" might provide a will to reconstructing a new educational order (Giroux, 2021, p.36). COVID-19 has brought to the fore the centrality of our relationships with each other, this is highlighted in a quote from a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) at an infant school, "whilst this scenario is unimaginably strange for all of us, if nothing else, it has bonded us together in a way that will forever be part of our lives" (Wharton, 2020, p.19).

3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DECOMMISSIONING NORMAL

The construct of being "normal" is argued by Davis (2013, p.1) to have done some "heavy lifting in the area of eugenics, scientific racism, ableism, gender bias, homophobia, and so on." As such, Davis (2013) calls for diversity to be the new normal. So, when a global pandemic plunges the world into a "new normal" that significantly impacts the social sphere, this study sought to examine this "new normal" in relation to the social inclusion of children with learning disabilities through the perspectives of six key stakeholders.

3.1 | Social inclusion: an ecological model

Social inclusion is argued to be unclear as a concept, largely due to multiple and conflicting definitions in research and policy (Simplican et al., 2015). Drawing on the work of Simplican et al., (2015), this paper chooses to adopt an ecological pathways approach to social inclusion, reflexively analysing how "individual," "interpersonal" and "organisational" variables influence "interpersonal relationships" and "community participation" for children with learning disabilities. At the level of the "individual," social inclusion refers to enabling/disabling conditions, such as the level at which a person functions, their self-motivation, confidence and knowledge (Simplican et al., 2015). The "interpersonal" element of social inclusion addresses the relationships occurring between the individual, their family and the professionals with whom they have contact (in the case of this article relating to schooling). The structural elements of these relationships are viewed as key components which enable/disable social inclusion. For example, key structural elements include the length of the relationship; the frequency of contact; the location of the contact; who initiates the contact; reciprocity in the relationship; and the intensity, formality and complexity of the relationship. Simplican et al., (2015) also point to relationships facilitating both bonding (the building

of a common bond or identity which increases trust, reciprocity and confidence) and/or bridging (the extension of a network). The latter is argued by Phillips et al., (2014) to be important in improving outcomes for people with disabilities. Focussing on school as a category within the community, the "organisational" conditions of the school which facilitate social inclusion should be viewed as broader than the opinions of one professional. Instead, the organisational elements of social inclusion concern the culture of a setting, its mission statement and the attitudes of the senior leadership team.

3.2 | The Erfahrung of the "new normal"

From a hermeneutic Gadamer (1975/2006) point of view, all experience can be subdivided into two types: Erlebnis, experience that conforms to our expectation and confirms it; and Erfahrung, experience that occurs as new. Gadamer (1975/2006) argues that experience is always negative in the latter, not in the sense of something which lacks positive attributes, but that "if a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now we know it better. Thus, the negativity of [Erfahrung] experience has a curiously productive meaning" (Gadamer, 1975/2006, p.347). Erfahrung as an experience broadens a person's horizons and helps them to understand something different than they had in the past. Strictly speaking therefore, a person cannot have the same Erfahrung experience more than once (Gadamer, 1975/2006, p.348). Conversely, part of the nature of Erlebnis is continual confirmation. Gadamer (1975/2006) writes, "we can now predict what was previously unexpected" (Gadamer, 1975/2006, p.348). The experiencer has, as it were, become aware of his experience and is now experienced; moreover, he has "acquired a new horizon" (Gadamer, 1975/2006, p.348). Here, however, a challenge languishes, for what becomes visible can once again become buried; the nature of Being comprises therefore of existing alongside the visible and the hidden (Heidegger, 1927/1995). Being has a temporal structure which is evolving, readjusting, continually becoming and possibly even returning to something like it was before. Tradition and assertion also have an impact on the hiding of Being, for when either of these two become master, phenomena can appear to be self-evident (Heidegger, 1927/1995).

3.3 | Research focus

As children with learning disabilities, families, professionals and schools become acquainted with the Erfahrung of the new horizon brought about by COVID-19, the negativity of altered social inclusion is becoming the "new normal." Thus, as the new normal becomes established, this paper takes this transitory moment in time to reflexively analyse some of the curiously productive variables of altered ecological pathways to social inclusion for children with learning disabilities.

The research question is: Focussing on the curiously productive nature of Erfahrung, how is the COVID-19 pandemic altering the ecological pathways to social inclusion for children with learning disabilities in England?

4 | METHODS

4.1 | Design and ethics

The focus of the research was a relatively new phenomenon—the impact of a global pandemic on provision for children with learning disabilities in England during the autumn of 2020. As such, an interpretivist, qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for the study. Cooper and Schindler (2008) argue that a qualitative in-depth interview-based approach is highly beneficial when little is known about the topic of research and there are few previous studies to draw on.

Applying a hermeneutic lens, the aim of the study therefore was not to provide generalised findings (Malpas, 2009) that might be subsequently applied to all provision across England or further afield. Rather, by contrast the research sought in-depth understandings and interpretations into the phenomena (Kakkori, 2009, p.26), which can be viewed as a preliminary stage to a lengthier process which would continue to evolve as the pandemic and its impact is more thoroughly understood over time. Therefore, an inductive approach was adopted to the data collection and subsequent thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2009).

Ethical approval was provided by the first author's University Ethics Committee on behalf of the research team. The full set of anonymised transcripts are available on request from the corresponding author. To maintain the anonymity of all participants, they are referred to throughout this paper by pseudonyms.

4.2 | Participants

Yin et al., (2013) argue the collected opinions and perceptions of key stakeholders can add to understanding of the research focus under scrutiny. Therefore, in keeping with the design of the study, it was decided to conduct a focussed number of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals who would be able to provide insider knowledge about the experiences of children with learning disabilities during the pandemic. Whilst the design of the study was being discussed, the authors were aware of several planned studies which focussed on the experiences of teachers during the pandemic. It was therefore decided to sample from alternative stakeholders as they might provide different perceptions of the situation.

All participants were previously known to two of the research team. During the planning stages, the benefits and challenges this brought were discussed. The research team were aware previous collegial relationships between interviewer and interviewee were beneficial as they would permit a relationship of trust and openness to the

discussion. Balanced against this benefit was the potential for closed thinking shaped by researchers' assumptions and an attitude of mind that has become blind to possibilities and tranquilised by "average everydayness" (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p.239) This challenge was addressed by the provision of one researcher who was not known to the interviewees therefore generating a detachment from the everyday order of things, or as Ricœur (1981, p.117) calls it "a critical moment of suspicion" that generated the motion needed for a robust reflective dialogue underpinning the analysis process.

Six participants accepted invitations to be interviewed. The initial sample focussed on stakeholders who held senior managerial remits for educational provision for individuals with disabilities/additional needs/vulnerable children: one Headteacher of a Secondary Special School and two Local Authority (LA) Officers. One of the LA Officers is a Service Director for Schools and Learning and the other has responsibility for SEND provision within their region. It was anticipated the first three interviewees would provide a unique overview of the phenomena under scrutiny through their role as senior leaders—often with the ear of government.

Following initial analysis of the first three interviews, specific lines of enquiry around partnership with parents emerged. To generate further motion of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1975/2006) and thus a deeper nuanced understanding of the phenomena, it was decided to purposively widen the sample to include three other interviewees: a child with a learning disability and their mother, and a SEND Consultant. It was anticipated these interviewees would provide through their roles a different perspective to the phenomena under scrutiny; each participant (apart from the child and her mother) are located in different English LAs. The aim was to provide both a macro perspective and micro perspective to the experiences of children with learning disabilities during the pandemic.

4.3 | Interview procedure

In preparation for the data gathering, the authors of this paper prepared three research questions which were used as a guide to structure the interviews. The questions were broadly framed to facilitate focus on the social experiences of children with learning disabilities within educational provision as opposed to academic achievement only:

- what has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed to you in relation to the social inclusion of children with learning disabilities?
- new ways of working that have come to light because of COVID-19 that appear (at this early stage) to be beneficial to the social inclusion of children with learning disabilities?
- if you reimagined social inclusion for children with learning disabilities what would the new normal be?

These guiding questions acted as prompts but the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured/open format adapted to the individual participants. For example, the interviews with the Headteacher and the LA Director for Schools and Learning addressed the questions directly, with additional time given for follow-up questions/any other comments. Whereas the interview with the child with a learning disability (Kezia) and her mother (Sara) was conducted in a more open format, addressing their experiences of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This permitted the researchers to gain insights into the plurality of experiences of the multiple stakeholders in the sample within an ethically appropriate framework.

The interviews took place online using a variety of digital platforms; Kezia and her mother Sara were interviewed simultaneously as the decision was made that Kezia (who has Down syndrome) would be most comfortable if the interview was set up in this manner. Following transcription of all interviews, the transcripts were shared with the participants for accuracy and to determine whether they wished to add anything to their responses. As the study was examining what was a relatively new phenomenon, the transcripts were initially analysed individually by all researchers using a constructivist grounded approach (Charmaz, 2014). Following this initial stage of the analysis, the research team engaged in extended dialogue to refine the emergent key themes.

5 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion focuses on how COVID-19 has imposed Erfahrung, experience that occurs as new, as opposed to the more usual Erlebnis, experience that conforms to expectations. Erfahrung presenting the possibility to find a "new normal" for the way schools are organised to include children with learning disabilities. The central tenet of this paper is that the pandemic has overthrown people's capacity to maintain interpersonal relationships in the ways they are used to, thus opening up the possibility of new pathways through the ecological model of social inclusion.

5.1 | Power, connectedness and relationships

From an outsider's perspective, power seems hierarchical in English education provision, with government departments delivering policy edicts which move down the chain of connectedness to LAs, school leaders, classroom teachers and finally to parents, with children being the receivers of provision possessing little or no agency over their education. Despite policy changes in recent years to increase the agency of families and children, in reality the power relationships at various points in this perceived power chain are more complex as demonstrated by Ball (2013), MacNaughton (2005) and Gallagher (2008). Analysis points to the importance of avoiding a "problematic, oppositional model of power" (Gallagher, 2008, p.137) whereby power is seen as a commodity possessed by dominant groups, obscuring the complex multivalent ways those with seemingly no power may redirect, contest or refuse it. Gallagher's (2008) construction of power permitted the data to be interpreted in ways that surfaced how children with learning disabilities and their families were able to assert

new forms of agency due to the impact of COVID-19 on education provision. Analysis of the data shows a complex interplay of shifting power and agency, demonstrating that the impact of the pandemic was creating moments of Erfahrung (Gadamer, 1975/2006)—chances at a range of levels for individuals to explore and exert new opportunities for positive change. With this approach to the sharing of power in complex ways, comes the opportunity for individuals within the education system to explore novel relationships outside the traditional dynamic of face-to-face contact, which can deepen reciprocity through the affordances of digital connectedness.

5.1.1 | Students' agency

An example of these new power-sharing dynamics is evidenced at the commencement of the pandemic when, with the shift to home learning, many teachers, although skilled at using technology for supporting learning in formal classrooms, did not have the digital competence to provide digital learning for their pupils. Evidence was provided within the interviews of the children with learning disabilities exerting increased agency within teaching sessions as many possessed digital competence lacked by the teacher. An example of this is described by Sara when she explains how her daughter Kezia began organising her own online learning:

> If it was a ZOOM link, I was highlighting it with a little yellow star in Gmail...and then I'm deleting them after the ZOOM...but I've started noticing that an email comes and I've not seen it's got a ZOOM link she's [Kezia] now highlighted it. So, she's getting herself more organised. But she also sometimes just deletes emails if it's something she doesn't want to do, she'll just delete it.

Kezia's power to delete ZOOM links is similar to Allan's (2007, p.94) narrative of Raschida, an Asian visually impaired student, who engaged in what Allan refers to as "transgressive acts" which enabled her to escape the imperative to perform her visual impairment in public. Raschida threw her long cane which she detested in a lake adopting instead a smaller and more comfortable folding cane which was less obvious to others.

Due to the new normal of COVID-19 on education provision, Kezia was also able to engage in a "transgressive act" which moved her away from a learning disabled identity by avoiding subjects in which she considered she did not flourish as a student. Allan (2007) notes the teachers in Raschida's case did not approve of this demonstration of her agency. However, with the physical distance between teacher and child in the new normal of COVID-19 and the dynamics of online learning, transgressive acts of this nature seem to offer children with learning disabilities the opportunity to "engage playfully with limits imposed on them by a disabling society" (Allan, 2007, p.96). The new normal created by COVID-19 seeming to offer an opportunity for increased agency for children with learning disabilities and the possibilities of new relationships between teachers and

students similar to that advocated by Fielding (1999) in his notion of "radical collegiality."

In contrast to the teacher in Raschida's case, other teachers were keen to embrace the affordances of online learning as they recognised opportunities to enhance the participation of children who had been disabled by the traditional ways that communication was previously undertaken in school settings. This was evidenced by Liz (Headteacher) when she recounted the story of children who identified as selectively mute finding voice within the chat function of online platforms. In addition to the new relationship that was possible between teacher and children, Liz noted that relationships between the children and their peers had also altered as the other children with learning disabilities were quick to adapt to this new way of communicating engaging even in what Liz referred to as "a bit of banter". A new way of gaining a "sense of belonging" engendered by positive relationships with others (Hall, 2009) became possible via this new platform. The online environment facilitating improved connectedness and relationships between both the teacher and children and between children allowing what Liz referred to as "proper social interaction." Liz also saw merit in retaining some of the technology as they had no wish to return to the previously disabling ways of interacting with certain children. This was evidenced in her recounting of autistic girls who "find [the] social parameters of school difficult to deal with" but with the increased agency afforded by digital connectedness could choose whether to switch the camera function on in sessions and welcomed the opportunity to join lessons from the comfort of their own home. In summary, whilst the pandemic and its impact on education has highlighted the challenges for some communities regarding digital poverty, for other children with learning disabilities the pandemic has created ecological pathways for increased agency, connectedness and improved relationships with their teachers and peers (Simplican et al., 2015).

5.1.2 | Curriculum and pedagogy—support for learning

Black and Wiliam (1998) expressed concern that for many outside the teaching profession, the classroom was a black box in which activities occurred which were not known or shared with parents and other nonteaching stakeholders. The global pandemic has opened this black box in new ways as teaching and learning has shifted unexpectedly to the home environment from the formal classroom. Canning and Robinson (2020) highlight how there has been a blurring of the boundaries between home and school and suggest that families might be supported to look for learning experiences in the everyday rather than having to meet the demands of externally set school work.

The affordances of digital provision of schooling have permitted parents an insight into their children's learning and the educational provision experienced by their offspring. With remote teaching and learning, students are experiencing "pandemic

pedagogies" which are not new but that have a "renewed salience" (Williamson et al., 2020, p.108). Liz referred to this shift in the location of the learning as a "powerful thing." Evidence of parents using this new knowledge and insight to advocate for enhanced provision surfaced during the interviews. For example, Sara recounted that only once Kezia was learning at home was it discovered that a teaching assistant (TA) had been completing much of Kezia's art class tasks. Once at home, the standard of Kezia's art improved highlighting this situation and resulting in her being offered the opportunity to gain a GCSE in Art; work which Kezia seems proud of:

> Sara: You're going to get a GCSE.
>
> Kezia: Yeah, I'm going to put it on the wall I think.
>
> Sara: You're going to put it on the wall. Your certificate or your art?
>
> Kezia: Art

Previous research indicated that TAs, often with the best of intentions, intervene in the learning of pupils with SEN in this way (Blatchford et al., 2012) but with the impact of COVID-19 and parents' new insight, parents seem empowered to advocate for this practice to end. With appropriate support, a greater "depth" of social inclusion might be achieved through a focus on interpersonal relationships and being able to participate within the community to which they belong (Simplican et al., 2015, p.20).

Additional to this is evidence that TAs often, again with the best of intentions, limit the social off-task interaction that students with disabilities engage within the classroom (Webster & De Boer, 2019). Whilst not approved of by teachers, a key element of school life is the informal social interaction which occurs under the radar of classrooms (Reitz et al., 2014). This was highlighted by the interview with Kezia and Sara as it was revealed that the online teaching was being provided by the TA, not the teacher; further highlighting the social isolation that can be experienced by children with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

5.1.3 | Deepening partnerships with parents/carers

The efficacy of involving parents/carers as active partners, who are central to the decision-making process and viewed as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise (Wolfendale, 1985) has long been accepted and understood by the education profession. That said, in 2009 the Lamb Inquiry called for a "radical recasting of the relationship between parents, schools and local authorities to ensure a clearer focus on the outcomes and life chances for children with SEN and disability" (Lamb, 2009, p.2). The reformed SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DOH, 2015) sought to centralise the role of parents/

carers ensuring they are fully involved in the decision-making process. In this time of lockdown, in order to maintain relationships with the families of children with learning disabilities schools have therefore needed to explore alternative means of engaging with families (Wharton, 2020).

In line with the views of the Children's Commissioner who describes some schools as actively reaching out to the parents of vulnerable children, Liz described moving to online meetings with parents/carers (including formal parents' evenings). The Erfahrung of this experience surprised the school, whom, already very committed to removing barriers to parental engagement found the nature of the online experience in some cases deepened the reciprocity between teachers and families. As Liz explains:

> It's actually really difficult for some families to come through our school door, [...] and you know we do a lot of outreach, we understand that [...] but this has been a bit of an eye opener really [...] a learning curve for us. ...You are going into their homes aren't you and it is a powerful thing that. The knock-on impact has been, I think, a closer-knit community really.

This point is also picked upon by James (SEND Consultant) who describes the same lockdown phenomenon, explaining that rather than being face-to-face with a teacher or professional, a parent/carer might feel a bit more comfortable and in control in their home environment. Such has been the pronounced impact of this adjustment; Liz describes a cultural shift in approach to the structure of family engagement which from now on will always include an online option. Drawing on Simplican et al.'s (2015) analysis of social inclusion, structurally moving the location, intensity and formality of family liaison appears in some cases to have deepened the "bond" between family and school, which arguably increases, trust reciprocity and confidence. The Erfahrung of this experience pointing to the complex ways power balances can be unexpectedly altered (Ball, 2013; Gallagher, 2008), breaking down barriers and establishing deeper social inclusion for the families of children with learning disabilities.

As well as schools meeting with parents/carers online, the wider partnerships involved in supporting the education and social inclusion of children with learning disabilities have also needed to reimagine their family offer. Both Carl (LA Service Director for Schools and Learning) and James referred to the online ways therapies are being delivered to children with SEND (including some with learning disabilities). The nature of this encounter has tended to involve therapists in an online session with the child/their family, the therapist guiding the family as they engage with the intervention in their homes. From the perspective of the professional, this structural change has enabled them to increase the "frequency" and the "intensity" (Simplican et al., 2015) of the session as they no longer need to spend time travelling between schools/families and can incorporate a greater number of one-to-one sessions. Carl and James also

referred to the efficacy of providing training for families which helps build resilience and capacity within the SEND system. This change facilitating greater access to community services and potential for "bridging" (Simplican et al., 2015) with the extension of family networks of support. From the perspective of families, the restructuring of services to an online offer increases their understanding of the "complexity" (Simplican et al., 2015) of the offer and as Sara described, provides increased visibility of the offer.

The Erfahrung of the online offer points to complex changes in parental/carer power. On the one hand, increased understanding of the complexity of the therapy offer holds the possibility for increased family autonomy and freedom from appointments with professionals, which have been described as tiring and burdensome on family life (Nikmat et al., 2008). Increased understanding of the complexity of the therapy may also deepen families' reciprocity with professionals, facilitating greater involvement in decision-making. On the other hand, delivering therapies in the home may challenge the balance of family life, taking up time and possibly increasing feelings of isolation and being unsupported (Nikmat et al., 2008). As both Carl and James explain, they feel there is a discernible benefit to families and professionals regarding the delivery of online therapies, but that outside the confines of the pandemic a blended offer of online and face-to-face therapy would be efficacious. The Erfahrung of the new experience pointing to new horizons which incorporate both pre-COVID and COVID offers.

Carl also described the online nature of meetings as significant "being able to work with families and work with stakeholders in a much more immediate manner I think has been positive." In Carl's locality, during the pandemic this has led to a significant quantitative increase in the numbers of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) completed within the expected 20 weeks (DfE & DOH, 2015); and all be it to a lesser extent, the same phenomenon has also led to an increase in the numbers of EHCP annual reviews completed on time. Whilst structural increases (Simplican et al., 2015) in the timeliness of completing statutory requirements will not, in and of themselves, lead to increased social inclusion for children with a learning disabilities, what is known is that:

- having an EHCP ready before transition (for example, primary to secondary school) is considered to facilitate dialogue between the family and the proposed setting;
- when EHCPs take more than 20 weeks to complete they can become outdated by the time they are published (Adams et al., 2018).

The nature of the pandemic has meant the many of the efficacious elements described in this paper rely on families and professionals possessing digital capability and capital. As James explained in relation to the families he has consulted, whilst most parents/carers have a smartphone they may have limited data and no access to other computer equipment. Sara described the challenge of finding time to regularly print resources emailed to her by the school,

whilst other parents may not have access to a printer. Those living in rural areas may also experience challenges establishing a reliable and consistent internet connection. As Simplican et al., (2015) point out, social inclusion can both be enabled or disabled by the variables associated with interpersonal relationships.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that in contrast to some concerns, the impact of the pandemic may not be entirely disadvantageous for children with learning disabilities. Findings from this study indicate that some of the changes resulting from the impact of the pandemic have afforded children with learning disabilities enhanced opportunities for social inclusion, whether that be through increased power/agency for them and their families and/or new modes of connectedness leading to enhanced relationships with key stakeholders and timeliness of reviews. As yet, the impact of the pandemic is still embryonic; however, as James stated the "genie is out of the bottle"; referring to the black box of the classroom being opened to parents, this article points to the ways COVID-19 has decommissioned aspects of normal and challenged the status quo. Here, however, a challenge languishes, for what becomes visible can once again become buried (Heidegger, 1927/1995); preventing the genie from slipping back into the bottle in the post-pandemic world will be a challenge that needs actively embracing. Regarding the findings of this exploratory study, the authors also wish to point to the limitation of interviewing a small sample of stakeholders and only one child with a learning disability. It is crucial that further study of the identified benefits of these enhanced opportunities for social inclusion is undertaken for these positive changes to be maintained and the genie kept well away from the bottle.

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