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Parental involvement during COVID-19: experiences from the special school

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The closure of schools worldwide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic required parents to undertake key pedagogical roles to support their children's education and movement to a remote, often virtual world of online teaching presented many challenges for families. For the parents of children attending special schools, the loss of educational, as well as therapeutic provision, added a further layer of complexity unique to this group. This paper presents findings from a Northern Ireland-wide survey undertaken during the first lockdown period. Using Hornby and Blackwell's model of parental involvement (PI), the paper describes parents' experiences relative to their child's needs, family circumstances and societal expectations, and the intersection of these with teacher relationships and the wider school community. The findings reveal those factors that facilitated and inhibited PI and makes suggestions for improvements at school and policy levels in the short and longer term. The results have relevance and reach beyond the Northern Ireland context and should contribute to international dialogue on the synergy between PI and the special school setting.

Keywords: special schools; COVID-19; home-schooling, parental involvement

Introduction

The closure of special schools in March 2020, as part of the Northern Ireland (NI) lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching implications for parents, conferring a hitherto unseen level of involvement in their child's education. The movement to a remote, often virtual world of online teaching presented myriad challenges for families – in digital access to education, in balancing parental workloads with children's learning and in managing the learning needs of multiple children as well as the specific challenges relating to the special needs of these children. Whilst it became evident that additional challenges were experienced by certain groups of pupils, including children of key workers, children living in disadvantage/deprivation and children with difficult home circumstances, emerging evidence has emphasised significant challenges for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN)¹ and their parents (Skipp et al. 2021; Equality Commission 2020). Thus far, there has been little empirical exploration of the impact of school closures on the parents of pupils attending special schools. Parents' involvement as partners in the education process is rightly acknowledged as a symbiotic relationship (Connor and Cavendish, 2018); for those whose child attends a special school, it holds added importance, as the intersection between complex educational and health needs requires a more profound level of engagement (Jigyel et al. 2019). For these parents, the implications of school closure have undoubtedly presented a more profound challenge. In addition to managing their child's learning, navigating the loss of classroom, behavioural, therapeutic or other

¹ The term special educational needs (SEN) is most commonly used in Northern Ireland

support and the essential structure this provided, indicated an additional layer of complexity unique to this group.

This paper reports on a survey of parents of children attending special schools in Northern Ireland (NI) about their experiences during school closures relating to COVID-19. It was part of a wider project that also included surveys of parents with children at primary and post primary schools. This paper synthesises Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) explanatory model, and Hornby and Blackwell's (2018) updated interpretation, of barriers to parental involvement (PI) in education as a lens through which to examine the experiences and perceptions of parents of pupils attending special schools in Northern Ireland during the period of lockdown. Conceptualised around Epstein's (2001) spheres of influence, the paradigm is a societal depiction of barriers to PI fused around: *individual parent and family factors; child-factors; parent-teacher factors; societal factors* and the *widening role of schools* (Figure 1). Each of these can have variable degrees of influence depending on family circumstances and the findings of this study illustrate the often porous relationship between them. Although the research was undertaken in Northern Ireland, there is scope to apply the findings within in a wider special education context.

[Figure 1 near here]

The role of special schools

Special schools occupy a unique and distinctive position within the education system, providing specialist support for a continuum of complex, severe and profound SEN. The provision of education alongside specific therapies and support typically not

available in the mainstream school environment is indicative of the combined educational and allied health expertise that some children require on a regular, if not daily, basis. The position of special schools has attracted controversy and debate over the past few decades, particularly in the immediate aftermath of ground-breaking publications, including the Warnock Report (DES 1978) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), that advocated for a more inclusive system of education. The endorsement of mainstream schools as the default option for the majority of children with SEN in the policy agendas of many education systems was further boosted by rights-based conventions that advocated for equal and equitable access to education and non-discrimination (UNICEF 2007). The shift did not go unchallenged, however, with critics highlighting that commitment to the ideology of inclusion was aspirational rather than universal, where mainstream education was an option for the majority of, rather than all, children (Terzi in Warnock and Norwich 2010). Perceptions of an integrationist approach that accelerated inclusive placement where possible was interpreted as a threat to the future of special schools in the UK. Since then, proposed alternative options have sought to navigate the *'... divide between the ideal of inclusion and the reality of what is achievable'* (Conner 2016, 19). Broadly, these are framed around the precept of educating children in the learning environment that is best for them; in this context, greater emphasis on actively involving, and acting upon, parents' informed choices in decision-making as well as listening to the voice (and preference) of pupils has offered educational pathways that moved beyond binary options to provide more creative, flexible, and tailored opportunities for children and their families (Shaw 2017).

In NI, the status of special schools has been in a state of flux, with notable variations in in the type and range of SEN provision, meaning that some pupils have to

travel significant distances to access their nearest suitable school (DE, 2015). This has been exacerbated by a changing pupil profile shown in increasing numbers presenting with complex intellectual difficulties, medical needs and challenging behaviour (EA, 2020). Furthermore, against the backdrop of a protracted review of SEN policy and questions on the efficacy of the system (NIAO, 2020, 2017), parents and school leaders have been united in highlighting enduring capacity pressures, as special school places have been unable to keep pace with demand (Bain, 2021). Over the past ten years, there has been a 5% reduction (from 41 to 39) in the number of these schools, whilst the number of pupils has grown by 34% (DE 2020); this rate is significantly higher than elsewhere in the UK where enrolment figures increased by 6% in England over a similar ten-year period (Black 2019; DfE 2019). To redress this imbalance, the Education Authority (EA) undertook a consultation on an area planning framework for special schools as a pathway to creating greater consistency and continuity of provision

Special schools and the COVID-19 pandemic

The closure of schools worldwide to manage the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was without historical precedent (UN 2020). Schools in NI closed on 23rd March 2020 although many special schools opted to close a week earlier to safeguard the health and safety of vulnerable children. As distance learning became the new norm across schools and age ranges, children with SEN were specifically identified as '*least likely to benefit*' from this option (UN 2020, 12). By the time of the second NI lockdown in November 2020, the position of special schools had become a moral conundrum. The detrimental impact of school closures on children with complex needs was regularly emphasised, although counterarguments queried the risk to staff and pupils, particularly in classrooms

where the adult to pupil ratio was significantly higher than in mainstream settings and where children's health profiles required closer contact than government regulations permitted (NEU 2020).

So far, evidence nationally and internationally has indicated that loss of the regular school routine has been disproportionately detrimental to the social and emotional well-being of pupils with SEN, leading to feelings of anxiety, frustration and loss (Banerjee et al. 2021; Lindner et al. 2021; Ashbury et al. 2020; Neece et al. 2020). In other instances, practical challenges such the availability of regular and appropriate educational material and access to caregiving support have been reported (Patel 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020). More specifically, for parents of children in special schools, the dual impact of school closure and public lockdown was immediate, with many feeling inadequate or unprepared for their new role (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas 2020). The move to a virtual learning environment disrupted the equilibrium of well-established home-school routines; overnight, parents found themselves taking on key pedagogical and other therapeutic roles, with many also managing the behaviour of children who thrived on the structure and routine of the school day whilst supporting the learning of siblings (Canning and Robinson 2021; Nusser 2021; Wu et al. 2020). These responsibilities often took place alongside parents who were variously navigating their own working from home arrangements, finding themselves a key worker or furloughed, or facing the prospect of losing their job.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement (PI) is typically used to describe involvement in schooling, commonly organised and initiated by the school *which may or may not be associated with learning* (Harris & Goodall 2007). In this context, PI can be a reactive behaviour that includes attendance at parents' evenings, skills courses, extra-curricular activities and volunteering. It can also incorporate more deliberative activities such as home learning, decision making, community collaboration and remote engagement (Campbell 2011; Epstein 2001). The medium of remote engagement as a vehicle for PI gathered increasing and unexpected currency over this past year. PI contrasts to models of parent partnership and parental engagement. Parent partnership is driven by the concept of parents as consumers and their right to be involved in decisions affecting their child (Armstrong 2020) and parental engagement focuses on proactive engagement in learning (Campbell 2011; De Oliveira 2019; Harris and Goodall 2007). PI implies acknowledgement of the various skills parents can bring to the life of the school (Dempsey and Dunst 2004). Parents and schools working in harmony is pivotal to improve the educational outcomes, development and well-being of children regardless of their age or school setting. It requires balanced involvement between parents and teachers (Connor and Cavendish 2018), based on supportive relationships and democratic decision-making processes. For parents of children with disabilities, '[e]mpowered parents create synergistic, recursive relationships, resulting in a greater likelihood of long-term positive educational, social, psychological outcomes for their child' (Hsiao et al. 2018, 5).

The practicality of PI is not without challenges and its effectiveness is determined by parents' perceptions of involvement and the various interactions that can enhance or obstruct it; for example, working and lone parents may be unable to commit regularly to

school engagement, particularly if there are issues around child care and/or other children to consider, whilst for other parents, the full-time responsibility of caring for a child with complex needs severely limits the extent to which they can engage with the school or other agencies (Jigyel et al. 2019). Raising a child with a disability is frequently presented as an enduring economic, health and social dilemma. The estimated cost of raising a child with a disability is up to three times higher than raising a child without a disability, with over half (56%) of families reporting these extra costs are only partly covered by disability benefits (Scope 2019), whilst poorly co-ordinated service delivery and limited or infrequent access to respite options has a detrimental impact on parental productivity and well-being (Mori et al. 2019). To better understand the multiple barriers that typically restrict PI, it is worthwhile to identify and address these in the unique contextual setting of the special school at a time when the added complexity of COVID-19 restrictions have, arguably, magnified these. As children return to face to face learning the learning gained from this scenario is more important than ever.

Methodology

Research aim and objectives

The overall aim of the surveys was to explore the experiences and perspectives of parents in NI as they navigated their child(ren)'s home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This translated into four key objectives:

- i. To establish parents' familiarity with, and confidence in, supporting their child(ren)'s learning;
- ii. to establish the nature and type of communication between home and school;

- iii. to identify the key challenges experienced by parents in supporting their child(ren)'s learning;
- iv. to identify key messages that contribute to education planning and decision-making moving forward.

The research data informing this paper was collected from parents of children attending primary, post-primary and special schools during the original period of lockdown in April and May 2020. Recognising that each sub-population would have their own unique voice and experiences, an online survey was developed and adapted to capture each school type. The special school survey comprised 35 questions in total, questions were formatted in several ways: Likert scales, multiple choice, binary, as well as open questions for elaboration of some responses. Results were tabulated as frequency counts and translated into percentages for the purpose of reporting. Analysis of responses by cross-tabulation was also undertaken to show a relationship between key questions and Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) and any notable distinctions are reported as part of the findings.

Although a necessity due to social restrictions, the online survey also represented the most efficient means of accessing a wide population of parents in a short time span. A purposive sampling approach was adopted; access to parents was dependent on the co-operation of school Principals across Northern Ireland to share the survey link via the school website or Facebook page, with further promotion via wider social media. To facilitate ease of completion and encourage responses, parents had the option to complete the survey on a computer, I-pad or I-phone using the online platform Survey Monkey.

Full ethical approval was obtained from Ulster University in accordance with institutional best practice prior to data collection. All parents were provided with an information letter explaining the purpose of the study. Consent was required in order to begin the survey; responses were anonymous although provision of truncated post codes gave an overview of the geographic distribution of returned surveys. A total of 198 returns were received from parents of children attending a special school. Findings are presented to align with the survey objectives.

Results

Parent confidence in supporting their child's learning

The majority of parents (89%) who completed the survey were mothers, followed by fathers (6%), foster carers (3%) and other guardians (2%); over three quarters (78%) indicated there were other children at home. School closure due to COVID-19 meant a number of parents (16.5%) had to take unpaid leave from work and 40% indicated FSME for their child.

The complex learning profile of pupils was an important consideration when exploring parental confidence in home schooling. Most of the children attending special school had more than one SEN, with the most commonly reported being Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (n=97), Cognitive and Learning Difficulties (including Moderated Learning Difficulties, Severe Learning Difficulties, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) (n=76). Other SEN reported included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (n=23), Global Developmental Delay (n=16), Down Syndrome (n=15) and Other conditions/syndromes (n=12). The majority of parents (89%) identified the

importance of in-school support in meeting their child's daily needs. Classroom assistance was the most common source of support (79%), followed by Speech and Language Therapy (58%), Sensory Support (50%), Occupational Therapy (48%), Behaviour Support (27%), Physiotherapy (18%) and Hydrotherapy (10%) (Figure 2). Other forms of support included music therapy, sign language, assistive technology and learning tools such as magnifiers.

[Figure 2 near here]

Just under two-thirds of parents (60%) believed it was important to maintain their child's learning, although many did not feel confident in doing so. Over a quarter (28%) disclosed that they were not at all confident, just under a half (47%) were somewhat confident, whilst just over a fifth (22%) described themselves as confident. Parents were most confident supervising Language and Literacy (40%) and Numeracy (34%), although these two subjects were also identified as areas of least confidence (24% and 28% respectively). Response rates in relation to parental confidence in therapeutic, behavioural, sensory and communication support, were evenly represented at 21% for most and least confidence.

[Figure 3 near here]

A large number of parents (84%) agreed that they had experienced difficulties with their child's learning (Figure 3), which generally aligned to familiarity with, and confidence in, a range of educational, behavioural and practical matters. These included: managing attention (74%) and behaviour (56%), managing their child's needs with those

of siblings (48%), sticking to a timetable/routine (41%) and completing the work (35%). In fewer instances, difficulties were attributed to their child not understanding the subject content (23%), managing their child's health needs (15%), lack of appropriate interactive resources (15%) no, or poor, internet access (8%) and parents not understanding the subject content (7%).

Further cross-tabulation of parent responses with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) revealed that parents of children with FSME were notably more likely to: lack confidence in supervising their child's learning; experience difficulty in managing their child's behaviour; struggle to understand subject content; have no/ poor internet access; use television programmes to support child's learning; and prefer that their child learn through play. In addition, parents of children with FSME were also more likely to: struggle with managing their own mental and physical wellbeing; struggle to manage household budgets; be part of a parents' social media group, but less likely to struggle juggling care of their child with work. In contrast, parents of children without FSME were slightly more likely to: struggle sticking to a timetable/routine; have limited appropriate interactive resources; use online videos, activities and websites; use online resources provided by local organisations; use other printable activities; and use resources they created themselves.

Communication between home and school

The speed with which school closures took place, undoubtedly placed pressure across the whole school system as teachers and Principals co-ordinated a communication system between home and school. Parents reported that their child's school had provided

information in a variety of ways including how to access online materials (80%), contact details for teachers (60%), guidance on using learning materials (57%) and contact details for the Principal (43%). Over two thirds of parents (68%) also stated their child's school had a social media page, with most posting updates several times a week. Only a minority of parents described their experience as lacking support, information, guidance or input from their child's school.

Regular communication was a priority during this period. The majority (83%) of parents reported they received regular communication from their child's school including emails from their Principal and teacher, as well as updates via Facebook, Zoom and Seesaw. One parent described the value of regular contact between her son, his class teacher and Principal:

We emailed her to let her know how we were getting on and to send her a picture.

Writing emails is a weekly activity I do with my son and I got him to email the class teacher and Principal. Both replied with lovely emails and he was delighted.

Over three quarters of parents (79%) reported they were able to contact their child's teacher if necessary. Reasons for this were generally attributed to clarifying learning tasks, getting feedback on completed work, seeking advice on therapeutic interventions and sourcing additional material such as visual supports.

In terms of learning support, almost three quarters (74%) of parents reported their child's school had provided curriculum materials in a range of formats, including a pack distributed before school closure (49%), through an online interface, such as Google Classroom or Seesaw (40%), through the school website (39%) and through regular emails (31%). Other options (12%) included access to Occupational Therapy equipment,

work tray and ClassDojo. One parent gave the following example of the learning support they had received:

...the teacher messages every day with a timetable of what children have to do. With online activities through Seesaw and Google Classroom which aren't the easiest to navigate but we are managing. School also sent home a paper-based learning pack.

Key challenges in supporting child(ren)'s learning

Parents highlighted how the move from school to at home learning had impacted on the general well-being of their child. For one family, this resulted in accessible specialist services and equipment: *'My child's education programme involves specialist input, therapies and equipment, none of which are currently available'*. For others, the emotional impact was more pronounced: *'[m]y child's world turned upside down overnight. From waking until my child falls asleep on constant repeat is 'can I go back to school? A massive impact on mental health and anxiety'*. The medium of online learning was identified as an overwhelming experience, particularly for children with ASD: *'...our problem is online learning. My autistic son finds it all so frustrating and overwhelming. His anxiety has increased to a high level and mental health problems have heightened'*. For another parent, the adjustment to home learning was difficult to navigate as their child: *'can't get his head around schoolwork at home – he sees school for school and home is a safe place and a routine he does every day.'* Crucially, when asked to summarise their experiences of home-schooling in three words, parent responses revealed negative sentiments outweighed the positive (Figure 4).

[Figure 4 near here]

Almost one fifth of parents had taken unpaid leave from work to care for their child. Of those who were working, 40% stated they struggled to manage their child's learning alongside their own work, with the biggest challenges relating to managing their child's health/behaviour needs (28%), getting their own work completed (23%), interruptions to their work (20%) and organising a work schedule for themselves (14%). One parent commented *'I am working from home full time. It is so difficult to juggle work with home-schooling two children with SEN who need 1-1 support.'*

Parents with other children at home were more likely to experience difficulties managing their child's needs with those of siblings and more likely to have difficulties managing their child's health needs, behaviour and attention. They were also more likely to have difficulties maintaining a routine, juggling caring for their children with work, and managing household budgets. One parent provided an insight into the reality of this for their family:

I am an essential worker and am continuing to work a full-time job both in work and working from home when possible, my husband is a keyworker and continues to work a full-time job from home, we do not have any childcare for our one-year-old and due to risks to my daughter they cannot attend provided day care for essential workers.

Another parent reported there was a lack of understanding from employers regarding the situation being faced by employees at home and the expectation on them to attend non-essential meetings:

Lack of understanding re: disability and personally from a safeguarding point of view who do employers think are supervising children whilst meetings sometimes for the sake of saying doing are taking place. Virtual coffee mornings via phone with team!!

The difficulties experienced by parents demonstrated the wider social implications of school closure (Figure 5). These included keeping their child entertained (43%), managing limited opportunities for outdoor activity (42%), managing social isolation (36%) and managing their own physical (31%) and mental (30%) well-being. To a slightly lesser extent, challenges were also identified in juggling childcare with work (23%), managing household budgets (20%), and keeping their child safe and healthy (18%). Just under half of parents (48%) indicated they were a member of a parents' group on social media, most of whom (30%) used it once a week, typically to share concerns around their child's mental well-being (58%), behaviour (55%), physical well-being (52%) and learning (42%). A few of these parents also used it to reduce feelings of isolation (40%) or to chat to other parents generally (35%).

[Figure 5 near here]

A majority of parents identified benefits to spending this time with their child, such as finding out new things about their child (63%), talking and listening together (63%), enjoying new activities (62%) and learning together (58%). Most parents (81%) strongly agreed that their role at this time was to support their child in whatever way he/she needed. Several parents illustrated the reality of this for their family. For one it meant '*...there are times when responding to emotional needs has to be prioritised over*

learning needs', whilst another commented that '*Just getting through the day is our aim.... Learning doesn't come into it. We are under so much pressure*'.

Discussion

Research on home-school relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted particular challenges for parents of children with SEN. Many of these have addressed parental experiences in relation to mainstream provision and, thus far, few studies have been located within special schools. Whilst some of the current research is germane to parenting a child with SEN regardless of school placement, the findings presented in this paper suggest there is a particular distinction in the home-special school relationship that defined the nature and extent of parental involvement. Consideration of the findings, therefore, may help inform decision-making in the return to regular learning as well as in strategizing for home-school relationships.

One of the most revealing findings of the present study was parents' vivid description of their experience of home-schooling a child with complex and/or challenging needs. Indicative of the particular stress of home-schooling, some parents reported scaling back on work to support their child's diverse needs whilst others identified employers' lack of understanding on the scale of support required. If we use Hornby's five-level model to better understand the original objectives, most of parents' reported difficulties can be interpreted relative to three of these levels, namely *individual parent/family factors*, *child factors* and *societal factors*. These predominantly outside-school issues have a porous relationship, with pressure points in one level influencing the dynamics of another. For example, the expectation to balance home life, work and family

well-being whilst navigating the educational, emotional and therapeutic needs of a child with SEN was exacerbated by parents' perceived familiarity with, confidence in, home-schooling; the complexity of re-creating, even partially, special school provision underlines the role of respite and specialist support as integral to more fulfilling parental involvement (Asbury, et al. 2021; Banerjee et al., 2021).

In contrast, *parent-teacher* factors were generally reported more positively, underlining the value of regular interactive communication. Co-operation between children, teachers and their parents was vital in preparing for home-schooling and in the months afterwards. School staff had to hastily formulate and implement creative and sustainable communication strategies on a scale not previously experienced and that would be accessible to parents and pupils alike. Most parents in this study acknowledged the success of this approach and commended Principals and teachers for their regular contact, availability and commitment to keeping in touch with individual children. Now that such lines of communication have been established, there is an argument that it should be maintained post-COVID-19 and utilised to nurture increased parental involvement, particularly amongst those previously hard to reach. In this context, the relational dimension of parent-teacher factors is exemplified as a precursor to more productive and potentially more enduring PI.

The nature of parent-teacher factors has implications for the *widening role of the school*. Parents' reporting on the central role of the school revealed the importance of place and location, with the findings suggesting PI aligned closely with their child's daily routine and/or level of support required. Managing a child's health, behaviour and learning needs, is navigated in special schools with a range of education and allied health

professionals, each bringing a specific skill set and expertise to work together in an individualised support plan for each pupil. With the move to remote learning, arguably, the losses for these parents have been deeper than in mainstream schools because of the range and level of support typically provided in special schools. The day-to-day reality of caring for a child with severe learning needs is a difficult and complex experience; the extent of these parent/family factors is often shaped by the intersection of individual, environmental and social circumstances that encompass employment, housing, poverty, family size and parental health. Findings indicated the culture of the special school provided particular support during the period of home-learning and represented a source of much-needed advice and reassurance for many parents. The parental confidence that can emerge from this type of communication has been described in previous research as an opportunity to nurture self-efficacy and more equitable relationships (Bruns and LaRocco 2017). Proactive relationships between home and school re-position parents from passive to informed recipients of information and the findings indicate that options for the delivery of skills-based training, awareness-raising and intervention techniques is a way to sustain this in the months ahead.

Conclusions

The period of home-schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic was a distinctive episode for children in special schools and their parents. Survey findings such as these are an opportunity to assess what aspects have worked as well as signpost possibilities at school and policy levels to improve parental involvement. Parent-teacher factors were a source of much-needed support and further exploration of the dynamics of this relationship could help inform development of a prototype to maximise parental

involvement through tailored provision, including for harder to reach parents. Locating this within the wider school community should, by necessity, involve expert input from classroom assistants as well as allied health professionals working in the school.

The particular experiences of the parents in this study are a reminder that circumstantial factors can determine the nature and extent of PI; societal expectations, family structure, socio-economic status as well as the individual needs of children. The profile of these parents is an under-researched area in NI, yet such information would contribute to the knowledge base of this population and the factors that may determine their involvement. At policy level, the forthcoming independent review of education in NI is an opportunity to renew scrutiny of special education provision. It is important that this focus encompasses special as well as mainstream provision education if the findings are to genuinely meet the needs of parents.

The confluence of factors affecting parental involvement during the initial period of school closures cannot be under-estimated. However, it is also evident that, even in such unprecedented circumstances, the potential to nurture PI was harnessed and it is these experiences that must direct the roadmap for special schools in the months ahead.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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