

“It feels like sending your children into the lions’ den” – A qualitative investigation into parental attitudes towards ASD inclusion, and the impact of mainstream education on their child

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Background: Increasing numbers of autistic children are being educated in mainstream schools. The success of inclusive education is dependent upon multiple factors, including key stakeholders (i.e., teachers and parents). Research has tended to focus on teachers' experiences of inclusion with limited focus on parents.

Aims: The study aimed to qualitatively investigate parental attitudes and experiences of inclusive education. As such, the research question was: *What are attitudes towards, and experiences of, inclusive education for parents of autistic children?*

Methods and Procedure: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 parents of autistic children. Data was analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Outcomes and Results: four themes were identified; 1) Feeling Unheard; 2) Implementation of Inclusive Strategies; 3) Social Exclusion; 4) Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact. Findings suggested that parents felt their child struggled socially in mainstream school, with such experiences negatively impacting upon their child's wellbeing. The detrimental impacts were a result of parents believing school staff dismissed their concerns and thus appropriate strategies for their child were not always implemented.

Conclusions and Implications: This highlights the need for school staff and parents to work together to enhance inclusivity both academically and socially for autistic children.

What this paper adds

Although an abundance of research has focused on teacher attitudes towards inclusion, much less research has focused on parental beliefs. This is problematic given that parents play an important role in the success of inclusion and in fostering a positive school climate. The paper addresses these gaps in the literature by qualitatively investigating parents' perceptions of their autistic child's experiences of mainstream education and the impact of this.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized in the DSM-5 by difficulties in social communication, along with specific interests and constant or repetitive behaviours (APA, 2013). Autistic individuals may also experience sensory issues (taste, touch, audition, smell and vision) which impact upon their perceptual experience of the world (Robertson & Baron-Cohen, 2017). Autism is heterogeneous in nature, presenting differently in individuals but can impact upon communication and social skills, interpretation of emotional cues, and learning delays (Goodall, 2019; Warrier et al., 2019). The diagnostic rate of autism is rising with global prevalence estimated at 1 in 160 (World Health Organization, 2019). Scottish statistics suggest that the prevalence in Scotland is approximately 1.04% (Scottish Government, 2018). Scottish Pupil Consensus (2020) data showed that per 1000 students attending school, 31 had an Autism diagnosis. This figure has more than doubled since 2012.

The importance of education for autistic children's development is recognised by most national and international legislation (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, 2006; UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 1994; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; 2014). These policies advocate that all children should be educated within their local school regardless of (dis)ability. Thus, inclusion aims to increase acceptance and participation of all children (Florian, 2014; Goodall, 2019; Love, & Horn, 2021) and to enhance wellbeing of young people by assisting them in all major aspects of their life: socially, emotionally, behaviourally and educationally (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Reiter & Vitani, 2007).

Successful inclusion can result in improved academic attainment (Freeman & Alkin, 2000), enhanced sociability (de Boer et al., 2012; Sansour & Bernhard, 2018), and a sense of belonging to a schooling and social community (Barned et al., 2011). Inclusion can therefore facilitate academic and social development for autistic children. Despite this, some evidence

suggests that in comparison to neurotypical peers, those with autism are more likely to be discriminated against and excluded (Recio et al., 2020). This has been linked to an increase in negative emotions, anti-social behaviour and loneliness (Xiao et al., 2020). In order to ensure inclusion has a positive impact upon autistic children's development, it is important to consider the role of key stakeholders in the school environment.

Teachers and managerial staff are identified as being pivotal in incorporating inclusivity within education (Florian & Spratt 2013; Goodall, 2019). Successful inclusion is dependent on stakeholders having an accepting, supportive and tolerant attitude (Paseka & Schwab, 2019; Salceanu, 2020). An attitude is a favourable or unfavourable mental or emotional feeling or thought to an object, event or person and guides behaviour (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Much research has focused on teacher attitudes towards inclusion and report that teachers are generally positive about inclusion (van Steen & Wilson 2020). This is important given work which shows that teacher attitudes towards inclusion impact upon their classroom behaviours (Wilson et al., 2016; 2019).

A limitation of focusing on teacher research, however, is that this population may not be able to comment on the personal impact mainstream schooling has on an autistic child. Thus, in addition to teachers, parents are crucial to the success of inclusion (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2014). Parents play an active role in how their child views themselves, their achievements, the world around them as well as helping to construct their beliefs and values (Knafo & Galansky, 2008; Osefo, 2017). Furthermore, research suggests parents can enhance a positive school environment, in turn, accommodating inclusivity (de Boer et al., 2010). This work highlights the important role parents play in education; however, research examining parental attitudes and experiences towards inclusion is limited (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Failure to understand parental attitudes and perspectives towards inclusion is therefore

problematic, given the role parents play in advancing inclusivity in schools (de Boer et al., 2010).

In the limited research relating to this area, findings have been mixed. Some authors suggest parents favour inclusivity (Majoko, 2019; Su et al., 2020), while others argue parents are less positive (Falkmer et al., 2015) as themselves and their child are stigmatised by educators (Farrugia, 2009). Moreover, parents feel rejected and judged due to their child's diagnosis (Broady et al., 2017; Mitter et al., 2019). Additionally, there is a need to carry out qualitative investigations as much of the research in this field tends to favour quantitative measures, with researchers noting the importance of gaining a parental qualitative perspective (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2014; Alinsunurin, 2020). Such qualitative investigation is needed to provide a deeper understanding of parent attitudes towards inclusion and perceptions of how inclusion has impacted their children. In doing so, this could bring us closer to identifying strategies needed to support both parents and their autistic children in mainstream schools.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to qualitatively investigate the attitudes and experiences of parents whose autistic children currently attend or have previously attended mainstream school. The study explored how parents viewed inclusion and aimed to investigate the perceived effects of inclusion and inclusive strategies on the child. Thus, the research question posed here is: *What are attitudes towards, and experiences of, inclusive education for parents of autistic children?*

Methods

Design

The study adopted a phenomenological qualitative design making use of semi-structured interviews. The aim and virtue of phenomenology is to study and reflect upon the lived

experience of a phenomena from a first-person perspective, and relate and interpret that experience in a psychological manner (Menon et al., 2014). A phenomenological qualitative method was considered advantageous as it allowed for a greater and in-depth understanding, from a parental perspective, of their attitudes towards inclusion and the impact inclusivity has had upon their child. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility of questions to be asked (Blee & Taylor, 2002), and for the participant to be in control of their answers, and are more appropriate for sensitive topics in which participants have the potential to become distressed (Kumar, 2005).

Participants

Ethical approval was obtained from the home institution. Twelve female participants who all had a child with a confirmed autism diagnosis were recruited. All children attended a Scottish mainstream primary or secondary school. In total, 6 children were in primary education, 4 were currently in secondary education, and 3 had recently completed their education. Participants were asked about support offered to their child while at school. Participants noted the use of classroom assistants, sensory objects and pupil support units. All participants were enlisted via social media platforms, where the study was advertised. This technique has been found to be an effective recruitment strategy which is time and resource efficient (Baltar & Brunet, 2015). Participants who wished to be interviewed were sent relevant documentation (i.e., Information and Consent Form), and once reviewed with any queries being answered, then interviews were conducted. All BPS Ethical Guidelines, BPS Code of Conduct (2018) and participants rights, including confidentiality, anonymity and right to withdraw during interview were explained in the Information and Consent Forms. Upon completing interviews, participants were asked to share the social media link with friends and family to facilitate a snowballing recruitment technique (Allen, 2017). See Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic information

| | <u>Age</u> | <u>Age of Child</u> | <u>Age of Diagnosis</u> | <u>Years in Education</u> | <u>Gender of Child</u> | <u>Interview Length (minutes)</u> |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <u>Participant 1</u> | 47 | 6 | 6 | 2 | Female | 40:28 |
| <u>Participant 2</u> | 58 | 26 | 5 | 13 | Male | 84:20 |
| <u>Participant 3</u> | 32 | 6 | 4 | 2 | Male | 35:55 |
| <u>Participant 4</u> | 30 | 8 | 7 | 4 | Male | 67:44 |
| <u>Participant 5</u> | 45 | 15 | 13 | 11 | Female | 70:31 |
| <u>Participant 6</u> | 58 | 24 | 8 | 13 | Male | 40:04 |
| <u>Participant 7</u> | 37 | 9 | 5 | 5 | Male | 31:07 |
| <u>Participant 8</u> | 38 | 8 | 8 | 4 | Male | 44:44 |
| <u>Participant 9</u> | 41 | 11 | 10 | 8 | Female | 74:35 |
| <u>Participant 10</u> | 44 | 13 | 10 | 9 | Male | 57:20 |
| <u>Participant 11</u> | 34 | 9 | 5 | 5 | Female | 45:20 |
| <u>Participant 12 (son 1)</u> | 48 | 16 | 3 | 12 | Male | 53:00 |
| <u>Participant 12 (son 2)</u> | 48 | 20 | 10 | 13 | Male | 53.00 |
| <u>Means</u> | 42.67 | 13.15 | 7.23 | 7.77 | | 53.45 |

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Data Collection

Virtual interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams. Interviews followed a semi-structured approach to allow for rich exploration of participants' attitudes and beliefs (Wilson & MacLean, 2011), allowing for greater flexibility and range of questions to be asked in comparison to other forms of interviewing (Blee & Taylor, 2002). They also allow for expansion of points, further probing, and the inclusion of prompts to obtain detail from participants. The interview questions (see Appendix 1) focused on addressing the research question: *What are attitudes towards, and experiences of, inclusive education for parents of autistic children?* All participants were fully debriefed at the end of each interview where further support details were given in case of any distressed caused by the interview. Additionally, the debrief consolidated participant rights, such as right to withdraw after interview, anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data was transcribed prior to analysis and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' anonymity. Reflective thematic analysis was employed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. The steps of this process are as follows: 1) Familiarisation of the data through transcribing, reading, and re-reading the data; 2) Producing initial 'codes'; 3) Searching for 'themes' in the 'codes'; 4) Reviewing and making any adaptations to 'themes' and related data; 5) Naming and defining 'themes' into easily understood concepts; 6) Reporting data. Reflective thematic analysis is advantageous as it allows the research team to identify patterns in the data set. Such patterns allowed the researchers to relate this to the wider phenomena under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, and in general, thematic analysis allowed

for a real life understanding of both what participants thought about inclusion, and their views on how inclusion, or lack of inclusion, has impacted autistic children in mainstream education. In doing so, the researchers could answer the research question with both evidence and justification for their response.

Analysis and Findings

The current study aimed to answer the research question: *What are attitudes towards, and experiences of, inclusive education for parents of autistic children?* Thematic analysis produced four themes; 1) 'Feeling Unheard'; 2) 'Implementation of Inclusive Strategies'; 3) 'Social Exclusion'; 4) 'Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact'. Each theme is discussed below allowing for the research question to be answered.

Theme 1: Feeling Unheard

The first theme represented the lived reality of how parents feel they are treated when raising concerns about their autistic child. Parents are made to feel that concerns for their child are not real, and that they themselves are the issue:

"[I was considered by the school] to be a neurotic parent, and I needed medication to control my son, was the response we got. And that it was all in my head...you get told that it's your fault that your child is acting like this" (Participant 7)

"They wanted to see his problems as stemming from the home environment or bad parenting" (Participant 10)

We see that participants felt staff held them responsible for their child's behaviour and that issues raised are factitious. Furthermore, participants reported a sense of appearing like an out-

of-control parent to staff. Thus, parents felt unheard and blamed by staff and were made to feel that they were the problem as they suggest that staff perpetuate and project the narrative the parents are hysteric for raising and inspecting concerns that staff believe are not there. We also get a sense that parents felt unsupported in their queries as they looked to those whom they believed would assist them and have more knowledge in additional support needs, yet, were met with hostility and judgement. This sense of unsupportiveness by staff allows us to understand that parents felt hopeless in their search for answers to their worries. Additionally, when asked about their own attitudes towards inclusion, it was common for participants to discuss beliefs that staff were not open, accepting, or tolerant of parental concerns, as hinted at by the above quotes. Participants detailed that if a teacher did not listen and communicate with the family, this has a negative impact upon their attitudes towards inclusion, with Participant 5 stating *"I felt as if we were being silenced. Nobody was interested in listening"*. This is in line with Frederickson et al.'s (2004) argument that communication between teachers and family is crucial for successful inclusion. Our findings suggest that parental attitudes towards inclusion are influenced by teachers' practices and behaviours towards them and their child. For example, when discussing having a change of teaching style to a more positive outlook of inclusion, Participant 7 made it clear this impacted upon their beliefs (*"just that one difference. That one change. And it has such a positive influence...You may get a great teacher who is understanding and that's great"*). This highlights the importance of teachers' having good skills of communication and tolerance to parents and autistic children.

In summary, 'Feeling Unheard' represents parents' lived reality of raising concerns about their child to school staff and the difficulties around this. The findings suggested that parents felt blamed, shamed and their concerns dismissed by staff. As a result, parental attitudes towards inclusion may not be positive which, in turn, will ultimately hinder the success of

inclusive education. This notion of hindered inclusivity is further considered in the next theme 'Implementation of Inclusive Strategies'.

Theme 2: Implementation of Inclusive Strategies

The second theme represented parents' perceptions that inclusive strategies to support their child were not always implemented within mainstream education. However, parents discussed their views on when a strategy was implemented. The central notion of this theme is outlined in the following quote;

"There is no barrier for access to mainstream schools. There is a barrier to accessing adequate mainstream school support...accessing mainstream school is not the problem, it's what they access when they are there that is the barrier." (Participant 12)

The participant described that accessing mainstream education is easy, yet, gaining adequate and required assistance through inclusive strategies is more challenging, and there lies the issue and barrier of inclusive education. Thus, gaining access to mainstream school is not problematic but achieving inclusivity through inclusive strategies is challenging. We also get a sense that strategies that are currently employed by staff in mainstream education may be disadvantageous and may not support a child's needs, therefore, hindering the successful inclusion. In other words, the participant is hinting that current inclusive strategies need to work for each individual child, yet, what is always accessed during education may not be the right support needed, thereby hindering inclusivity if the incorrect support is used. Multiple legislatives (e.g., Additional Support for Learning Legislation, Getting It Right for Every Child, and Targeted Support Plans) aim to enhance inclusivity of children with additional needs. However, the current study found that parents believe educators do not take subsequent action and implement these policies by way of inclusive strategies that support each individual autistic

child. Such a finding supports research which has shown this as teachers may hold positive attitudes towards inclusion, but this may not always translate into practice (Wilson et al., 2016).

Consider the following:

"He had no visuals in place, he had no timeout in place...So, nothing was put in place."

(Participant 6)

"My son needs access to putty when he's feeling stressed...But he didn't. I bought him putty and put it in his bag." (Participant 10)

Participants argued that inclusive strategies and resources, which are outlined to be helpful, were not made easily assessable and not fully utilised. By stating this, the participants are illustrating the need and importance of having such inclusive strategies and resources for their autistic child to assist them with their needs. Yet, we get the sense that parents are frustrated and angered that these strategies have not been actioned. Arguable, failure to incorporate such strategies may mean a child becomes distressed around the ambiguity of their day, and may be unable to de-stress from triggers in their environment. Lack of effective provisions for autistic children may hinder their educational experience and development with our findings suggesting that participants felt staff did not consistently use inclusive strategies.

Participants also discussed the ineffectiveness of teaching assistants in supporting their child. They are pivotal for the inclusion and participation of children with additional needs (Groom & Rose, 2005). However, participants believed this did not always positively assist autistic children:

"The only help they were offering him was exactly that...the help you need is speaking to a pupil support assistant or do a few sessions with the additional support needs teacher right. But the basis of that to me is discriminatory because it is saying there is

something wrong with you, so you leave the class, you need to be sorted out"

(Participant 10)

Here, the participant is noting that individually working with a teaching assistant is commonplace for autistic children. However, participants' dislike of such strategy is evident as they argue this strategy may be counterproductive and does not always provide the right support for autistic children. Additionally, it was argued that this strategy is a form of discrimination due to a child being singled out for needing support. Such a finding suggests a violation of Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) in that education in this form, is not inclusive. From this, we get a sense that parents believe that autistic children are being unfairly treated when requiring support for their learning and behavioural needs. Indeed, participants noted that autistic children are often physically isolated from the mainstream classroom during teaching time, and thus, this strategy can result in the child being discriminated against. Not only that, but the parent is arguing that being physically isolated from the class settings puts a physical and emotional barrier between an autistic child and their peers, therefore, illustrating to both that there are some children who are superior to others. Despite studies investigating the role of teaching assistants (Groom & Rose, 2005), these investigations did not capture the views of parents. Our findings suggested that parents perceived the need for strategies other than the use of teaching assistants.

Overall, the current population believe implementation of inclusion is problematic and more should be put in place for their children. The data suggests parents were not overly positive towards inclusion and describe experiences to explain why this is the case. They have felt unheard by school staff and have questioned the inclusive strategies that have been implemented for their child. The analysis now shifts to look at parental perceptions on the

impact that this lack of inclusion has had on their child. The data suggests that due to the lack of inclusion, parents believed their child to be socially and mentally impacted.

Theme 3: Social Exclusion

The penultimate theme illustrates that due to a lack of inclusive education, parents feel their children can be socially excluded from their neurotypical peers. The current theme gives qualitative context to a lack of inclusion facilitating social exclusion and isolation as it is clear that parents are worried about their child socially within the school setting. Consider the following:

“[Before he started school] I was nervous that was he going to fit in? Was he going to make friends?...Would he settle in?” (Participant 3)

Here, the participant is hinting towards a social element of concern regarding school, even before the participant's son entered education. We see the participant has concerns over acceptance in mainstream education, and concerns over social interactions her son may have. These worries and queries show an existing knowledge of autism stigma within schools, as the parent is acknowledging the social difficulties her son may face, and that she feels out of control and may not be able to protect him against such stigma. Evidently, from this we see and get a sense that the participant fears that her child will be socially behind and isolated to that of his peers due to his autism diagnosis. Social isolation is echoed by other participants:

“Parents didn't want their children playing with him...he felt targeted and picked on...So, from a very early age he knew he was different.” (Participant 7)

“I worry that children like my daughter will be left out.” (Participant 11)

Parents believed that their children are labelled and identified as an outsider within the school social circle, resulting in them being possible victims of bullying. We also see the societal stigma there is by having a child with an autism diagnosis, as parents illustrate their concerns that their child's peers are influenced by their parents' negative attitudes towards autistic children. Thereby, we get a strong sense of dread from parents about the social impact others have on their children, as well as the negative impact of school and a lack of inclusion. This notion of being isolated and alienated is well documented (e.g., Marsack-Topolewski, & Graves, 2020). Furthermore, these social concerns of being labelled as an outsider then lead parents to worry that their child may be isolated, enhancing the notion of '*Social Exclusion*' by way of social rejection, aspects that inclusion aims to avoid. Due to social rejection, negative views towards school are adopted:

"It feels like sending your children into the lions' den" (Participant 2)

"The best way I can describe it as being in an abusive relationship." (Participant 5)

Participants highlighted the dread they felt there is when sending their autistic children to school and the social impact of school, showing the extent of social exclusion their child faces by their peers. Additionally, we get a sense that parents believe the school setting to be an unsafe and toxic environment for their children to be around due to the social exclusion. By making such comparisons, the fear of the school setting is evident, yet unavoidable, with parents feeling hesitant about placing their children into a setting that they believe might not be within their best interests. Past research notes that children with a disability report feeling unsafe in domains of their life, particularly school (Mepham, 2010). Our findings suggest that a lack of effective inclusive strategies may facilitate these unsafe feelings among autistic children with parents viewing school as an unsafe social environment. Such negative school

and peer experiences may have mental and emotional impacts upon children, which may negatively impact upon their current and future selves.

Theme 4: Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact

Mental health issues are growing within the pupil and student population (Ford et al., 2021), with anxiety, depression, anger and low sense of self being common in autistic individuals (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). The final theme represents the notion that lack of effective inclusive strategies impacts upon the onset of mental health issues in autistic children. Firstly, it was clear that mental health is of real importance to parents:

“My main concern for [daughter] is her mental health, not her academics.” (Participant 9)

Consistently, parents believe that being mentally well is of great significance. This is of great importance that parents note that their child's mental wellbeing takes precedence over other aspects. From the above quote, we see that as long as their child is happy and mentally well, then parents feel they have been successful in their role as a parent. By stating this, we get a sense that parents are acknowledging the mental health issues may arise as a result of their children's experience while at school. Furthermore, we see the viewpoint that parents have about school. Parents view school as not only a place where their children can be educated academically, but be educated in various interpersonal skills and should be looked after in both aspects of their life. Therefore, we understand that parental worries extend past those explain in prior themes. Following on from this, we see, from a parental perspective, that the lack of inclusion and subsequent impacts (i.e., *'Feeling Unheard'*, *'Implementation of Inclusive Strategies'*, and *'Social Exclusion'*) has led children to develop negative feelings:

“It’s causing my daughter so much anxiety now because her experience has been so negative...It was the holiday period before starting high school that she told me that she felt suicidal... And so yeah she has felt periodically suicidal.” (Participant 5)

“It [school] impacted her mental health... I had a wee girl who would come home every single day crying, shouting, telling me she wanted to kill herself” (Participant 11)

Participants discussed experiences of school impacting on their child so greatly that they now display anxiety, distress, and suicide ideation. From such quotes and discussions, there is a feeling of helplessness in that parents did not know how to support and help navigate their child through these feelings. For some, they did not know who to turn to for support as school would be the first port of call as Participant 9 mentioned (*“If (daughter) had an issue and I don’t know how to handle that, then where would I go with that? ... It would be the doctor or school. But again, they are not experts in that.”*). Yet, as noted in prior themes, parents felt unsupported by staff in such settings, and therefore, may be disinclined to go to those establishments for further and future advice about their children. Arguably, these negative experiences derive from a lack of effective inclusive education thus evidencing how the importance of the proper implementation of inclusive strategies on the child’s mental health. Participants made it clear that they believed their child’s mental health had been so detrimentally impacted due to the lack of inclusion, to the point that some children have made it clear they have considered suicide and have had suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, we see that the thought of returning to school is so feared that even during time away from school, school is still a major returning and concerning thought in the minds of autistic children, and in some cases seems to take up significant headspace. Therefore, and arguably, the school setting may be the onset and drive

of some suicidal thoughts in autistic children. This theme shows parents believed that their child's mental health and wellbeing can suffer greatly if inclusion is not implemented properly.

Overall, our findings suggest that parents felt unsupported and overlooked when raising concerns about their child. Additionally, if teachers do not use appropriate strategies for autistic children, they will not be included in important aspects of their life. This, in turn, can have negative outcomes not only on the child's performance but also their wellbeing. The analysis has presented what participants think about inclusion, and how inclusion has impacted their child. Participants felt that mainstream education lacks inclusion, thus, leading to social, and mental health and wellbeing impingements.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate parental attitudes and experiences of their autistic child's inclusive mainstream education. Four themes were identified from the data. *'Feeling Unheard'* highlighted parents' perceptions that they did not feel school staff listened to their concerns and may blame them for their child's difficulties. The second theme *'Implementation of Inclusive Strategies'* identified parents' concerns that appropriate inclusive strategies needed to support their child's learning were not always used. Thirdly, *'Social Exclusion'* highlighted parents' beliefs that their child may be isolated from their peers and feel the playground may not be a safe environment for their child. Finally, *'Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact'* indicated parents' perceptions of the link between schooling and their child's mental health.

The findings outlined parents' feelings of being dismissed, unheard, and blamed when raising concerns about their child's needs to school staff. As a result, parents reported feeling stigmatized by staff members, with prior research suggests this common among parents of those with an autistic child (see Broady, et al., 2017; Farrugia, 2009; Mitter, et al., 2019; Salleh

et al., 2020). Our findings extend this work by suggesting that stigma may originate from staff's dismissal and blame of parental concerns. In addition, parents believed that appropriate inclusive strategies were not always implemented in their child's school. For example, simply assigning a teaching assistant to work with the child away from the others in the classroom was perceived as discriminatory and further excludes the child, physically and emotionally. Although schools may support inclusion, parents discussed experiences of schools failing to implement adaptations needed to assist their child's learning. Past research finds that strategies such as visual timetables are advantageous to promote structure for autistic children (McDougal et al., 2020), while sensory objects are important for self-regulation (Thompson & Raisor, 2013). However, parents felt schools fail to incorporate such strategies. This is problematic given previous research which argues that for inclusion to be successful, inclusive concepts and principles must be adopted by school staff (Salceanu, 2020).

The current findings suggest that parental attitudes towards inclusion are reliant on teachers' inclusive behaviours towards both them as a parent and their child. If such prior experiences were not positive, it was unlikely that parents discussed the notion of inclusion positively. Such findings give context behind quantitative studies which have attempted to understand the nature of parental beliefs (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010; Falkmer et al., 2015; Majoko, 2019; Su et al., 2020). However, this study has highlighted the need for research to make a distinction between overall attitudes towards inclusion, and attitudes towards how inclusion is actually implemented, as it is evident there is a difference between the two.

The findings also identified parents' beliefs relating to the impact of poor inclusive strategies on their child. Parents often worry about the inclusion of their child within mainstream education (Falkmer et al., 2015), with the current study finding that parents are fearful of the social setting school has for their children. Past research has shown that autistic children are socially impacted in comparison to neurotypically developed peers (Kasari et al.,

2011). Our findings support this as parents commonly felt their child was labelled as different and an outsider which caused them to become socially isolated from peers. This supports previous research that suggests that social rejection leads to impaired social relations (Reiter & Vitani, 2007; Nowicki, et al., 2014). Additionally, past research has argued that sociability predicts the readiness of an independent life (Refaeli, et al., 2013), and with schools not successfully accommodating this through inclusion, then autistic children are being insufficiently set up for their future selves.

Finally, the analysis showed that parents believed their child's mental health and wellbeing had been significantly impacted through mainstream education. Parents noted their child had developed negative emotional states, anxiety and distress as a result of limited inclusion and social rejection. Autistic children are at increased risk of suffering from anxiety (Rogers & Ofield, 2018) and the lack social inclusion can thus make autistic children feel alienated and this in turn, exacerbates their mental state, with some children discussing suicidal feelings as a result of their school situation. Our findings extend and supports past research that argues autistic children are common among those who die by suicide (Masi et al., 2020; Nowicki et al., 2014; Oliphant et al., 2020), with the current study qualitatively suggesting that a lack of inclusion may provide an origin of suicide ideation, thereby highlighting school as an important risk factor.

Implications

The findings have important implications for the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schools. Firstly, it is important that schools and staff listen to and empathise with parents regarding their concerns about their child's needs. Regular meetings between staff and parents would allow for rapport building and more open discussions of how to successfully accommodate inclusion. In doing so, parent-teacher communication and relationships will

improve (Reedy & McGrath, 2010), thereby emphasising the important role parents play and have in creating inclusivity within education.

Further, staff should consider appropriate inclusive strategies for each child and ensure provisions needed for that child are in place. These should, where possible, allow the child to be taught as part of the larger classroom rather than individually with a teaching assistant. This in turn, may improve the social inclusion of the child. Finally, schools should consider mental health support within schools. Appropriate intervention may allow an autistic child to address negative thinking patterns, setting the foundation for more positive mental wellbeing for both their current and future selves. Policy-makers must be aware of such implications and consider initiatives that better support staff and parents to enact inclusive legalisation.

Limitations/Future Directions

Despite the favourable notion of investigating parents, their viewpoints towards the impact of inclusion are subjective to themselves alone. Past research has identified that autistic children and their parents may differ in their beliefs on school related issues (Wilson et al., 2018). Further, some have argued that fathers hold more positive attitudes towards inclusion than mothers (Kalyva et al., 2007), so it would be useful to investigate this further with future research.

Another limitation of the study is the differences in perspectives of parents who have young children versus adult children. When conducting the research, the criteria for participants was that they had a child with autism who is in or went to mainstream education. Therefore, differences between inclusion might differ between those parents who currently have a child in school and those who's child has left, and thereby such societal and parental norms and attitudes of inclusion might depend upon when their child was in school, yet, the research did not account for this. It would thus also be of pertinence to examine whether

parents' attitudes towards inclusion and their child's support impact on the inclusivity of the school, and even, at a basic level, what inclusion means to parents and how this is reflected in their expectations..

However, of most importance, is future work focusing on the experience of inclusive education from the perspectives of autistic individuals. Evidence has demonstrated the value of data collecting from autistic individuals themselves (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2021). More can be done to allow a clearer voice and representation of living with autism. Finally, the head researcher, who completed all interviews and analysis, has an autism diagnosis themselves making them a reflexive researcher. Despite following Braun & Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis process, be it reader and re-reading data, reviewing codes and themes multiple times, maintaining objectivity may have been an issue as their own understanding and situation of living with autism may have played a role in the interpretation of the data. However, with that being said, the three other researchers had their input into the final reporting of the data, thereby and arguably, making the analysis more robust.

Conclusion

The current study qualitatively concludes that the parents' interviewed believed school staff did not always listen to their concerns and thus appropriate strategies for the child were not implemented. Findings also suggested that parents felt their child had struggled socially in mainstream school and had felt socially rejected. These negative experiences had impacted on the wellbeing of their child with parents reporting their children had experienced several mental health issues, such as suicide ideation. Therefore, school staff and parents must work together to enhance inclusivity both academically and socially for autistic children.

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