

The Participation of Parents of Children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in the School Exclusion Process in Wales

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ABSTRACT

This study examined parents' experiences of their child being excluded from school. Semi-structured interviews were completed with ten parents of children excluded from school; all children had an Additional Learning Need (ALN). Interviews explored parents' experiences of participation in their children's education before they were excluded from school and their experiences of participating in the exclusion process. Data was analysed using Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation, which categorises participation as Inform, Consult, Participate and Empower. The findings showed that the majority of parents' involvement was categorised as Inform, with school staff informing parents of negative behaviour and sanctions, rather than enabling them to participate in meetings to provide suggestions on the best way to work with their child. Participants who acknowledged that they had knowledge and experience of the education system found the school exclusion process procedural and stressful; they expressed concern for parents without their knowledge and experience. It is concluded that Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation would be useful in school exclusion policy to describe how parents should be involved in different stages of the process.

Keywords: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), exclusion, parents, Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

Introduction

Children with additional learning needs (ALN) are overrepresented in school exclusion figures and continue to face challenges being successful in mainstream education (Brede et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016, Sproston et al., 2017). Research from the UK has found that parents believed that school staff would not make reasonable adjustments to help their children succeed in education and this could contribute to behavioural difficulties which could lead to exclusion (Parker et al., 2016). Brede et al. (2017. p.17) highlighted that the parents that they spoke to felt that school staff were ‘constantly letting their child down’ and they had to ‘fight’ to get their child’s learning needs addressed in order for them to access appropriate support.

Despite the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government enacted the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 Code and Regulations, which aims to deliver a more inclusive person-centred system for children and young people with ALN to learn effectively and achieve their full potential (Welsh Government, 2022). This new legislation is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRDP).

Central to the Welsh Government’s (2021a) Additional Needs Code for Wales is the ethos of participation. The ALN Code describes the benefits of children, young people and parents participating meaningfully as it helps them feel confident that their wishes and views are listened to, even if they have difficulty expressing themselves, to ensure they have an awareness of their rights and the support services available to them (Welsh Government, 2021a). Most importantly, it promotes a sense of responsibility and control over their child’s learning (Welsh Government, 2021a). These benefits demonstrate the value of the participation of children, young people, and their parents in making decisions about education.

Moreover, the Welsh Government’s (2019) guidance on school exclusion, which was in place at the time of the interviews, mentions involving and supporting parents in the school exclusion process. This guidance has since been updated, but outlined that ‘other than in the most exceptional circumstances, schools should avoid permanently excluding children with a statement’ of special educational need (SEN). However, the Welsh Government (2023) states that school exclusion rates are increasing for pupils with ALN, as they are for all learners.

The literature from England shows that parents reported that school staff tended to respond to the behaviour of children with ALN rather than the support needs that led to the difficulties (Sproston et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016). Research from England highlights that parents of children with ALN felt that a lack of adequate support had led to their children being excluded from school (Sproston et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016). There is a gap in knowledge as we do not know whether parents in Wales feel there is a lack of support for their children. There is also a gap in knowledge as we do not know how parents experience the school exclusion process in Wales. With a strong ethos of participation in the new ALN code, it is unknown whether the parents of children with ALN can meaningfully participate in the school exclusion process in Wales.

This paper seeks to address the gap in knowledge by answering the following research questions:

- Had schools implemented the individual support and interventions needed for their child?
- What were the experiences of parents of children with additional learning needs (ALN) who were identified as at risk of exclusion of participating in the school exclusion process

The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature on parents' experiences of navigating the education system and then it examines the policy context in Wales, where the fieldwork took place. It then outlines how the research was conducted, the data collection methods and the analysis. Next, the findings will outline the experiences of parents participating in decisions in the school exclusion process. The discussion will examine whether parents felt empowered to participate the school exclusion process.

Literature

Inclusive Education

As education worldwide becomes more inclusive, children with ALN are increasingly educated in mainstream classrooms (Mohr-Jensen et al., 2019). The United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Salamanca statement promoted a new policy approach to inclusive education, reaffirming a commitment to education for all and proposing that schools should serve all children, including those with special educational needs (SEN) (UNESCO, 1994). Haug (2017) explains that since the Salamanca statement, most European countries have recognised that inclusive education is a foundational approach to securing equal rights for people with special educational needs.

However, research highlights that inclusive education is challenging to research because the concept is 'complex, broad, and ambiguous' and different countries and scholars have different concepts and definitions (Rapp and Corral-Granados, 2024, p. 425). Policy analysis also demonstrates that there is ambiguity around inclusive education. Hardy and Woodcock (2014) used a critical analysis approach to analyse inclusive education policies in the United States, Canada, Australia and England. Hardy and Woodcock (2014, p. 141) suggest that inclusion could be 'observed, camouflaged or insufficiently valued'. This raises questions about why such an important principle is not a standalone policy (Hardy and Woodcock, 2014).

Research by Haug (2017) suggests that the ideal dominant theories of inclusive education suggest that pupils with disabilities should be entitled to attend regular classrooms with children from the same communities in mainstream schools. They should have access to individual support and interventions (Haug, 2017). Haug (2017) explains that inclusive education challenges established explanations that low attainment results from a pupil's weakness and pathological characteristics. Within inclusive education, the view is that academic failure is social and relational, caused by the school system (Haug, 2017).

Research from Australia examined parent-teacher relationships in inclusive education settings (Mann and Gilmore, 2021). Mann and Gilmore (2021) found that parents were more interested in preserving relationships with teachers and making them workable. Conversely, teachers seemed more invested in following formal school processes and procedures than maintaining relationships with parents (Mann and Gilmore, 2021). The literature from England highlights the challenges that parents of children with ALN can have accessing support in school for their children (Sproston et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016). Research suggests these challenges can be compounded by parents finding communicating with school staff challenging, meaning their request for reasonable adjustments to support their child effectively can be ignored (Mann and Gilmore, 2021; Sproston et al., 2017).

The research suggests that inclusive education environments can be more effective if parents and teachers work together, but this can be hindered by teachers' reluctance to acknowledge the expertise of parents (Mann and Gilmore, 2021).

While existing research from England highlights parental concerns about inadequate support for children with ALN, there is limited evidence on whether similar issues are experienced by parents in Wales – particularly in light of the Welsh Government's recent reforms aimed at strengthening inclusive and participatory education.

Inclusive Education in Wales

There is a strong emphasis on inclusion in Wales, with a relatively large number of pupils with ALN in mainstream schools (Ware, 2019). Ware (2019) suggests this could be because of a low population density but is also at least partly driven by the inclusive ethos of Welsh education policy. In the new ALN Code for Wales, the Welsh Government (2021a, p. 40) explains that inclusive education is where all pupils can access 'common opportunities' in ways that are appropriate for their needs, which ensures they 'fully belong to the school community and the school community is a 'benefit for all'.

Research by Knight and Crick (2022) examining inclusive education in Wales proposes that education policies suggest practice that is on a continuum from a medical model to a social model of disability, and education policy documents are on a continuum from deficit to diversity. Knight and Crick (2022) suggest that educational practice in Wales has tended to focus on a medical model of disability where special needs are seen as a deficit that is diagnosed and that needs to be fixed or cured. The medical model places difficulties on the individual, and in practice, this leads to individual practices and interventions that focus on the needs of the individual (Knight and Crick, 2022; Knight et al., 2025a). Knight and Crick (2022) explain that the medical model's focus on diagnosis and labelling indicates that students with the same diagnosis will have the same learning needs. Over the last 50 years, practices around disability have moved towards a social model of disability; where there are different variations of the social model, disability is viewed as a socio-political construct where the physical environments and negative attitudes disable people (Knight and Crick, 2022; Knight et al., 2025b). Knight et al. (2022) further suggest that if educational practice follows the social

model of disability rather than focusing on labels and impairments, educational environments would be restructured so that children with ALN could flourish. Suggesting that a social model of disability would mean creating educational environments that would support all learners (Knight et al., 2022).

The education system in Wales is going through significant reform. Knight and Crick (2022) explain that Wales has been experiencing the most substantial educational system changes since devolution in 1999. This includes the development of a new curriculum and transforming the support system for learners with ALN (Knight and Crick, 2022). The new curriculum will consider and align with the ALN transformation programme (Duggan et al., 2022). Duggan et al. (2022) highlight that practitioners have expressed concern that the curriculum reform and transformation for pupils with ALN will be time-consuming and place a strain on capacity. Welsh Government (2021a) emphasises that the new ALN system aims to ensure greater consistency and continuity of provision with Individual Development Plans (IDP) being put together to integrate arrangements for pupils by bringing together school-led interventions and local authority-issued statements. Research by Conn and Hutt (2020) examined how ALN was being considered in developing the new curriculum for Wales, examining what discourses, values and beliefs key professionals draw on when thinking about curriculum reform and additional learning needs. Conn and Hutt's (2020) research findings showed two divergent narratives. Firstly, the new curriculum and ALN reform should create universal provisions for learners based on an inclusive pedagogical approach (Conn and Hutt, 2020). Second, there should be a continuation of arrangements for learners in the current form, which emphasises differentiation as a way of addressing ALN, giving the example of teachers making minor adjustments and providing something additional in learning contexts that remain unchanged (Conn and Hutt, 2020). Within this narrative were concerns about increased accountability for schools and a 'moral responsibility' to meet the individual needs of learners with ALN (Conn and Hutt, 2020, p. 163).

Exclusion from school

In the Welsh education system, a pupil can be excluded for a fixed term or permanently. The Welsh Government (2019, p. 8) guidance on exclusion from schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) explains that the decision to exclude a learner should only be taken 'in response to serious breaches of the school's

behaviour policy' and 'if allowing the learner to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the learner or others in the school'. The guidance also explains that the decision to exclude should be a 'last resort' and the 'final step for dealing with disciplinary offences following a wide range of other strategies that have been tried without success (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 8). It is an acknowledgement by the school that it has exhausted all available strategies for dealing with the learner' (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 8).

The Welsh Government's (2019) guidance on school exclusion, in place at the time of the fieldwork refers to special educational needs (SEN) rather than ALN. Regarding SEN, the guidance states that 'other than in the most exceptional circumstances, schools should avoid permanently excluding learners with statements of SEN' (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 19). Despite this the latest figures from Welsh Government (2023) showed that pupils with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Behavioural, Emotional Social Difficulties (BESD) needs had the highest rates of exclusion in 2021/22. With the rates of fixed-term exclusion for pupils with ADHD SEN/ALN being 406.4 per 1,000, pupils (41%) (Welsh Government, 2023). The Welsh Government (2024) guidance on school exclusion has recently been updated to amend the tone and the language, reflect the new ALN Code and bring in a trauma informed approach. The new guidance explains that wherever possible, schools should not exclude learners with an ALN. The updated guidance explains that other than in 'exceptional circumstances' schools should avoid excluding pupils with an IDP and where a child is being assessed for ALN or an IDP is being prepared (Welsh Government, 2024, p. 16).

Involving Parents

The Welsh Government (2016) have provided guidance on pupils' inclusion and support. This Welsh Government (2016) guidance states that engaging parents is the biggest challenge for school staff in disadvantaged areas. The guidance also states that although there is no conclusive evidence of how parental engagement improves attainment, family and community engagement will positively and significantly affect children's academic performance (Welsh Government, 2016). This guidance suggests that an inclusive whole-school approach is needed because some learners will need greater support than most of their peers (Welsh Government, 2016). More recently, the Welsh Government (2021b) has focused on relationships as central to a

whole-school approach to mental health and well-being, explaining that a teacher and learner relationship positively impacts social and academic outcomes. The Welsh Government (2021b) continues that one way of supporting good emotional and mental well-being is by strengthening relationships with school staff, parents and carers and other professionals working in the school and the wider community.

The Welsh Government (2021a) explains that a rights-based approach is one of the principles underpinning the new ALN Code, where the views, wishes, and feelings of children, young people, and their parents are central to planning provision and support. Children, young people and parents can participate 'as fully as possible' in decision-making and have the right to challenge decisions around ALN and additional learning provisions (ALP) (Welsh Government, (p. 49, 2021). The Code also outlines parents' critical role in their child's development, meaning they have a unique view on how to support them (Welsh Government, 2022). As such, parents have a right to participate in decisions about their child's education, which can lead to better decision-making and outcomes for the child (Welsh Government, 2021). The ALN code describes the lead-up to a parent receiving a diagnosis for an ALN as an 'anxious' time as they make decisions about their child's ALN (Welsh Government, 2001, p. 49).

Conversely, the Welsh Government's (2019) guidance on school exclusion is procedural and explains how parents are involved in different parts of the school exclusion process. When a headteacher has decided to exclude, the headteacher must immediately tell the parent or carer (Welsh Government, 2019). When a pupil has been permanently excluded for five days or more, or their exclusion means the pupil will miss an exam, the school's governing body needs to call a disciplinary committee (Welsh Government, 2019). A disciplinary committee comprises members of the governing body and does not include the headteacher (Welsh Government, 2019). However, the guidance explains that the disciplinary team must invite the parents/carers and the learner to a meeting with the headteacher and an LA officer (Welsh Government, 2019). If a disciplinary committee agrees with the decision to exclude, it must explain its decision, and tell the parent or carer the last day they can appeal the decision (Welsh Government, 2019).

Theory and Conceptual Framework

Empowerment is seeking control over one's life by acting to get what one wants and needs (Murray et al., 2013). It involves increasing one's knowledge and skills and

boosting motivation to achieve a desirable outcome. Empowerment refers to a continuum of experiences that offer the individual opportunities to utilize his or her own competencies to learn new information and skills (Murray et al., 2013). In research examining Spanish-speaking parents' involvement in their child's education, Delgado-Gaitan (1991, p. 23) defined empowerment:

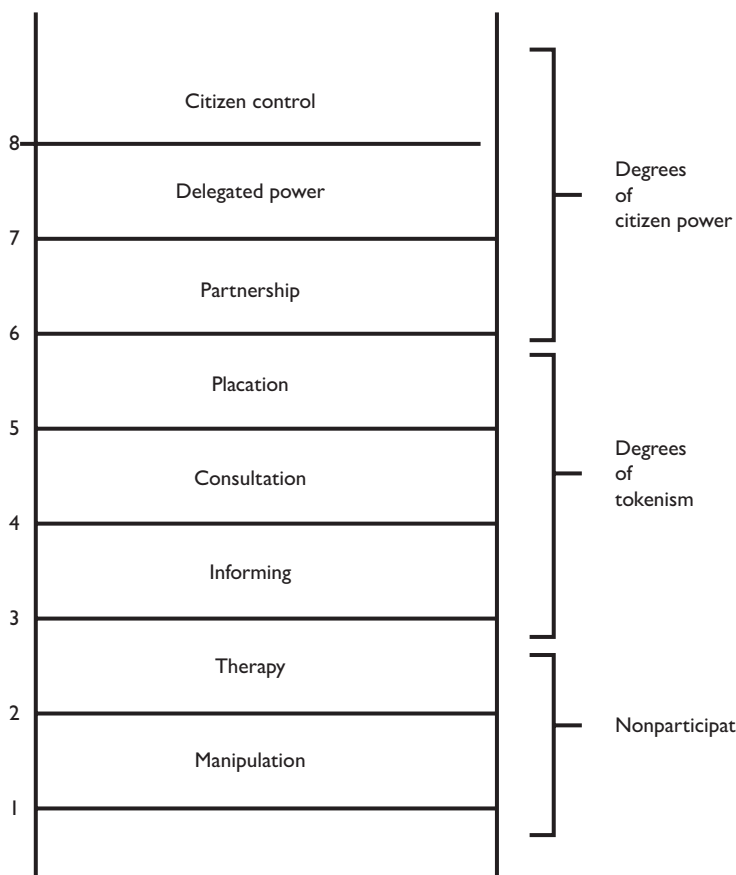
Empowerment is an ongoing intentional process centred in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources. People become aware of their social conditions and their strengths; they determine their choices and goals. Action is taken to unveil one's potential as a step to act on one's own behalf. Implicit here is the consciousness of and responsibility for one's behaviour and willingness to take action to shape it as desired through a social process (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Arnstein (1969) designed the ladder of citizen participation to examine systematic unfairness in the urban planning process towards some communities that developers had claimed had been considered as part of the planning process. Arnstein (1969) explained that participation was a little like eating spinach; nobody is against it in principle because it is good for you. However, she felt there was a critical difference between going through the 'empty ritual of participation' and not having any power to affect the end of the process (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Arnstein's typology has three overarching categories: nonparticipation, degrees of tokenism, and citizen power (Figure 1).

Since its inception, Arnstein's (1969) ladder has been used to examine citizen participation in different sectors, e.g. planning and environment, housing, health, schools and young people, and higher education. While Arnstein's (1969) ladder is a helpful starting point, it compares powerless citizens against the powerful to highlight the differences. Arnstein's (1969) ladder was designed to be provocative, and other models were needed over fifty years later. Davidson (1998) proposes that a wheel of participation (Figure 2) supports a more positive and responsive approach to participation. In which dialogue and partnership can develop (Davidson, 1998).

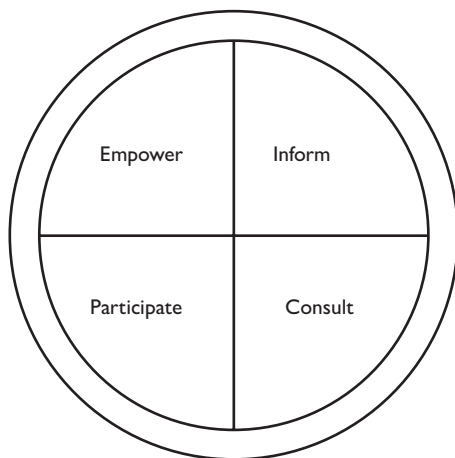
South Lanarkshire Council originally developed Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation to examine the participation of citizens in the planning process. Davidson (1998) suggests that the wheel provides a theoretical underpinning for an open and

Figure 1: Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation



democratic planning system that encourages suitable participation activities to achieve the identified objective – information, consultation, participation, and/or empowerment. Arnstein's (1969) hierarchical ladder pitches powerholders against powerless citizens, with citizen power being exemplified as the ideal form of participation. Davidson (1998) suggests that the wheel supports a more positive approach to citizen participation as, unlike Arnstein's (1969) ladder, there is no need to aim for inappropriate levels of participation.

Figure 2: Adapted from Davidson's (1998) Wheel of Participation



Inclusive education challenges traditional views that attribute low attainment to student weaknesses and emphasises the role of the school system instead (Haug, 2017). Education policy in Wales strongly emphasises inclusion, aiming for all pupils to access common opportunities (Ware, 2019). This research will examine whether parents thought that school staff had implemented the individual support and interventions necessary for their children to succeed in education. The literature highlights that teachers could benefit from parental expertise about their children's ALN (Mann and Gilmore, 2021). The Welsh Government is committed to ALN reform in a system where children, young people and parents can participate as fully as possible in decision making (Welsh Government, 2023). This research examines the experiences of parents of children of ALN who are at risk of exclusion from participating in decisions about their children's education. Previous research has shown that the parents of children with special educational needs value having workable relationships with teachers, while teachers prioritise formal procedures over relationship building (Mann and Gilmore, 2021). Delgado-Gaitan (1991) explains the concept of empowerment, which allows people who lack equal access to resources gain greater control over those resources, become aware of their social conditions and strengths, and determine their choices and goals.

Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation, which aims to foster dialogue and partnership, is being used to explore the participation of parents of children with ALN in the school exclusion process.

Method

The research was undertaken as part of the ESRC-funded Excluded Lives project, which aimed to understand formal and informal exclusion across the four jurisdictions of the UK – England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales – with this study focusing on the data from Wales. Ethics approval was sought before we started to recruit participants. Parents and carers of children who had been excluded from school or who were at risk of exclusion were invited to participate. The study was advertised through general emails to case study local authorities and core schools selected for the project. An email was also sent to third-sector organisations, and recruitment posters were shared on social media. The sample consisted of ten parents (nine mothers and one father) (See Table 1 for the sample). Their children had received fixed-term or permanent exclusions from school. All the participants identified themselves as parents, and none identified as carers. All ten parents had a child with at least one ALN.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interview questions focused on their child's experiences of school, the experiences that led up to their child being excluded from school (or being at risk of exclusion), the exclusion process, their child's experiences of alternative provision (if applicable), their child's experiences of returning to school and the impact of the exclusion for the child and the family. A semi-structured interview schedule enabled participants to share and narrate their experiences of their child's exclusion (Johnson, 2016). Follow-up questions, not in the original interview schedule, were used to build on the research participants' perspectives and enable the research to be taken in new and unexpected directions (Johnson, 2016). Interviews lasted around an hour. The interviews either took place online on Microsoft Teams or the telephone. While it is acknowledged that ideally, the interviews would have taken place face-to-face, fieldwork took place following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: The Sample

Participant	Child's School Year	Child's Diagnosis ¹	Where Child is Educated
1	11	Multiple diagnosis and medical needs, including a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Farm based Alternative Provision (AP).
2	10	Diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC)	Mainstream secondary school with time spent in the school's Autism Base.
3	11	Diagnosis of developmental trauma	Mainstream secondary school
4	8	Being assessed for ASC	Special School
5	9	Diagnosis of ASD	Not currently attending school after an unsuccessful managed move.
6	10	Diagnosis of ADHD and ASC	Has been permanently excluded from school and another educational placement has not been put in place
7	9	Diagnosis of ADHC	Mainstream secondary school
8	8	Diagnosis of ADHD, ASC & Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)	Home educated
9	11	Diagnosis of ASC and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)	Educated in a school office with a one-to-one
10	11	Diagnosis of ADHD & Oppositional Defiant Disorder	Home educated

This paper builds on the same dataset of semi-structured interviews with parents that Bridgeman (2024) used, which focused on how families perceive their power within the school exclusion process, based on Arnstein's Ladder of Participation. While there are some common themes, especially regarding how

¹ Participants shared their child's diagnosis in interviews.

parents engage with and understand exclusion practices, this paper takes a different approach by using Davidson's (1998) Wheel of Participation. This framework offers a more relatable way to understand how parents get involved at different points during the exclusion process. It simplifies the search for actionable insights that can influence policy and practices in Wales. This approach aligns with the journal's goal of encouraging research that translates into real-world applications, ultimately promoting inclusive and participatory school systems that benefit everyone.

Brown (2022) examined the benefits and limitations for researchers conducting online interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic when research methods needed to be adapted to comply with social distancing measures. Brown (2022) highlights that it is essential to be aware that online and face-to-face interviews are different, and they both have advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that online interviews are more convenient for participants, cover a larger geographical area, and can capture participants' technological preferences (Brown, 2022). All participants were able to participate using their preferred technology. However, there are also disadvantages to conducting interviews online, including it being more difficult for the researcher to pick up on non-verbal cues and follow leads, which could hinder data collection (Brown, 2022). This had been considered, and the researcher repeatedly checked their understanding with participants before moving on to follow-up questions. The main disadvantage of online interviews was the digital divide. It is possible that moving the research online led to a lack of voice from underrepresented groups, which could bring into question the generalisability of the findings (Brown, 2022). Parents were given the option of whether they wanted to be interviewed in person, by telephone, or on Microsoft Teams. No parents selected an in-person interview. Participants were given an information sheet before the interview, and all participants gave informed consent to participate in the interview.

The data was collected and analysed iteratively, and themes were explored further using thematic analysis; the use of thematic analysis aimed to provide a detailed and nuanced account of parents' experiences of advocating for their children to get support in place and their involvement in the school exclusion process (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation was used as a framework to code the data with the overarching categories of inform, consultation, participation and empower.

The research was undertaken by a researcher with a background in education. As thematic analysis can be subjective it was essential to consider the researcher's

background to minimise bias (Greene, 2014). In order to minimise potential bias, peer debriefing was used, and findings were discussed with a colleague on the same research team who advised on coding (Greene, 2014).

Findings

Support Needs

The data showed that some parents perceived that school staff had not made the necessary reasonable adjustments, as outlined in their children's Individual Support Plan (IDP), for them to succeed in education. Some parents highlighted a lack of flexibility, and while their children had been supported in primary school, it had not continued in secondary school. Some parents felt there was a lack of understanding from school staff about IDPs and protections for children with ALN.

So, he went to high school, having been supported since age three. And they just refused to do anything. They didn't assess his needs; they didn't put anything in place for him. (Participant 6)

I don't know whether they understand what the statement means and how they are protected, and there's a different process to go down if you're looking at the different settings for a child with a statement. (Participant 8)

Parents reported that this lack of understanding was frustrating when they had challenges getting a diagnosis of ALN and then had to fight to get an IDP. Parents also explained that school staff were not always aware of their children's support needs when they attended meetings.

I requested an IDP, which was agreed. Then, a month later, they said that he hasn't got ALN. With his diagnosis as well, he has ALN. They wouldn't do it. And then they didn't provide me any information on how to (get an IDP), but to go to the local authority and get one in place. They didn't; they weren't forthcoming on Ben's² rights and my rights as his mum on how I could get an IDP in place for him. (Participant 10)

When we met with the Head Teacher a couple of days before, he was excluded over something else. The Head Teacher didn't even know whether he had any additional needs. (Participant 7)

- 2 This and all names used in this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

Davidson's Wheel of Participation

Inform

The data showed that most of the participation in decisions about education could be categorised as 'inform'. Participants felt that school staff focused on punitive measures rather than understanding their children's backgrounds and triggers. Some Parents explained that schools did not want to cooperate with them and learn the best way to work with their children. They thought that school staff wanted to inform them there was an issue and what the resulting sanction would be. Participants reported a range of types of informal exclusion, including managed moves without the appropriate consultation.

The school's natural response was around detentions, isolations, exclusions, and all these factors. My instinct at that stage was to say to the school, look, I understand why you do those things, but you know, let me tell you about this kid's background and what works for him at home. What triggers him, and why does he do some of these things? And yeah, it just kind of came up against a huge brick wall. If anything, the school put more effort into pushing me away and keeping me out of it, and would only then ring me every so often to say what we're doing isn't working. I'd say yes, it isn't. (Participant 3)

On the last day of school, the Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCO) called us and said, 'She's not to come back to school in (the next term). We're going to look at a managed move to another school'. We were like, 'What, this is the first we've heard of it, and we're not happy about that'. The ALNCO said, 'Right, okay, so she's not to come back, she's not coming back to this school (next term). We'll be in touch after the holiday. (Participant 5)

Consultation

The data did show some examples of consultation, with some parents requesting they be more involved in decision-making. Parents spoke of review meetings to discuss their children's IDPs. Most participants highlighted that they had tried to maintain relationships with school staff, and they thought meetings where their children's IDPs were reviewed were a good opportunity for this.

We have regular review meetings. I called an interim review of his statement last year because I felt that the relationship with the school was breaking down. So, we had a review meeting. Then we've got another meeting scheduled for next week, but that's more of a statement review type meeting regarding where they are. (Participant 7)

Participation

The data showed that some parents felt they did participate in decisions about their children's education. This could be linked to knowledge and experience of the education system. Participant 2 worked in education, put together her son's IDP, and participated in decisions about his education. One participant had a good relationship with the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) at her son's school, which led her to access an alternative education placement for him. Some of the participants worked in education or were pursuing an education qualification, and they felt they could work with school staff.

(I had a good relationship with) the SENCO because when you are in high school, you are chopping and changing teachers all day long. But yeah, I had a really good relationship with her. She supported us by saying, Right, what does he need, and what placement does he need to go onto for college? And they were really supportive. But he would never have a place without the exclusions and the permanent exclusion. Because saying to the school you can't just send him home ... You have to send me the exclusion letter. It gave me evidence of his needs. (Participant 1)

I had support from a [school exclusion charity], but they're not allowed to do very much, are they? They're allowed to sit there and just be there. For me, it's more about, well, if they can't participate as much as myself, and because I've got the knowledge I've got, I feel like I'm just going to be taking their time. I'm quite glad that I've got the background in Education that I've got now because it has helped and supported me in dealing with this. Because prior to getting my education, this would have just broken me, and I think that's what happens. I am seeing a lot of broken parents. (Participant 8)

Empower

The data showed that parents did not feel empowered during the school exclusion process; they found it stressful and procedural. Parents did feel empowered to arrange their children's subsequent educational placement. Parents stressed the importance of knowing their children's rights and thought their children's education journey had been more stressful than their children's additional learning needs. Some parents had worked with knowledgeable advocates, others worked in education or had friends who did, and some had done their own research. A common theme from all these participants was that with all their skills and knowledge, they had struggled with their children's educational journeys and school

exclusion. They were concerned that other parents without the same experience and knowledge would really struggle.

I'm lucky in that I'm in a position. I've got friends who work in education. I've got friends who work for various services to do with children who can point me in the direction of this. That's out there; you just need to know how to get into it. But without them telling me, I wouldn't know. (Participant 6)

The most insulting thing that I am watching is sitting there watching everybody calculate how much respect to give me. I said, 'Now, the concerning thing is that parents who haven't been educated are feeling quite intimidated, patronised, and bullied by teachers'. So, it's only the fact that I've got the understanding I've got is why I'm getting the respect that I get, and these adults can stop themselves from patronising me because it doesn't work. (Participant 8)

Discussion

The new ALN code for Wales aims to enable children and young people to learn effectively and achieve their full potential (Welsh Government, 2022). At the inception of the new ALN system in Wales, this research examined how the parents of children with ALN experienced the school exclusion process. The data showed that before their children were excluded, some parents felt that schools had not made reasonable adjustments to enable their children to succeed in education. The data on the school exclusion process showed that parents felt that school staff wanted to inform them about behavioural issues and the sanctions they were using to deal with them rather than collaborating with parents to solve these issues. Parents reported that school staff focused on punitive measures without understanding their children's backgrounds and triggers. The findings of this research highlight the significant challenges the parents of children with ALN face in securing appropriate support and meaningful involvement in the school exclusion process. This could emphasise the need for better communication and the empowerment of parents of children with ALN within the school system.

Research question one asked if parents thought schools had implemented the individual support and interventions needed for their children to succeed in mainstream education. The findings of this research showed that parents felt that school staff had not put the necessary support in place. This reflects research from

England, which found that the parents of children with ALN who had been excluded from school prior to the exclusion had their requests for reasonable adjustments ignored (Sproston et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016). The participants in this study reported that this was particularly frustrating as the necessary reasonable adjustments were outlined in their children's IDP. The findings of this research are concerning as IDPs are a key component of the new ALN system, which aims to ensure consistent support for children and young people through integrated plans (Welsh Government, 2021a). Conn and Hutt (2020) suggest that questions need to be asked about what is transformative about education reform for learners with ALN, as the reforms are similar to the old system. The literature points to potential time and resource constraints, which could be a barrier to implementing the new system (Duggan et al., 2022). With the literature noting the ambiguity around the policy and practice of inclusive education, there is a need for unambiguous policy and practice (Rapp and Corral-Granados, 2024; Hardy and Woodcock, 2014). The Welsh Government's (2019) guidance explains that schools should avoid excluding pupils with SEN, this has been updated in the Welsh Government's (2024) guidance, which emphasises avoiding excluding children with ALN. However, there seems to be no guidance on preventing exclusion from school for pupils with ALN. This is concerning considering the overrepresentation of pupils with ALN in the school exclusion figures (Welsh Government, 2023). There is a cogent argument for comprehensive guidance combined with resource allocation on how putting the appropriate support in place can prevent exclusion from school for pupils with ALN.

Research question two examined the experiences of parents of children with additional learning needs (ALN) who were identified as at risk of exclusion in the school exclusion process. The data was categorised using Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation into the categories of inform, consultation, participation, and empower. The majority of the data from parents suggests that they were involved too late and their involvement was limited to being informed about issues rather than solving problems. This was reinforced by parents' perception that school staff wanted to focus on punitive measures and did not want to learn about their children's backgrounds and triggers. This reflects research from Mann and Gilmore (2021) that parents are interested in building relationships and school staff are more invested in following school processes and procedures. Nonetheless, the fact that the majority of parents involvement was categorised as informing is concerning because a rights-based approach is one of the principles underpinning the new ALN

Code where parents participate as fully as possible in decision making. There were some examples of consultation where parents were involved in review meetings about their children's IDP. Mann and Gilmore (2021) suggest that parental knowledge can be valuable to teachers when a child has a disability but suggest teachers can be reluctant to acknowledge parents' expertise. There were also examples of participation notably for parents who had knowledge and experience of the education system. This could suggest the new ALN Code is having a positive impact on consultation and participation and affords opportunities for school staff to benefit from the expertise of parents.

The data showed that parents did not feel empowered in the school exclusion process. Instead, they thought it was procedural and stressful. The new ALN Code acknowledges that getting a diagnosis is an anxious time for parents (Welsh Government, 2022). However, the guidance on school exclusion has no such acknowledgement (Welsh Government, 2019, 2024). The parents in this study felt empowered to support their children despite their children's educational experiences and the school exclusion process. Parents with educational knowledge and access to advocacy support could access services and subsequent educational placements. These parents, with these skills and knowledge, explained that the exclusion process had been a concerning time for them, and without the knowledge and support they had, they would have struggled. Participants expressed concern for parents who did not have their experience, knowledge or support. The new ALN Code explains that the participation of parents is essential to show they are listened to and to ensure they have an awareness of their rights and the support services available to them (Welsh Government, 2022). This raises questions about what support can be provided to parents during and after the school exclusion process. Parents should be aware of their and their child's rights and feel empowered to access the most appropriate education placement for their child following an exclusion.

It is recommended that Davidson's (1998) wheel be used in the school exclusion policy to clarify the different stages of participation for parents and school staff. In Davidson's (1998) wheel, the most appropriate form of participation can be selected. There are stages of the exclusion process where different forms of participation are necessary. When a managed move is being considered, parents need to be in agreement, and they will need to participate in the process. When their child has been permanently excluded, they must be informed of their rights.

Davidson's (1998) wheel could add clarity for parents and school staff about the most appropriate form of participation at each stage of the exclusion process.

Conclusion

Despite the Welsh Government's (2021a) recent introduction of the ALN Code and efforts to create an inclusive education system, this research found that parents perceived that school staff were not making reasonable adjustments to support their children to succeed in mainstream education. The data showed that parents were frustrated because the support their child needed was explained in their IDP, which is part of the ALN reform to ensure greater consistency and continuity of education (Welsh Government, 2021a). However, a minority of parents reported participating in some IDP review meetings. The data also showed that parents did not feel involved in the school exclusion process. Central to the ALN Code is a rights-based approach which outlines parents' role in decisions about their children's education (Welsh Government, 2021). Parents felt frustrated advocating for their children in the school exclusion process. This study concludes that more clarity around the different types of involvement in the school exclusion process, such as inform, consult, participate and empower (Davidson, 1998), could help parents understand the different types of participation expected from them at different stages of the school exclusion process. Policy guidance for school and local authority staff structured around Davidson's (1998) wheel of participation could also outline how parents should be involved.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Where ethical considerations allow, supporting data are available to bona fide researchers, subject to registration, from the UK Data Service at <http://reshare.ukda.taservice.ac.uk/>.

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