Portfolio Volume 1: Major Research Project

Experiences of Moral Practice and Values in Special Educational Needs settings:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Rationale and Aims:

The wellbeing of education staff has been established as a crucial factor for ensuring safe and effective development for children and young people within their care. Whilst research into moral injury has grown across military, police, health care, and education settings in the UK, literature investigating this phenomenon within Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) school staff remains limited. This study explores the experiences of SEND staff working within their moral values, how they make sense of experiences where these values are transgressed, and the resulting psychological consequences including stress, overwhelm, burnout and compassion fatigue.

Methods:

This study approached answering these questions using a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with six SEND education staff to explore their experiences. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this research aimed to understand personal and group experiential themes surrounding working within SEND education.

Analysis:

Three main group experiential themes were found, each containing three distinct subthemes. Firstly, participants shared their stories around what brought them in to SEND education specifically and this included reflections of early life experiences instilling values congruent with this line of work, finding kinship and support within the professional environment, and recognition that for some participants, their own stories around their neurodivergent identity

also drew them to working in this environment.

Participants reflected on the various ways in which moral decision making affected their own personal and professional identities and how they can stay true to working in line with their morals. Experiences of working amidst the various challenges within SEND, such as resource limitations whilst facing increasing demand on places, and evolving needs were shared.

Finally, experiences of systemic demands, scrutiny and pressures, including frictions around inclusive and holistic care versus academic expectations, and the ability to question systemic powers in the face of moral dilemmas were identified.

Discussion:

Findings of this study are discussed in relation to the current context of SEND education in the UK, as well as wider contemporary literature. This research sheds light on how SEND education staff make sense of their experiences working in a way in line with their morals, and the psychological consequences on both personal and professional identities when this is challenged. New knowledge around the ways in which systemic pressures can entrap staff, thus facilitating moral harm, emerged from this research. It is hoped that these findings will not only support in shaping policy development at both organisation-level within schools, but also strengthen wider understanding of how best to develop support for the emotional and mental wellbeing of SEN education staff.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"Moral wounds have the peculiarity that they are invisible, but do not close; always painful, always ready to bleed when touched, they remain tender and open in the heart"

Alexander Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to support the reader's understanding by outlining the language and current contexts associated with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) education in the United Kingdom (UK). It will then provide the current conceptual understandings and, where possible, definitions around moral practice, injury and entrapment. This chapter will conclude by situating the primary researcher's positionality through reflections on their relation to the subject area, including exploration of their ontological and epistemological position and how these inform the intentions behind this research.

Where possible, the language used in this study was co-produced alongside the study's consultants, both of whom have current and previous experiences working with Special Educational Needs (SEN) education settings within the UK.

1.2 Situating the topic: Context of SEND Education in the United Kingdom

The terminology SEN and SEND are distinct terms, although they are often incorrectly used interchangeably. SEN focuses primarily on learning difficulties or disabilities,

neurodevelopmental conditions and/or other communication difficulties that affect a child or young person's (CYP) learning needs. SEND, however, also includes children with disabilities that may not necessarily impact on their learning needs, but who still require additional reasonable adjustments or specialist settings to access education. SEND is increasingly becoming the standard terminology across education settings in the UK as it reflects the wider range of needs schools now support (Richard, 2026), therefore this research will aim to utilise SEND where possible.

The UK's statutory guidance, the SEND Code of Practice (2015), defined four key areas of need in relation to SEN requirements of CYP. These can be found in Table 1:

Table 1: Summary of SEND Code of Practice (2015)

SEN Need	Brief Summary
Communication and Interaction	Speech, language and communication needs presenting with difficulties in communicating with others. This category also includes CYP with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) who may experience varying levels of difficulty with social interaction.
Cognition and Learning	Covers a wide range of needs, including moderate learning difficulties (MLD), severe learning difficulties (SLD), profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Also includes specific learning difficulties (SpLD), such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia.
Social, emotional and mental health difficulties	A wide range of social and emotional difficulties which present as withdrawal, isolation, or through behaviours that challenge and reflect underlying mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, or other neurodevelopmental conditions

	such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or attachment disorder.
Sensory and/or physical needs	Many CYP require specialist support or equipment to access learning due to sensory disabilities such as vision impairment (VI), hearing impairment (HI) or a multi-sensory impairment (MSI). Additionally, some CYP with physical disabilities require ongoing additional support and equipment to access the same level of opportunities as their peers. Children and young people on the autism spectrum may also present with specific sensory needs that require specialist provisions within the school environment (e.g. sensory rooms) to ensure their needs are met.

Educational, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are central to supporting the needs of SEND students. They are statutory documents for CYP with complex needs outlining key support and provisions required for them to access education. Annual monitoring of an EHCP requires involvement from all key stakeholders and support networks around the child and their family. All schools are required to have a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinating Officer (SENCO) to oversee the strategic development of SEN policy and provision to ensure that appropriate support is available for pupils with SEND.

Most students identified as having SEND receive support within mainstream school settings (Latimer et al., 2025). The role of specialist education settings is to support a child or young person with complex needs (requiring an EHCP) where a mainstream school would be unable to meet the need of a child or young person through reasonable adjustments, within either the main school or any resource/SEN provision.

1.2.1 Historical Context of SEND education

To provide the reader with the historical context of education for students with additional educational needs and disabilities in the UK, the following table (Table 2) has been provided to summarise some of the key historical legislative frameworks relating to SEND education. Please note, language rooted in historical context has been used.

Table 2: Overview of key SEND legislation in the UK. (Esposito & Carrol, 2019)

Legislative Framework	Brief Summary
Education Act (1918)	Formally introduced into law that the education of children with disabilities as mandatory in the United Kingdom. Attitudes of this time promoted this education take place in residential schools rather than mainstream schools.
Education Act (1944)	Specialist provisions were created to specifically cater to the education of children and young people with specialist education needs.
Education (Handicapped Children) Act (1970)	This act handed responsibility for the education of 'severely handicapped children' from health authorities to the local education authorities (LEAs).
Warnock Report (1978)	Revolutionary report which introduced term 'special educational need' (SEN), recommended legally mandated protections for children with educational needs (statements). Emphasised parents as partners with professionals and advocating for children's rights. Promoted that children with SEND needs be educated within mainstream schools wherever possible.

Education Acts (1981)	Acted on many recommendations from Warnock Report and emphasised inclusion within mainstream schools which should introduce reasonable adjustments rather than forced integration.
Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001)	Outlawed discrimination against disabled students in schools, colleges and other educational settings, and promoted the education of children with SEN needs within mainstream settings under a model of inclusion

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The legislative frameworks released over the last decade, Children and Families Act, 2014; SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE], 2015) introduced major reform around the identification of CYP with special educational needs, assessing their needs and promoting the correct provision. EHCPs replaced statements, extending support offered from birth to 25 years of age, and promoted an integrated approach of care across education, health and social care services (DfE, 2015). Whilst the 2014 legislation aimed to streamline support for SEND students, several systemic failures were identified that impacted on the delivery of the framework (National Education Union [NEU], 2025). These will be explored in the following subchapter.

1.2.2 Contemporary challenges facing SEND education

There has been recent focus in literature and the media on the various challenges facing SEND, frequently referred to as the SEND Crisis (House of Commons Education Committee, 2024; NEU, 2025). It argues that the current provision for supporting CYP with SEND is "broken" and failing both the students and the professionals working within them (NEU, 2025).

One of the key challenges within SEND is a significant increase and continuing rise in

the number of children requiring the highest level of support. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) identified that the number of students in England with an EHCP has almost doubled, 2.7% of all students in 2016 to 5.2% in 2025 (Latimer et al., 2025). Additionally, the number of children with EHCPs due to their autistic needs has almost tripled in this time (Latimer et al., 2025). This corresponds with an exponential increase (787% between 1998-2018) in ASC diagnosis (Russell et al., 2022). Furthermore, this increase in identification of needs has led to a corresponding increase in demand for school placement at specialist education settings (up 50% since 2015) (NEU, 2025). Ongoing issues around long waitlists for autism and ADHD diagnoses is now impacting on CYP receiving formal diagnoses in good time (Maciver et al., 2025), thus impacting ability to access EHCP and specialist provisions (Alghrani et al., 2024).

Due to this rise in SEND needs across CYP, as well as relative legacies of state-led austerity measures since 2010 (Warnock, 2023), local authorities have faced additional significant pressures to their budgets in order to account for the increase in high-needs spending offered by councils (Local Government Association, 2023; Latimer et al., 2025). This holds a real-world impact on the allocation of resources to both mainstream and SEND education settings, resulting in insufficient resources available to support student's needs (Hughes, 2025; Allan, 2026). The NEU SEND in crisis report (2025) identified that just 1 in 10 teachers surveyed felt they had sufficient access to specialist support, such as educational psychologists (EPs), speech and language therapists (SALTs) and learning support assistants (LSA) or teaching assistants (TA).

Such pressures are negatively affecting the wellbeing and retention of staff within SEND settings. McLean et al., (2023) highlighted that the increasing workload and systemic accountability pressures are acting as key drivers towards teacher's professional dissatisfaction and job attrition. This retention issue further compounds issues in schools offering consistent

and effective support and care for students with additional complex needs.

1.2.3 SEND Legislative Reforms – The debate of inclusive vs specialist education

The education and care of CYP with SEND needs in the United Kingdom is currently entering into a transitional period following the recent release of the Government's Schools White Paper, 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' (DfE, February 2026). This government initiative lays out a ten-year strategic vision around systemic reform to education by prioritising SEND inclusion within mainstream education settings, with a view to narrowing the disadvantage gap (IQM, 2026). A central aspect of this paper is surrounding the SEND reform document titled 'SEND reform: putting children and young people first' and an open consultation which closed on 18th May 2026.

One of the most significant changes that this initiative proposes is around introducing a four-layered support model. Firstly, all mainstream schools are expected to offer universal adaptive teaching and inclusive environments. Above this is the 'targeted support' model which includes the introduction of 'Individual Support Plans' (ISP) which are to be offered to any child with SEND needs, without the requirement of a formal diagnosis. These ISPs will support with day-to-day provisions, addressing barriers to learning and implementation of reasonable adjustments. Following this, the next level of support offered, classified as 'targeted plus', incorporates existing support from Educational Health Care Plans (EHCPs). Finally, a new nationally defined, evidence-based Specialist Provision Packages will be offered to support children with the most complex needs.

The rationale behind this initiative is a result of recognition of a number of current issues within education discussed previously, including; an ever growing population of CYP with SEND needs and EHCPs (Latimer et al., 2025), long waitlists to access formal diagnoses resulting in challenges in accessing EHCPs for students with SEND needs, and resourcing and

provision issues around mainstream settings being able to offer the inclusive adjustment required (Latimer et al., 2025). This has led to an overwhelming increase in demand on specialist education settings, resulting in corresponding structural and systemic challenges faced by school leadership and staff (DfE, 2026).

1.3 Issues facing educators

1.3.1 Wellbeing, Burnout & Compassion Fatigue

The psychological burden of teaching can pose a significant drain on the individual staff member's emotional resources, in addition to their other teaching responsibilities (Hochschild, 1983). There has been evidence of teachers facing burnout, compassion fatigue and increased rates of job attrition (Madigan & Kim, 2021), which will be the primary focus of this subchapter.

Professional wellbeing in the context of educators has taken a prominent position in literature, both across education and mental health centric fields (McCallum, 2021). The onset and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown policies have driven a focus on individual and collective mental health and emotional wellbeing (Penninx et al., 2022) as a matter of public health concern. Education settings faced a number of temporary closures as part of nationwide government guidance around social distancing, causing an unprecedented disruption to learning across all education systems in the UK. These challenges were compounded by a lack of clearly communicated guidance to school staff (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The physical closure of SEND schools meant that many students could not access the specific learning resources required to facilitate their learning and as such, created an inequal disparity with many SEND students being unable to continue to access an equitable education

during this period (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020), thus widening already existing inequalities between SEND and mainstream students (Blundell et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2024).

These concerns may have contributed to the government's decision that vulnerable CYP with EHCPs and children of key workers return to their education settings in late March 2020 (DfE, 2020a). Whilst this may have been more easily facilitated in mainstream schools where a smaller proportion of students have EHCP plans (around 2%; DfE, 2020b), specialist education settings faced a considerable challenge in reopening support for almost all students who attend the school due to the majority having EHCPs (97.9%; DfE, 2020b). These challenges included introduction of new structures and routines, management of social distancing and other hygiene policies where some sensory sensitivities may pose as barriers for compliance, enacting behaviour management policies which may involve additional physical contact.

Consequently, teaching staff within SEND education settings faced extraordinary emotional and moral challenges of meeting students educational, emotional and health needs, whilst managing the challenges of social distancing amidst the threat of illness (Skipp et al., 2021; Walls & Seashore Louis, 2023) leading, for many, to a deterioration in personal mental health and wellbeing at this time (Kim et al., 2022; Gaona et al., 2024).

Sectors that involve the care and nurturing of vulnerable populations are acknowledged to facilitate a complex interaction between empathy and vicarious stress or trauma (Isobel & Thomas, 2022) or compassion stress injury (CSI) (Russell & Cowan, 2018). Expectations are often placed on school staff to nurture students presenting with vulnerabilities or experiencing active or historical trauma (Brunzell & Norrish, 2021). In the current climate, teachers' roles have become multifaceted where they are often expected play the role of educator, pastoral support and counsellor in response to the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges

which students present with (Kessler & Bromet, 2013; Snoek et al., 2019). These expansive responsibilities also come in a climate of additional systemic pressures such as increasing demand for student places at the school, higher needs of CYP, restrictions in school funding, and ever-increasing oversight and scrutiny leading to workload pressures (Educational Support, 2023). It is therefore vital that support and care is offered to education staff to 'contain the containers' (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015).

Much contemporary literature on professional wellbeing is centred around the concepts of burnout & compassion fatigue. Burnout can be defined as a negative consequence of persistent occupational demands placed on professionals, often within service and caring professions. This is characterised as a psychological state of distress facilitated by three distinct facets; emotional exhaustion due to a draining of emotional resources, depersonalisation due to held views of cynicism and other negative perceptions, and finally a low perception of a sense of achievement and accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Compassion fatigue (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017) describes a state of emotional exhaustion, caused by chronic work strain, which affects a teacher's ability to experience compassion for others (Ormiston et al., 2022; Oberg et al., 2023).

The presence of burnout within teaching roles has been identified as a strong contributing factor to high rates of job attrition within the field due to situations that affect staff wellbeing (Nygaard, 2019; McCallum, 2021). It is felt that SEND staff have a multi-faceted role which involves significant emotional labour alongside their core education roles, therefore, factors contributing to burnout and compassion fatigue may be 'dialled up' compared to contemporary staff at mainstream schools.

This compounds existing issues in the recruitment and retention of teaching staff within England (House of Commons, Education Committee, 2023) and will have broader societal and

financial implications that in turn, influence the wellbeing and outcomes of CYP. Literature exploring burnout and compassion fatigue within other caring roles have also found that moral injury (MI) may also play a key role in affecting wellbeing (Ford, 2019; Thibodeau et al., 2023).

1.4 Theoretical Concepts

1.4.1 Moral Injury

Moral Injury (MI) has increasingly been the focus of research in relation to professions that can be characterised as involving high emotional labour as well as presenting with elements of ethical workings. MI was initially conceptualised (Shay, 1994; Shay, 2004) and defined by Shay (2014, pg 183) as "a betrayal of what's right by someone who holds legitimate authority… in a high stakes situation" when exploring American veteran's experiences in the Vietnam war and drawing comparisons to Homer's Illiad and Odyssey sagas. This definition of MI was later developed further by Litz et al. (2009) as the resultant distress present following one or more potentially morally injurious experiences (PMIEs) where one "perpetrating, failing to prevent, and bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations". The distress response as a result of MI a can be characterised by a significant cognitive dissonance, which can elicit emotions of guilt, shame, demoralisation and other interpersonal challenges (Drescher et al., 2011; Levi-Belz & Zerach, 2018). Whilst there is no universal consensus over one 'true' definition of MI, this research will be aligning itself to Litz et al's (2009) definition of the concept.

There is a significant focus around MI in contemporary literature, particularly within military (Frankfurt & Frazier, 2016; Richardson et al., 2020, Hollis et al., 2022) and healthcare

(Dean et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2020; French et al., 2022a; Williamson et al., 2023; Dean et al., 2024) contexts. Increasing research is emerging around the role MI holds within care and education contexts (Sugrue, 2019; Hanna et al., 2023; Boysen et al., 2025), however this remains limited within the UK context. There is a notable paucity in the literature on this concept within education settings, particularly within SEND education settings.

Given the complex presentations of some of the school population, certain measures are required to ensure the safety and wellbeing of both students and staff. This may include the use of restrictive practice, study-based isolation, and suspension or exclusion from their placement at the school. These actions, as well as the decision process leading to such actions, may present as challenging and potentially morally injurious experiences for staff involved (Webb et al., 2024). It is worth noting however that potentially morally injurious events within the school setting may take shape in many ways, including more commonplace or less overt acts which contravene with someone's moral values, and that this research aims to understand these further.

1.4.2 Moral Entrapment

It is also important to recognise that decisions and actions or inactions leading to moral violation rarely occurs solely within the individual and are often influenced by wider, systemic issues. Bessa & Farmer (2011) noted that often soldiers were made to feel dispensable and experienced 'betrayal by the institution' in regard to the lack of support following traumatic incidents. This theme has also been noted within health care staff following Covid-19 (Dean et al., 2020; French et al., 2022b; Reis & Lesandrini, 2024).

Lissman et al., (2024) explored this further within education settings and coined the concept of 'moral entrapment' which conceptualises the systemic factors and institutional arrangements that facilitate teacher experiences of moral dilemmas and conflicts, thus

producing moral injury at the individual level. Entrapment in a broader sense can be understood as a desire to escape a challenging situation, coupled with an awareness that there are barriers to fulfilling this (Gilbert and Allan, 1998). The psychological processes around this create a subjective perspective of a loss of control around an individual's world view, breeding a view that circumstances may be uncontrollable or inescapable (Baum et al., 1986). As such, entrapment can play a role in facilitating certain psychological presentations such as learned hopelessness, PTSD, anxiety, and in certain circumstances depression and suicidal ideations and behaviours (SIB) (Taylor et al., 2011).

1.5 Positioning the Researcher

In qualitative research, emphasis is placed on maintaining a self-reflexive position throughout the research process. This is to promote an awareness of the context in which the research is taking place, particularly around the time and area it situates in. This also promotes considerations around the interactions between the researcher and participants and how this may affect the lens in which this research is being viewed, and thus how this may influence the outcomes of the research (Elliott et al., 1999). As such, I[1] will outline my own positionality in relation to the research topic in order to draw awareness of the insider-outsider researcher position I occupy in this research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

I was initially employed in a Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) school as a Teaching Assistant (TA) following my undergraduate degree, working closely with students to support them within classroom learning and to provide 1:1 support, in addition to taking a mentoring role for a number of students with a variety of needs. This first foray into full-time

[1] A first-person narrative was intentionally adopted in this section to support transparency regarding my positionality and relationship with the subject area. This acknowledges my active role in co-constructing knowledge through the research process, aligning with a critical realist epistemology in qualitative research.

employment following my degree was formative in my understanding of the mechanisms of specialist education settings, the intersectionality between neurodevelopmental disorders and learning and cognition, and the various additional emotional demands on staff these roles entail.

Following a period of time working within a paediatric health psychology service, I then returned to SEND education as an Assistant Psychologist (AP) where I initially was employed full time in an SEMH school for around four years. During this time, I was situated within the pastoral team and trained as a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). These roles allowed me to be heavily involved in understanding a student's context, not only within the day-to-day interactions through my AP role but also recognising the broader systemic factors that influence the student's presentation and needs. During my time in these roles, I was exposed to various examples of staff facing time off work or leaving the role due to feelings of stress and being overwhelmed. At the time, these issues were attributed to the concept of burnout. In recent years, I've developed a curiosity around what other external and internal forces contributed to these issues, which has resulted in me exploring this research topic.

This theme continued as I transitioned to an AP role within a Mental Health Support Team (MHST) that supported a variety of SEND schools across the local area. This role focused largely on supporting and developing a 'whole school approach' to mental health and through this, I gained a recognition of the pervasiveness of these challenges across different SEND education settings. Witnessing the effort and time that education staff put in to supporting the needs of others, whilst not always feeling able to prioritise their own wellbeing highlighted the systemic barriers that may also be contributing to the wellbeing crisis in this field.

I recognise that these experiences may influence my view on working within SEND education and lead to conscious and unconscious biases regarding the issues of staff wellbeing

and opportunities for moral harm and dilemmas.

1.5.1 Epistemological Position

This research will be grounded within a critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978) ontological position, underpinned by the realist view which asserts that reality can exist independently from human awareness and thoughts but can still hold power and influence over individuals (Fletcher, 2017). In the research context, it is acknowledged that objective, systemic structures; such as OFSTED, lack of resourcing and school protocols, exist as mechanisms and hold power over staff working within education settings.

This is paired with an interpretivist epistemology (Williams, 2008; Hiller, 2016) which acknowledges that the way in which individuals make sense of these realities is varied and subjective. Consequently, it is argued that individuals can assign different sense making and understandings of experiences due to their subjective realities being influenced by individual experiences and interpretations (Fade, 2004). In the research context, this means that for some educators, the issue around lack of funding may be interpreted as a personal failure, whilst another might see it as a systemic injustice.

To investigate and make sense of a person's experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to conduct an in-depth exploration of lived experience. It is felt that the most suitable method in line with exploring this phenomenon is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This will be explored further in Chapter 4: Methodology.

1.6 Conclusions

Previous research indicates that there is a strong link between teacher wellbeing and the emotional and academic outcomes of CYP both nationally (Paterson & Grantham 2016;

Glazzard & Rose, 2020) and globally (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012). Given the complexities of school staff's multifaceted role, and enacting policies that, whilst designed with the view of maintaining safety and wellbeing, can often lead to negative experiences and acute harm, it is felt that exploring the emotional and moral outcomes of the enactment of these policies is a key step to assess the overall impact on staff wellbeing.

As such, this researcher holds a firm belief that due to the influential role and enormous responsibility education staff hold for one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups within our society, investigating and supporting SEND staff wellbeing should be framed as a social justice issue.

Accordingly, the emotional and mental health demands and ill effects this may hold for SEND staff population group as evidenced earlier represents as a significant public health issue and therefore the role of clinical psychology in supporting emotional and mental health of SEND staff and students alike is of utmost importance. Clinical Psychology commonly works indirectly with vulnerable populations, such as CYP with SEND needs, and holds a unique perspective of being able to formulate the interactions between morally injurious experiences, systemic factors and psychological distress.

Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) are a recently commissioned service initiative (2018) tasked with providing low to moderate psychological interventions. The current aim is to expand MHSTs into 100% of schools in England by 2029/2030 (NHS England, 2023). One of the key remits of the MHST includes supporting school staff and leadership in developing and implementing a whole school approach to mental health. This early intervention model aligns with the NHS 10-year health plan which aims to promote more community focused work with an emphasis of early interventions to promote prevention of illness (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025).

The rationale for this study will be explored further in the conclusion of Chapter Two, and will encompass rationale from both the introduction material, and findings from the systematic literature review (SLR).

Chapter Two: Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the process in which the reviewer systematically synthesised, evaluated and critically appraised existing literature with the aim of exploring the experiences and views of key stakeholders regarding aspects of school inclusion, behaviour management, and exclusion across SEND schools in the United Kingdom. In this review, the term stakeholder was used to group school students, their parents and carers, and school staff involved in their care and education.

2.2 Situating the topic

There continues to be debate over the most appropriate way to support the needs and education of CYP with SEND needs in the United Kingdom. Legislative frameworks, such as the Children and Families Act, 2014; and the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015); and the recent White Paper; Every Child Achieving and Thriving (DfE, 2026) champion inclusion and integration of CYP with complex needs within mainstream education settings. However, anecdotal and empirical findings illustrate systemic issues and failings within this model of working, leading to CYP with SEND needs experiencing increased rates of exclusion (Jay et al., 2023) and other forms of harm within these settings (Warnes et al., 2022; Walton, 2025).

One argument is that specialist education settings often lead to unintended segregation of students who sit outside the idea of a 'norm' within the school system (Wehmeyer, 2022) and through 'removing' them from mainstream education populations, perpetuates negative

narratives, attitudes, and stigma around difference (Merrigan & Senior, 2023). This led to the movement that advocates the idea that students with SEND needs should remain within mainstream settings and internal SEND provisions, and that adaptations should be made by the school to promote a more inclusive environment (Hardin & Hardin, 2002).

In contrast, there is an argument that in certain cases, mainstream schools are not always able, or willing, to make the required reasonable adjustments to the school structure, systems and environment necessary to be truly inclusive, and that this can only be achieved within specialist settings where staff are trained with expertise in creating an appropriate and person-centred approach to the young person's education.

School inclusion, exclusion, and restrictive practices (such as internal isolation and physical holds), are commonplace within SEND schools and embedded within school behaviour management policies (Steele, 2018; Black, 2022; Whitehouse, 2026). Evidence suggests that improper or inappropriate enactments of policies which enable both student and staff wellbeing and safety within the school environment can contribute to psychological harm and further negative outcomes for those involved (Jones et al., 2023). As such, it is critical to understand the scope in which these practices are affecting those involved, and to question what the evidence is suggesting may be common themes shared across these experiences.

Whilst there is a growing body of literature investigating the impact of school policies and strategies within mainstream school settings in the United Kingdom (Sealy et al., 2023; Christie & Harding, 2025), there is still a scarcity of research within SEND settings, reinforcing the view that it remains still an underrepresented population. Furthermore, research exploring experiences of SEND education is fragmented, whereby individual parties' experiences are highlighted in isolation, and typically also focusing on a singular domain of their education experience, but little exploring collective themes and sense making across the system. As such,

it is important to identify and synthesise current research on all stakeholder's (school staff, parents & carers, and students) subjective experience of acts of behaviour management and other inclusion and exclusion policies, and the subsequent consequences of them from a triangulated perspective.

This review aims to consolidate available literature into a coherent account of stakeholder experiences across different facets of educational experiences around stories of validation and acceptance, or conversely, institutional harm. This review intends to also contribute to the existing debate around the issue of inclusion, and the alternative approaches to managing behaviour and support offered within the education systems in the UK.

2.3 Initial Scope of the Literature

Initial scoping searches commenced in July 2025 and utilised a range of bibliographical databases (e.g. SCOPUS, Google Scholar) which revealed a relative lack of research focused on the lived experiences and views of all stakeholders relating to the inclusion, behaviour management, and exclusion policies enacted within SEND education settings. A further search on the PROSPERO database in August 2025 revealed that there were no pre-existing systematic literature reviews exploring the chosen topic or question, therefore it was decided that it would be appropriate to proceed with the identified topic.

This review aimed to specifically answer the following question:

"What are the stakeholder experiences of the enactment of school exclusion, restrictive practices and other inclusion policies within special educational needs school settings in the United Kingdom?"

2.4 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was first developed to increase the chance that relevant qualitative research would be identified in literature database searches. Search terms were then developed with the use of a SPIDER tool (Cooke, Smith & Boothe, 2012) to inform the domains and subordinate terms used in the search strategy.

Boolean operators, such as AND, and, OR were used to facilitate the combination of different topic domains, as well as other relevant synonyms to refine the number of relevant articles returned (Atkinson & Cipriani, 2018). Additionally, some search terms were truncated (*) to include variations of the terminology, such as plural terms, variations of regional spelling differences, and terms which include parts of the term in variations of the terminology. Quotation marks (“) are used to bracket phrases or terms with multiple words to return only results which include the whole terms rather than the individual words in isolation.

Variations of key terms used in this search were developed through exploration of search terms used in past research on the topic area, in addition to discussions with supervisors and the review’s second screener. The term ‘inclusion’ was removed from the search group 2 from initial drafts due to it producing a significant range of unrelated topics, for example; religious inclusion in Northern Ireland, and thus returning search results beyond the scope of this review. The search terms were used in relation to the title, abstract and key terms associated with the articles.

Table 3 illustrates a list of terms developed for this search.

Table 3: Search String subdomains

Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 4
student* OR pupil* OR child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR learner*	AND	"restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management"	AND	experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*"	AND	school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education"	AND	"United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland"

Two additional search string variants were generated which altered the items listed in Group 1 to account for parent & carer populations, and for education staff populations. These

variations can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Parent/Carer & Staff variants on search string domain

Group 1 – Parent/Carer	Group 1 – Staff
parent*	teacher*
OR	OR
carer*	staff
OR	OR
caregiver*	educator*
OR	OR
"family member*"	"school personnel"
OR	OR
guardian*	"school staff"
OR	OR
"foster parent*"	headteacher*
OR	OR
"adoptive parent*"	"teaching assistant*"

2.4.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The use of a SPIDER tool (Cooke, Smith & Boothe, 2012) also assists in standardising the search term across different databases and clarifies key inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 5).

Table 5: SPIDER criteria (Cooke et al., 2012)

SPIDER Term	Review Definition
Sample	School Students, their Parents & Carers or their school staff
Phenomenon of **I**nterest	Experiences of the enactment of inclusion, behaviour management and exclusion policies
Design	Interviews: Structured, semi-structured, focus groups and case studies.
Evaluation	Experience

Research type	Qualitative (including ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological etc.) or mixed methods with substantial qualitative elements

This review only included peer-reviewed qualitative or mixed method studies reporting on original research that explored stakeholder perspectives of experiences of school exclusion, restrictive practices and other inclusive policies in SEND education settings in the United Kingdom. For studies which included the views of students/staff from both SEND schools and mainstream schools, only papers which identified which quotes were attributed to students attending SEND schools would be considered.

Only studies published in the English language were included in the review. Mixed-method papers were included in the screening, however only the qualitative aspects exploring participants experiences and subjective views explored in these papers would be included in any analysis to ensure that it remains relevant to the research question.

Exclusion criteria for this study included the following criteria: papers which focused exclusively on mainstream education settings; on further education SEND settings and/or the students who were 18 years old or older; adult participants who were not parent or carers to students at an SEND school; or the participants were exclusively in non-education roles (i.e. social care, psychology etc.).

Whilst the quantity of literature in this area is limited, only papers published from 2002 were included to ensure that experiences captured were in line with school policies enacted following the release of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001 which promoted the education of children with SEND needs within mainstream settings under a model of inclusion.

2.5 Screening and Selection

The literature review was conducted between July 2025 and February 2026. Multiple databases were used to capture a range of publications, therefore increasing the scope of research papers captured using the aforementioned search string. The following electronic databases were searched; Scopus, ERC (Education Research Complete) via EBSCOhost, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). Search strategies were developed for each database based on the core search string (see Appendix A).

Covidence software was utilised to support in the screening of papers as part of this systematic review and a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021) has been included which provides a breakdown of the screening process and selection of included studies (Figure 1). The initial literature search returned a total of 1529 relevant papers across all used databases, of which 747 were identified as duplications by Covidence and manually.

Further abstract and title screening then took place and subsequently 612 studies were found to not be relevant and were thus excluded at this stage. Additional searching of citations led to 7 more papers being acquired and included in the full text screening stage. The full text screening stage involved a more comprehensive review of the study to investigate whether all aspects of the study met the inclusion criteria to proceed to data extraction.

Following this stage, support was sought from a second screener, who was a fellow trainee clinical psychologist, to verify whether the included papers did meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The second screener was not involved in the earlier stages was due to the number of papers included at the prior stages and the significant demand on the second screeners time and capacity whilst also conducting their own research. The outcome of this second screening was an agreement that the 9 selected papers met the inclusion and exclusion

criteria.

The review was initially registered on PROSPERO on 21st November 2025, and a subsequent amendment to clarify key language was accepted on (24th January 2026) (registration number: CRD420251186558).

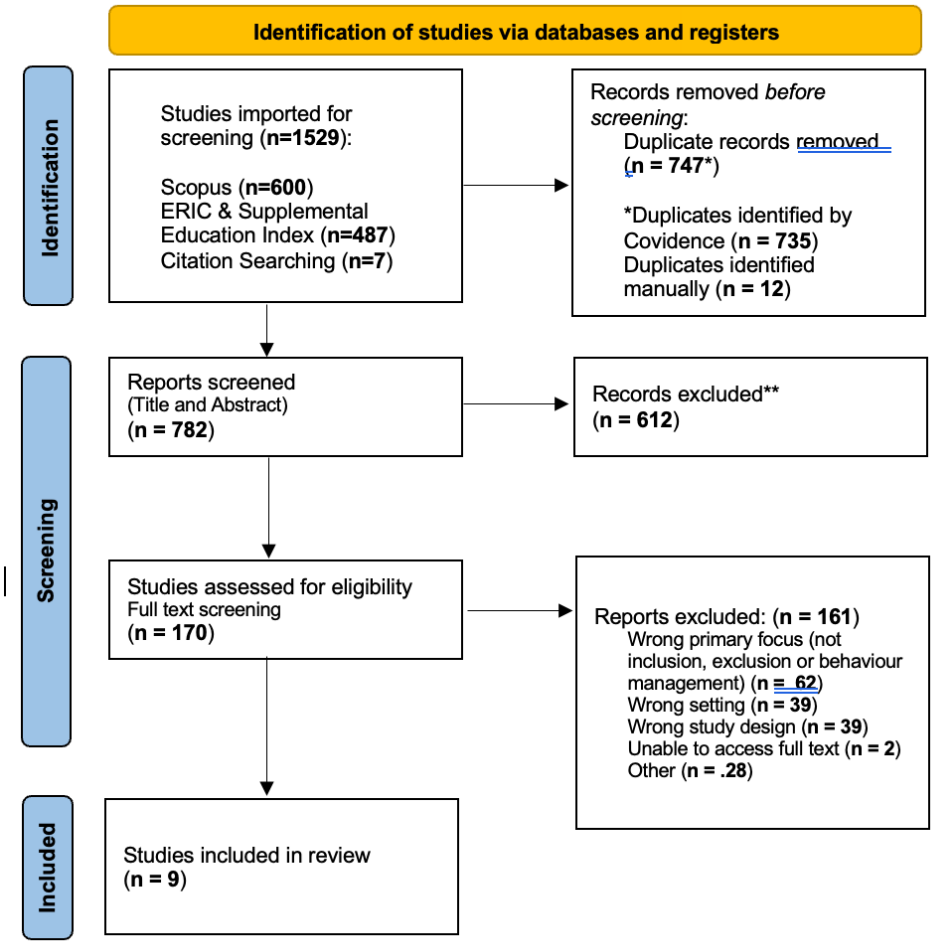


Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart

2.6 Included Studies

The literature review identified 9 studies that met the inclusion criteria, focusing on the experiences of students, parents/carers or school staff on the enactment of inclusion, behaviour management, and exclusion policies within SEND schools in the United Kingdom. Of these

papers, eight studies utilised qualitative methodologies and one utilised a mixed-methodology study design and included sufficient qualitative data to meet the inclusion criteria as outlined in this systematic review.

Two papers collected qualitative data from across the range of stakeholders (students, parent/carers and staff); one of these studies investigated the experiences of autistic students excluded from school and subsequent re-integration and inclusion into special education settings (Brede et al., 2017), whilst the other focused on a similar theme of experiences of exclusion on a broader SEND population (Caslin, 2011).

One study (Broomhead, 2013) explored parent and staff views on the perceptions and stigmas being experienced by students presenting with behaviours that challenge and other behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

One study (Cook & Ogden, 2022) explored staff views on the inclusion of autistic students within both mainstream and SEND schools. Only data pertaining to SEND Schools were included in analysis for this review.

The remaining five studies primarily focused on the student phenomenological experience through a mixture of focus groups, interviews and other creative approaches regarding a range of their experiences. One study (Pirrie et al., 2011) focused specifically on student experiences of exclusion from SEN schools, whilst two more recent studies explored student experiences of restrictive physical interventions and look at what potential alternative strategies may be suitable (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024) and the direct impact on student and staff relationships following these interventions (Willis et al., 2021). Sellman (2009) utilised a creative Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to explore a school's behaviour policy more broadly through the lens of the student experiences and sense-making. Finally, Polat and Farrell (2002) explored the retrospective experiences of former students of an SEN

residential school.

An outline of the studies included in this review can be found in Table 6.

Table 6: Overview of Studies included in Systematic Literature Review

Authors **(Year)**	**Study Aims**	**Participants**	**Methodology**	**Findings** **(Broad Themes)**	**Strengths and Limitations**
Brede et al. (2017)	To understand the key factors surrounding the school exclusion experiences of a group of autistic students with particularly complex needs, and their subsequent re-integration into education.	SEND Students with diagnosis of Autism. N: 9 Female: 1 Male: 8 Age Range: 10-18 7 parents (two did not take part) 19 teaching staff	Semi-Structured interviews & questionnaires. Thematic analysis	Negative student experiences at previous education settings still inform current view of education. Shared themes around adaptations to physical environment, strength of student-staff relationship, and focus on student wellbeing over academic attainment being key to successful inclusion in school	**Strength:** + Captures experiential data across multiple stakeholders (student, parent/carers and school staff. + Depth of interview and approach to involving students in study. **Limitation:** - Relatively small sample size. - Student sample all intellectually able therefore may not capture representative views of wider SEN cohort. - Case study design makes it hard to generalise findings.
Broomhead (2013)	To explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the differential treatment or stigma experienced by pupils with challenging behaviour more specifically, those with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), as well as children with visible special educational needs	10 parents of children within SEN needs and presentations of behaviours that challenge (BESD, PMLD). 15 Educational Practitioners (8 BESD School)	Semi-Structured interviews Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Negative stigma associated with SEN needs: SEN students higher demand and experiences of "rushed" exclusions. Examples of reasonable adjustments supporting learning needs	**Strength:** + Focus on parent & teacher experiences of SEN needs. + Brings to light the reality of education settings not being set up to meet need of SEN students which leads to higher rate of exclusions. **Limitation:** - Focuses on Mainstream education more than SEN experiences - lack of richness of information.

Caslin (2011)	To explore children and young people's experiences of the process of exclusion from education systems in England.	13 pupils in SEN & Alternative Provisions (AP) excluded for behaviour difficulties. Age Range: 14-16 10 teachers 10 parents.	Case Study design with multiple informants. Constructivist grounded theory. Creative approaches to data capture (graffiti walls, storytelling).	SEN label a barrier to inclusion in mainstream and structure and consistency in SEN settings helpful for inclusion. Staff expertise allows specific communication	**Strength:** + Particular focus on the value of involving the young person's voice in research. + Comparison of educational trajectories highlights inequity in experiences. **Limitation:** - Recruitment bias by being selected by education providers so may not include students completely outside of the system. - Focus on wider experiences of exclusion, and not just specific to SEN exclusion. - This study focuses primarily on SEN students' experiences of facing institutional harm, rejection and stigma whilst at previous mainstream settings, than the experiences of SEN school specific experiences.
Cook & Ogden (2022)	To explore the perspectives of teachers from both mainstream and specialist settings on the challenges faced by schools whilst pursuing inclusion of autistic students.	Special Education School Staff (n = 6) Southeast England Headteacher (n = 2) Deputy Head (n = 2) SENCo (n = 2)	Thematic Analysis Semi-Structured Interviews	Discussed identified challenges of making and maintaining friendships and experiences of bullying. Exploration of specific strategies and their implementation (sensory management, consistency of routine and structure)	**Strength:** + Direct comparison of SEND vs Mainstream experiences in enacting inclusion. + Data captured across six SEND schools. + Focuses on staff voice exclusively. **Limitation:** - Limited sample size and demographic captured in small area of country so may not be reflective of wider UK context. - Staff sample made up of senior leadership roles within school. Missing out on teacher/teaching assistant etc. view.

					- Split focus between SEN and mainstream means that there may be less depth of analysis specific to SEN.
Hodgkiss & Harding (2024)	To explore the views of CYP who have directly experienced physical restraint in an educational setting in England and to explore their views on alternatives that could be used in place of physical restraint, or to de-escalate situations.	4 SEMH primary aged students Male: 2 Female: 2	Inductive thematic analysis Semi-structured interviews with adaptations (visual timetable)	Key theme surrounding RPI as being negative and often painful and should only be used in incidents of keeping people safe, not for minor behaviour management. Alternative approaches can often be more helpful; breathing, allowing space etc.) Impact on staff relationships was subjective and context dependant.	**Strength:** + Niche focus on SEN student experience of RPI + Direct voice of child with SEN needs which is lacking in research **Limitation:** - Small sample and from a single setting limits generalisability
Pirrie et al. (2011)	To explore the experiences and outcomes for young people excluded from special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs)	24 children and young people excluded from SEN Provisions. Age Range: 9-14 Male: 23 Female: 1	Mixed Methods Longitudinal qualitative approach (across 3 years) Interviews with students, parents and service providers	Negative experiences associated with disrupted educational pathways and an extended period out of education and a lack of suitable alternative provisions. Felt like compromises had to be made regarding suitability of education setting to ensure placement achieved in good time. Failure of wider system in ensuring wellbeing and finding suitable placements.	**Strength:** + Longitudinal design captures viewpoints across education journey. + Focuses specifically on exclusion from SEN settings which is a niche area. **Limitation:** - High proportion of Male participants means that certain viewpoints may not have held as much power.
Polat & Farrell (2002)	To explore former pupils' views about the education they received while they were students at a residential school for pupils with Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (EBD)	26 former students of an SEN residential school (4 years after leaving)	Semi-Structured interviews Thematic analysis	Positive experiences of inclusion within SEN setting. Environmental adaptations and staff relationship identified as key factors.	**Strength:** + Viewpoints of students after leaving offer different perspective **Limitation:** - Retrospective accounts may be subject to bias
Sellman (2009)	To understand and evaluate a school's behaviour policy by involving students as	6 SEBD secondary students - all male	PAR focus groups made of students.	RPI viewed as necessary in SEN settings to keep people safe, however concerns raised over	**Strength:** + Use of participatory research approach allows young people to shape

	researchers and explore their experiences and understanding	Age Range: 13-16	Grounded Theory approach	appropriate use. Consistency and structured approach valued highly. It was a common theme that the staff/student relationship was more important than the behaviour management tool used regarding de-escalation and success of repair.	the research. **Limitation:** - Participant sample were volunteers and therefore may have led to a self-selecting bias towards more articulate students and therefore may not represent all SEN needs presentations. - Relatively low group size and all from one setting
Willis et al. (2021)	To understand the impact restrictive physical interventions, have on the student and teacher relationship, both during and after events.	10 SEMH Students across two education settings Age Range: 9-11 All Male	Focus Groups using photograph and story stimuli for discussion. Thematic analysis	High negative emotions associated with RPI in the moment (anger, fear). Reports of distress witnessing RPI and can be disruptive to wider learning. Recognised physical and emotional impact of conducting RPI on staff. Sympathy shown to staff	**Strength:** + Recruitment of participant group across multiple settings. + Use of photographs & other stimuli innovative approach in facilitating conversation and may be well suited for population group. **Limitation:** - Same sex population may limit generalisability

2.7 Quality Assessment

Quality appraisal of literature is a vital stage of systematic literature reviews to determine that the review's literature is applicable to the question and offers sufficient quality (Shaheen et al., 2023). This review only analysed qualitative data from the selected studies, and so, a single appraisal tool was utilised as part of the assessment of the quality of literature.

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Studies Checklist (CASP, 2018) was selected as the tool to assess quality of the literature in this review as the review aims to capture qualitative findings of lived experiences and meaning making. The CASP checklist is a widely used tool, especially in qualitative reviews involving educational or psychological literature and is often selected for its high utility as a structured framework for evaluating a studies' rigour and methodological strength (Hannes et al., 2010). The tool comprises ten questions, each focusing on a different methodological aspect of the study in question, such as credibility, reflexivity, and ethics.

The use of the CASP allows a judgement to be made by the researchers to weigh up any identified strengths and limitations to determine whether an article meets the required threshold of quality to be included in the review and to ensure in transparency. This differs from many other tools which produce scores by quantifying aspects of quality based on a scoring system, which holds strength in allowing a standardised approach to appraising papers. Although the CASP allows for nuanced subjective views to support the appraisal process, this may make comparison between papers more challenging.

A summary of the CASP checklist conducted in this review can be found in Table 7.

Table 7: CASP Qualitative Checklist

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Studies Checklist Tool											
Study and Author		**Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research**	**Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?**	**Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research**	**Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?**	**Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?**	**Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?**	**Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?**	**Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous**	**Is there a clear statement of findings?**	**How valuable is the research?**
Brede et al., 2017	Excluded from school: Autistic students' experiences of school exclusion and subsequent re-integration into school	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat Addressed power dynamic in allowing Teaching Assistants present and building rapport over multiple sessions but does not explicitly discuss implications.	Yes	Yes	Yes	High Significant Gap in literature looking at exclusion of ASC from SEN settings
Broomh-ead, 2013	Preferential treatment or unwanted in mainstream schools? The perceptions of parents and teachers with regards to pupils with special	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat Researcher acknowledged role of outsider researcher in relation to enabling participants to be able to speak freely.	Yes	Yes	Yes	High

	educational needs and challenging behaviour										
Caslin, 2021	'They have just given up on me'. How pupils labelled with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experience the process of exclusion from school	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes Discusses relationship focused approach and use of creative approaches to support engagement and explores positionality and power of being an outsider in facilitating the voice of a 'silenced' population.	Yes	Yes	Yes	High Creative methods and focus on SEBD exclusion
Cook & Ogden, 2022	Challenges, strategies and self-efficacy of teachers supporting autistic pupils in contrasting school settings: a qualitative study	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat Lack of reflexivity on role of power within research/participant relationship or fact that interviewing only Senior Leadership Team (SLT).	Yes	Yes	Yes	High Exclusive teaching participant group supports in study identifying key experiences and issues that staff are facing in enactment of inclusion, and possible specific training needs.

Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024	Exploring views of physical restraint in schools: pupil experiences, relationships with staff, and alternative strategies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mixed School staff self-selected students who they felt might engage in the interview. This may have excluded sample who were most impacted or unable to communicate views.	Yes Discussion around involvement of trusted staff to ensure population would not suffer undue distress by taking part. Some discussion of power imbalance.	Yes	Somewhat No verification was returned from student therefore unclear whether researcher interpretation was valid.	Yes	Moderate-High Recent and focuses on primary SEMH, however methodology may impact on ability to generalise findings wider.
Pirrie et al., 2011	What happens to pupils permanently excluded from special schools...?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes Discussion of position of researcher may be viewed as aligned with system that caused institutional harm.	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Polat & Farrell, 2002	What was it like for you? Former pupils' reflections on their placement at a residential school for pupils with emotional and	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear No explicit discussion on relationship with participants	Somewhat Anonymisation but explicit ethical protocol not discussed	Yes	Yes	Moderate Valuable as early focused research on subject but methodology limits scope

	behavioural difficulties										
Sellman, 2009	Lessons learned: student voice at a school for pupils experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat Students were volunteers therefore self-selecting sample of most enthusiastic/engaged.	Yes Discussion of use of PAR to dismantle power imbalance in research.	Yes	Yes	Yes	High SEBD students' involvement and quality of feedback on policy
Willis et al., 2021	Pupils with social, emotional and mental health special needs: Perceptions of how restrictive physical interventions impact their relationships with teaching staff	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear Lead researcher states positionality as a former Head Teacher, but does not discuss implications of this in relation to what bias this may have introduced to study.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Moderate-High Informs qualitive views on post restrictive behaviours and repairs, however positionality of researcher may have influenced findings due to power dynamics

All studies included in this review stated clear aims regarding what the purpose of the studies entailed. All studies also used appropriate qualitative methodology to explore and capture the subjective experiences of the chosen participant group. There was a range of sampling strategies employed across these studies, the most common being purposive sampling which involved the intentional selection of a sample population based on a specific characteristic, which is a common sampling strategy utilised in qualitative methodology.

In some of the studies (Caslin, 2011; Cook & Ogden, 2022; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Sellman, 2009), smaller samples were gathered compared to the recommended sample suggested for their respective methodology designs. Additionally, half of the studies (Brede et al., 2017; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Polat & Farrell, 2002; Sellman, 2009) had a sample population from respective single school populations, therefore phenomenological experiences shared in these studies are school specific, and caution is necessary when generalising to broader experiences shared by SEND students across the United Kingdom. Cook and Ogden (2022) captured samples across six SEND schools, all schools were situated in the same geographic region (southeast England), therefore the results may reflect some bias regarding the demographics (e.g. socioeconomic status or ethnicity) of the students, families or staff in that region.

Polat and Farrell (2002) employed a retrospective interview methodology which may need to be taken with caution as people's perspectives and views of their experiences at school may be retroactively biased by subsequent life experiences, e.g. rosy retrospection (Mitchell et al., 1997).

There was a mixed level of reflexivity around the relationship and role of power between the researcher and the participants discussed within these studies. Caslin (2021), Sellman (2009) and Willis et al (2021), who all had CYP participants, all utilised

methodological approaches (such as life grids, vignettes etc.) with a view to mitigate any impression of the researcher being viewed as an expert and students as having limited autonomy and power in the study. Additionally, Sellman's (2009) use of PAR was aimed to shift the power of research toward student participants, however acknowledged that despite these efforts, his positionality and that of the school system still influenced the relational interactions with the students.

Pirrie et al., (2011) discussed the various barriers in accessing participants due to the inherent power and 'gatekeeping' experienced by local authorities due to being an 'outsider' researcher, which may hinder the opportunity to access a wider range of individuals and their subjective experiences.

Only Polat and Farrell (2002) included minimal information about the ethical processes involved in gaining informed consent and agreement to take part, however, this may be explained by the fact that in the early 2000s, reporting standards held different priorities than contemporary studies. However, steps were taken in this study to anonymise the name of the institution through giving of a pseudonym to protect participant's anonymity.

One area of ethical consideration that was limited across all studies was related to debrief, follow up support after the conclusion of the study, as well as exploring steps taken to offer reasonable adjustments to enable all participants being able to access the interviews and/or focus groups. It can be considered that given the nature of the topics discussed, this would be an important aspect to the research methodology and therefore more focus should have been given to this in the writing of the studies.

Whilst it was found that some studies were not universally strong in all aspects of the quality appraisal, it should be acknowledged that factors such as the era in which the study was conducted, and the barriers to accessing and conducting qualitative focused methodology with

this particular population sample. There is significant value offered across the studies in their accessing an often-overlooked group, whose early experiences often speak of invalidation and marginalisation within society. It is therefore felt that the inclusion of all discussed studies offers a strong level of conceptual contribution, allowing the triangulation of stakeholder's unique experiences to be consolidated and explored through further synthesis.

2.8 Synthesis of Main Findings

Thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was chosen as the analytic approach for this review as it allows the construction of analytic (higher-order) themes which facilitates the movement beyond descriptive analysis and into interpretation of meaning which aligns with reviews of experiences and meaning-making. Thematic synthesis has been evidenced as a credible methodology which is recognised for its use within a systematic review. The process of how thematic synthesis was conducted in this review is as follows.

The initial stage of the process was to fully immerse in the findings of the nine included studies, paying particular attention to specific findings relevant to the phenomenological experience of the enactment of school behavioural, inclusion and exclusion policies. Following this, line-by-line coding of the raw data was then conducted on all selected studies, and relevant sections were collected and stored in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Subsequently, descriptive themes were then developed, and individual quotes were then grouped into these themes. Descriptive themes allow the researcher to reflect concepts or common trends across the different studies.

Finally, analytic themes were developed by the researcher and discussed with the research supervisor to support reflexivity and perspective taking. These themes move past the

descriptive, and towards more deeper meaning and inference as to why certain experiences may occur. In this review, three analytical themes were constructed, each containing two sub-themes which explore specific facets of the broader theme. The analytic themes and sub-themes are represented in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Table of themes from Thematic Synthesis

Theme	Sub-Theme
Theme 1: Relational inclusion in SEND	1. Experiences of rejection versus a validating welcome 2. Prioritising the student/staff relationship & taking a person-centred approach
Theme 2: Behaviour Management: ensuring safety vs enacting harm	1. Normalisation of restraint in SEND 2. Cost of restrictive physical interventions & importance of repair
Theme 3: Alternative provisions to success	1. Virtue of specialist provision 2. Re-prioritising holistic growth over academic attainment

2.8.1 Theme 1: Relational inclusion in SEND

In eight studies, themes surrounding the importance of relational engagement, historical experiences of invalidation and prioritising rapport-building to improve inclusion were highlighted and were therefore identified as a core theme. Experiences of rejection from mainstream schools and other SEND schools contrast with experiences of feeling welcomed within SEND specialist settings, along with content surrounding the relational buy-in, were also identified as a sub-themes which interacted with the broader theme of relational inclusion.

2.8.1.1 Subtheme: Experiences of rejection versus a validating welcome

Six of the studies included details around student and families' experiences of facing exclusion and rejection within SEND schools (Brede et al., 2017; Broomhead, 2013; Caslin 2011; Polat & Farrell, 2002; Sellman, 2009; Pirrie et al., 2011). These experiences were often considered as fracturing a sense of trust in the education system for many families.

> "a large number of children and young people in specialist SEBD provision, these students had experienced permanent exclusion from two or more previous settings." (Sellman, 2009).

This synthesis suggests that this could be due to the increased demand for resources required by SEND students, relative to potentially lower achieved academic attainment outcomes.

> "these kids are stigmatised because they threaten systems within the schools… and so they've been excluded." (Broomhead, 2013)

> "This group of young people continue to be framed as 'the problem' rather than having problems" (Caslin, 2011)

Parents were found to feel the responsibility of battling to ensure that their child was offered the most appropriate level of support for their child's needs:

> "They stressed how they had to 'fight' to get their children's difficulties recognised by schools and to gain access to appropriate support" (Brede et al., 2017)

Certain narratives were internalised by students regarding what having SEND needs may mean to them, as well as and the wider societal views of having attended SEND education settings:

"One of the main criticisms of special schools is that they isolate pupils from their communities and build up negative stereotypes among the general population." (Polat & Farrell, 2002).

A view summarised succinctly by a student:

"If you study at a special school others think that your life is fucked up, you are a social misfit and social failure which hinders a person at times." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

And also shared by a headteacher at a SEN school:

"pupils with BESD are the unclean, and they are perceived to be unclean by most high schools, because they are the kids that they cannot manage, so it's easier to put them 'outside the gates'." (Broomhead, 2013)

"They would use derogative terms to describe the school and other students in elements of this discussion, referring to the school as 'a mad house'" (Sellman, 2009)

This may leave lasting consequences for the young person's quality of education, and emotional wellbeing:

"I think that these labels crumble some people's life like they even cannot put the name of their school on their CV." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

"the majority of the former pupils felt that being labelled as having attended an EBD school had a negative impact on their lives." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

Additionally, stakeholders in these studies reflected on systemic issues surrounding demand for SEND school places due to a lack of specialist provisions, and the impact that this can have on a child who has been excluded from their previous setting.

> “Many children had not accessed education and were out of school for a significant length of time before their current placement.” (Brede et al., 2017)

This also presents challenges for specialist SEND schools being pressured to accept students with differing presentations which may offer unique challenges and demands to support.

> “there is an expectation that we pick up on all sorts of problems that we were never designated for in the first place.” (Pirrie et al., 2011).

This quote perpetuates the narrative that SEN settings are often viewed as the last chance for many of these children being able to access education and support. This could lead to a dilemma presenting itself of choosing a setting that is most suited to the young person’s needs, versus settling on one to minimise the amount of time out of education, and therefore can lead to certain compromises being made in the care provided.

> “now that he’s got permanently excluded from a National Autistic Society school on his record, nobody wants to touch him” (Pirrie et al., 2011)

> “Children were aware that their placement at the [school] was often ‘the only school that was left.” (Brede et al., 2011)

> “I got a call saying this is the only school we’ve got. You either take it or you don’t. They gave me, what, a week to decide, and it was like, well, I’ve got no choice.” (Pirrie et al., 2011).

In contrast to the experiences of rejection faced in previous settings, there was commonality found in families’ experiences of transition into specialist education, the narratives held by the staff and wider system around their children’s needs and difficulties, and

the approaches taken to facilitate a successful integration into their new school settings. Previous experiences of rejection and invalidation via the mainstream school system was initially challenged by the approach of compassion and patience, offering an opportunity for a 'fresh start' and buy in from stakeholders alike.

> "They never treat us like we're idiots, which is how we were treated when we said anything in mainstream" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "Both parents and young people felt that their views were taken seriously." (Brede et al., 2017)

> "He was making some progress educationally and was also benefiting from specific therapeutic interventions. His mother also felt supported in this environment." (Pirrie et al., 2011)

This view is reinforced that staff aim to take a non-judgemental approach to working with children, regardless of previous experiences of behaviours that challenge.

> "This is where he can be himself really, he's finally found somewhere that he can finally be who he is, and not get judged. We just accept it" (Brede et al., 2017)

SEND education settings can often take a more flexible approach to the inclusion and transition of students to the school following a permanent or fixed term exclusion (Sellman, 2013). As such, there may be differences in expectations on the students to immediately adapt to the new environment and conform to school systems and standard which may offer a more bespoke and less time-pressured approach.

> "For many students, the transition process appeared to be quite a gentle process, in which the time and days a week the student spent in school gradually increased" (Brede et al., 2017)

It was also identified that having a systemic buy-in to a new placement, which involved a coordinated approach to supporting the child back into education, was experienced as relating to more successful outcomes. This included situations where professionals were involved in their long term care, and could support in holding their stories and context across multiple transitions.

> "The transition between placements was made easier for the young person by the fact that familiar people came into their lives a second time, in a different role, thus providing some sense of continuity." (Pirrie et al., 2011)

2.8.1.2 Subtheme: Prioritising the student/staff relationship & taking a person-centred approach

Six of the eight studies also focused on stakeholders' reflections on how SEND settings prioritise the importance of developing the working relationship between students and staff. This ethos fosters an approach which centres the child at the centre of any decisions around their care and support, offering a truly person-centred approach to their education and emotional wellbeing.

> "students become re-engaged with school when school staff take the time to get to know their students – their capabilities and potential disabilities – and develop strong relationships with them." (Brede et al., 2017)

> "A lot of work goes into engaging parents and securing their co-operation" (Brede et al., 2017)

> “School was the only place in their educational history where they were listened to, encouraged to express their feelings, supported and cared for.” (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

Through this approach, staff aim to facilitate an environment conducive to building a sense of safety, which can be experienced as restorative following potentially challenging and traumatic experiences within previous school settings.

> “one of the participants in this study valued the calm nature of a member of staff, suggesting that coregulation of emotions was supportive for them” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024).

> “the students felt reassured that they were trusted by staff, which made it easier to seek help when they need it” (Brede et al., 2017)

> “the view that pupils with SEMH special needs need to feel secure and protected in order to have faith in those who teach them” (Willis et al., 2021)

This sense of safety could assist students in recognising their own needs in times of crisis and thus, support their emotional regulation with a trusted adult.

> “there has been times when things have bothered him, and rather than sort of just blowing up about it he’s managed to speak to [staff member] and calm himself down” (Brede et al., 2017)

> “one participant shared why deep breathing supported them to feel calmer, a member of staff joined in with the conversation and it was evident that both the staff member and participant had a good understanding of why this strategy was specifically useful for them.” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

Building a sustaining and positive relationship with students can often be challenging, as many of the students may be hypervigilant or wary of putting their trust in staff who represent a system that possibly caused institutional harm in the past.

> "getting him used to new staff, some he'll accept straightaway, some it might take a bit longer, some he'll not accept at the minute. We've got to go along, with what he wants really" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "the way in which the teachers responded would impact upon the relationships that were developed" (Caslin, 2011)

2.8.2 Theme 2: Behaviour Management: ensuring safety vs enacting harm

Four of the nine studies made reference to student, staff and parent experiences of behaviour management and its consequences, particularly surrounding restrictive physical interventions (RPI).

2.8.2.1 **Subtheme: Normalisation of restraint in SEN**

Four studies explored the narrative that physical interventions are a regular and commonplace aspect of behaviour management practice within SEND schools (Brede et al., 2017; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Sellman, 2009; Willis et al., 2021).

> "most commonly discussed by the students was physical restraint, which was regarded as an inseparable issue from the behaviour management policy." (Sellman, 2009)

Both Willis et al., (2021) and Sellman, (2009) explored students voice on what they perceived as the necessity of RPI's within SEND environments.

> "Even though the children in the present study have varied and complex SEND, they appear sensitive to the need for RPIs under certain circumstances, such as the potential for the child's behavior to harm others." (Willis et al., 2021)

> "If it wasn't people restraining, the school wouldn't be here…It'd be smashed up and everything, there'd be people in hospital." (Sellman, 2009)

Certain practices risk becoming commonplace and may threaten less systemic oversight and accountability, which lead to possibly unsafe and inappropriate use of such practices. This is a concern voiced by parents and students alike;

> "Parents also voiced serious concerns about the amount of physical restraint used with their child, which they felt had detrimental consequences on their children's mental health." (Brede et al., 2017)

> "some teachers were inappropriate with their use of restraints… sometimes they go overboard… I was being restrained and [staff] were shouting at me, screaming at me and started tightening up the restraint even when I was shouting cos I was hurting." (Sellman, 2009)

> "some teachers used antagonistic language and there was far greater need for a consistent approach to volatile incidents that used the language of de-escalation." (Sellman, 2009)

> "restraint was used too readily and there was not always an extra member of staff there to oversee any intervention when there should have been." (Sellman, 2009)

Additionally, it was felt that the threshold which would require the use of physical interventions for behaviour should be relatively high and only in situations that may require action to prevent harm being caused.

> "participants seemed to have a straightforward view of physical restraint: that it should be used to keep people safe," (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

> "Depends . . . If I, if like-, I'm trying to fight someone or something, yeah it's helping, but if it's like something silly like swearing at someone then . . ." (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

However, it should be recognised that there was some acknowledgement that staff members were not homogenous in their use of restrictive practice interventions, but concerns were raised when there was a reliance on physical interventions as a primary method of behaviour management by certain staff members.

> "I think a lot of teachers prefer not to use physical intervention, but I think there's some of them that really can't cope without…" (Sellman, 2009)

> "Some teachers were much more dependent on the use of restraint than others as a management strategy, suggesting that others were also much more successful in managing risk and employing de-escalation strategies so that restraint was only used as a last resort." (Sellman, 2009)

Instead, students felt that there should be an emphasis on a proactive approach to behaviour management, aiming to minimise the presence of immediate environmental triggers and support with emotional regulation strategies in the immediate aftermath of emotional dysregulation.

> “Having a good, shared understanding of alternative strategies to use in place of physical restraint, or to prevent escalation of behaviours and emotions may lead to a more collaborative and positive response.” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

> “participant identified that it would have been helpful if the staff had assisted him when he had his hand up, before he had become frustrated and things escalated.” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

2.8.2.2 Subtheme: Cost of restrictive physical interventions & importance of repair

Three studies (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Sellman, 2009; Willis et al., 2021) explored the direct and indirect consequences of restrictive physical interventions within SEND education settings.

Student reflections on the emotional response to being held in a restrictive hold illustrates a variety of challenging emotions associated with these events.

> “participants could explain why they had a negative experience of physical restraint, including an escalation of emotions such as stress, and physical harm.” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

> “when someone’s taking you back [holding you] they’re ending your personal bubble and I- . . . I don’t like that”. (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

> “All participants used anger to express how they believed pupils would feel about the adults holding them and, without prompting, how they themselves would feel in the same situation,” (Willis et al., 2021)

> “cause it [physical restraint] er, stresses me out more.” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

Such feelings can be associated with the loss of control, isolation and social humiliation that can be experienced by students during physical interventions.

> "participants reported that they took pleasure from seeing RPIs, finding these events exciting; even expressing enjoyment at the lack of dignity their classmates experience when being held and using the RPI as a reason to tease or verbally bully their classmates." (Willis et al., 2021)

> "feeling negativity towards teachers because for him, RPIs lead to a sense of isolation from one's peers." (Willis et al., 2021)

Additionally, there was found to be further indirect consequences of restrictive practices, both on the quality of education and in their emotional response, on students bearing witness to this.

> "I would feel a bit sorry for the teacher because she's come here to teach and not be hit. If a member of staff's been hurt really bad [by a pupil], it would change how you feel about them and care about them [the teacher] more." (Willis et al., 2021)

> "the time spent by teachers engaging in RPIs would have a negative impact on their education." (Willis et al., 2021)

> "It would change your learning because every 5 min there's someone being restrained and taken out of the class." (Willis et al., 2021)

A number of students reflected on the negative relational consequences of being subject to physical interventions by staff members.

> “strong negative emotional responses reflected children’s reporting of physical and emotional discomfort while being held, which then negatively impacted on their feelings about the teacher using the restraint.” (Willis et al., 2021)

> “all three participants who spoke about this had negative feelings towards members of staff during the restraint itself” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

However, it was shared that negative feelings associated with the physical intervention can dissipate after the intervention has finished and the emotional de-escalation has taken place. It was found across all three studies, that the pre-existing relationship between the staff and the student is directly correlated with whether the relationship remains.

> “there may be some protective factors to how physical restraint is carried out in terms of pupils maintaining positive and trusting relationships with staff members both before and after physical restraint.” (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

> “The students’ key point was that it does not matter what ‘tool’ (their word) a teacher has at their disposal (reward, sanction, restraint), if the relationship is poor this tool can be misused.” (Sellman, 2009)

> “children who expressed trust in the positive intentions of teaching staff in their decision to implement an RPI, as well as recognizing the need for RPIs to keep children and their peers safe, also tended to report a more short-term negative impact of RPIs, and to view the impact of RPIs on the teacher-child relationship more positively.” (Willis et al., 2021)

This is something that students felt was not consistently offered:

"they felt there was inconsistent opportunity to reflect post-incident and repair and restore potentially damaged relationships." (Sellman, 2009)

"pupils thought that there were inconsistent opportunities to repair staff-pupil relationships that had been impacted negatively by restraint." (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

2.8.3 Theme 3: Alternative provision to success

A final theme that emerged in eight of the nine studies was around the ethos towards education and wellbeing of the students attending SEND schools, and how this often contrasted the experiences held within mainstream education settings.

"Other schools, particularly special schools, tended to adopt a more individualised approach, getting to know individual pupils and taking action to meet their needs, managing transitions, monitoring mental health problems, grouping according to social needs and holding regular staff meetings to discuss different perspectives." (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

2.8.3.1 **Subtheme: Virtue of specialist provision**

There was a recognition from some stakeholders, parents and students, that mainstream education was not a suitable setting for their needs and a more specialist provision would better meet their needs.

"I needed lots of help, educational help because I was falling behind. I needed my special help, lots of help" (Brede et al., 2017)

"one has to seriously question whether a mainstream environment could ever offer the level of care and support needed to help these pupils overcome their long-standing

emotional problems and provide appropriately structured educational opportunities." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

"accommodations made by Hub staff, including the individual classrooms, and their exceedingly flexible approach to children's education are unlikely to be matched by regular, mainstream schools," (Brede et al., 2017)

It is suggested that one possible reason that SEND schools appear as better equipped to meet the specific need of children with SEN needs is due to the ongoing specialist training staff receive to promote a more psychologically informed view on behaviour and needs, as well as schools' access to health and care specialists.

"they are more trained in dealing with disability kids." (Brede et al., 2017)

"special schools tended to hire teachers who are experienced in SEN, trained all staff in autism and had access to speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other therapies" (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

"Having a good, shared understanding of alternative strategies to use in place of physical restraint, or to prevent escalation of behaviours and emotions may lead to a more collaborative and positive response." (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

"Parents noted the staff's ability to handle critical situations much better and 'a lot calmer' than the staff in students' previous placements." (Brede et al., 2017)

"[Occupational Therapist] is always willing to go the extra mile and to provide training, and anything else she can do and will do things that will benefit the whole, because she knows that a lot of our boys have got sensory/physical difficulties as well." (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

This facilitates an environment in which students feel safe to be themselves and express themselves without fear of misunderstanding and negative consequences, thus allowing them to thrive in an environment of acceptance and compassion. This was a theme commonly explored in Brede et al., (2017), where parents particularly shared their experiences of students being welcomed in a supportive environment within SEND specialist provisions.

> "gave them a secure space to 'be themselves' [teacher], and helped to manage children's sensory differences." (Brede et al., 2017)

> "In his last school they thought that [child] was just being picky, they just didn't get him, they didn't understand it was his anxieties that were causing the behaviour, whereas they do here" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "My son needs somebody to absolutely understand what [child] is about, what affects [child], what makes [child] anxious, what takes him up the scale, how to bring him down, and I was so impressed" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "not being judged for their behaviour in [school] was like a 'safety blanket' for students, which they felt had a positive impact on their mental health." (Brede et al., 2017)

Being in a specialist provision may mean that a more person-centred and bespoke package of care can be put together so that reasonable adjustments can be offered. One of the predominant triggers for students presenting with acute hypersensitivities to their sensory world is the environment in which they operate. It should be highlighted that that there will be some variance in a school's abilities to offer structural or significant environmental changes due to financial constraints, as well as factors such as how recently the school was opened.

> "Having an individual room helps reduce that anxiety because it's a place they're supposed to feel secure and safe, because it's theirs" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "Staff reported making extensive efforts to accommodate children's individual needs and preferences, which included making substantial adjustments to the physical environment ('removing anything that could potentially tip them over the edge')" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "in special schools there were also a number of additional considerations, e.g. neutral classrooms to prevent sensory overload, arranging seating to encourage social interactions, visually supported learning and resources/adaptive equipment for fine motor skill development." (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

> "they've now put things in place for him like stickers, time out, Golden Time, he no longer sits in the classroom, because he can't, unless he wants to . . . he doesn't sit in the dining hall, he has his lunch downstairs with a friend" (Broomhead, 2013)

> "students particularly welcomed the structure, regularity and consistency the provision brought to their lives." (Sellman, 2009)

> "A big focus for us is the environment . . . so the classrooms are small; they have spaces where the students can work independently but spaces where they can work collaboratively as a group…. Display is minimised, but it's kept very focused because we try to minimise the amount of visual stimulus in the room that could distract or upset the students." (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

One dominant theme that came up regarding environmental and structural differences between SEND specialist provisions and mainstream schools was around the number of pupils in classrooms. A limited class size may be conducive to more individual support and opportunities for staff to support with emotional regulation. By having a smaller population of

students, it allows a deeper level of understanding of each student's individual context and needs, and thus allows staff to support them in a person-centred manner.

> "they valued the opportunity to be in smaller classes, in some cases receiving one-to-one attention, the ongoing support after school hours and being in a relaxed environment where they were not afraid to ask questions." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

> "strategies participants identified as helpful were things they could make use of in school, some with the support of an adult" (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024)

> "the more favourable staff–student ratios and activities in place offered some order in their lives, conceding that otherwise life would be less interesting and perhaps less fun also." (Sellman, 2009)

> "the most effective aspect of the education at [school] was being placed in small classes, the availability of time and attention from teachers and other care staff, the teaching methods and the availability of constant support even after the school time." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

2.8.3.2 Subtheme: Re-prioritising holistic growth over academic attainment

Three studies offered stakeholder viewpoints around the balance between supporting students with academic attainment and learning, versus offering a holistic approach to supporting a student's emotional development and wellbeing. There was a recognition that meeting a student's most basic needs of safety and security within the school environment must be prioritised, otherwise they would not be able to be able to access learning at any level.

> “They’ve been kind of just working on getting his anxiety levels down rather than the academic side. If they’d pushed the academic too soon I don’t think he’d have come to school” (Brede et al., 2017)

> “parents reported prioritising non-academic skills (emotional resilience, life skills) – the so-called ‘hidden curriculum’ – over academic progress.” (Brede et al., 2017)

> “helped them to direct their energies into things where they were able to feel a sense of achievement and success. This seemed to help former students to enhance their self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence.” (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

> “we’re not educating them but we’re dealing with their emotional well-being and until we get that right we’re not going to get learning to take place.” (Brede et al., 2017)

> “for us the challenge is to stabilise that emotional well-being and reduce that anxiety for them to be able to access learning” (Brede et al., 2017)

Priority, it seems, was given to understand and support with child’s emotional and mental health context when supporting them within the school, paying particular attention to the student’s previous experiences and relationship with education.

> “Instead, they highlighted the need to build children’s emotional resilience so that they could access learning, suggesting that it takes time to ‘repair the damage’ of their previous experience and ‘build up the foundations’ for learning.” (Brede et al., 2017)

> “We have a policy that if a child refuses to do something, you have to ask yourself all the different reasons it could be why he’s refusing to do that. Is it because he’s cross with you? Is it because he had an argument with his mum? Is it because he hasn’t

understood? Is it because he can't cope with that change? So all the time the teachers are trying to think, where is this coming from?" (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

"Staff explained that their primary goal was 'to make them feel less anxious." (Brede et al., 2017)

"We have things like stress thermometers in classrooms, which is a visual display . . . the girls come in in the morning and put their name as to where they're kind of feeling emotionally and then if it's obviously a red or an orange then we probably need to deal with that straight away, but that's a great way of flagging to us, without having to have a conversation about it." (Cook & Ogden, 2022)

It was suggested that a creative alternative approach to education, offering more extra-curricular, vocational and experiential activities was taken, with the aim of building students' sense of self, esteem and enjoyment in special school.

"a different type of learning to the academic [learning] he would be getting in mainstream – it's social, it's daily living skills as well as academic" (Brede et al., 2017)

"Most of the former pupils referred to the variety and quality of social activities provided by the school. This may have helped many to direct their negative energies into something extracurricular such as sport, hiking, canoeing, football, bowling, horticulture and art therapy." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

"many former pupils referred to the recreational and leisure activities organized by the staff that helped them to be motivated and enjoy the school as a whole." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

However, this approach may come at a slight cost to academic attainment, as reflected by parents and former students. This causes some concern around the students future prospects and ability to integrate into the wider world which may be less supportive and accepting of difference.

> "There is a compromise because the kind of social and environmental support that we've given him, which was a hundred percent necessary, now comes at the expense of that teaching expertise," (Brede et al., 2017)

> "we just needed him socially to be able to cope with other people, to cope with society" (Brede et al., 2017)

> "these pupils require support in preparing them to leave school and for some time thereafter, and schools need to develop good relations with potential employers and further education colleges. All of this may help to minimize this problem and ensure that the former pupils of EBD schools become fully included into society when they leave the school." (Polat & Farrell, 2002)

2.9 Evaluation and Conclusions of the Systematic Literature Review

This review aimed to illuminate various facets of UK SEND education that staff, students and parents collectively and individually experience as they navigate supporting CYP people with SEND. Whilst attempts were made to capture the subjective views from the enactment of inclusion, exclusion and behaviour management policies across all stakeholders in this systematic review, there remains key gaps in the capturing of this in full, and therefore some caution should be taken when interpreting the findings.

This review highlighted that one of the core facets of shared experiences across stakeholders was the prioritisation of building trust and rapport between families and the schools, thus enacting relational inclusion to challenge historical institutional harm in previous experiences. Students with SEN needs have been more disproportionately affected by school exclusion than students without SEN needs (Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2018). Whilst some of the literature explored frustrations around the stigma of exclusion and the delays in finding a suitable placement, there was little exploration on the sense-making and experiences of families during the enactment of being given a fixed-term or permanent exclusion, or the emotional repercussions of what would have been an extremely challenging process. Additionally, reflections on the power differential between the school systems and families would be of particular importance. It is key that the role of clinical psychology aims to support the various stakeholders in navigating the challenges posed in their journey into and out of specialist education, in addition to the aforementioned challenges that present in attempting to engage and support children to access and thrive in education.

The negative stigma associated with attending SEND settings as the review explores, speaks to a wider societal stereotype around people with learning disabilities and non-neuronormative presentations. This raises questions on whether segregation of education settings is perpetuating historically problematic practices surrounding isolation of people with learning disabilities and other needs (Jarrett & Tilley, 2022; Wise, 2024). It is therefore important that clinicians consider the various potential systemic harms faced by SEND populations when formulating and supporting their needs.

Behaviour management is a key facet of SEND education as the varying needs of the students, and even difficulties in communication can often result in expression of needs and emotions through actions and present themselves as behaviours that challenge (McKenzie et

al., 2005). As such, schools have policies surrounding the management of behaviours, including staff-wide training and specific behavioural support roles, in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students and staff alike. The Department of Education's guidance (2013) surrounding RPIs frame it as a necessary practice for safety, however the real-world application of these measures, which are designed for safety, can paradoxically lead to acts of institutional harm. This review found similarities in themes around the normalisation of using physical interventions in response to all manners of behaviour, rather than as a reactive approach to minimise risk.

Sellman (2009) and Hodgkiss & Harding (2024) both make recommendations for schools to ensure that repair sessions are held between students and staff to make sense of the physical intervention experience for both parties, and to mediate any ruptures in the relationship at that instance to preclude any further longer-term consequences.

This synthesis agrees that focusing on repairing and rebuilding the student/staff relationship following a physical intervention should be prioritised as good practice to allow both parties to hold a space to share the impact the intervention had for them. This would enable further shared understanding of what environmental antecedent triggers & context occurred so that efforts can be made to make reasonable adjustments moving forward to best facilitate academic success and, where possible, minimise the likelihood of the occurrence of sensory triggers.

A final key theme that was constructed through this review was around experiences of holistic care and an ethos of prioritising emotional wellbeing and mental health within SEND schools. This was identified as a key foundation to re-engaging students in education, within an environment that was best suited to meet the various social, emotional and sensory needs, thus enabling them to thrive as opposed to simply survive within school.

Whilst literature investigating key stakeholder experiences within SEND education is growing, particularly within Educational Psychology fields (Patrick et al., 2011), there remains a limitation on the number of studies exploring stakeholder experiences of practices within SEND schools, particularly across SEND staff populations. Only one of the selected studies (Cook & Ogden, 2022) specifically explored staff experiences within SEND education, however, this focused very much more on the procedural challenges faced within schools, and there is very little discussion surrounding the personal experiences of supporting SEND student needs and wellbeing, and how this responsibility and challenges subsequently impacted staff wellbeing.

2.10 The Rationale for the Empirical Study

The experiences, views and wellbeing of SEND school staff in relation to the consequences of the enactment of practices within SEND settings remains limited and often only viewed in the scope of impact on emotional wellbeing & burnout exclusively.

There is evidence that the impact of trauma within the workplace holds numerous physical and psychological repercussions on professionals (Brooks et al., 2019). Much of this research focuses on the fear and anger responses to these traumatic events (Williams, 1993). By taking an approach which centres the concept of 'moral injury' through which subjective experiences are explored, it is felt that this will offer a novel and important lens to conceptualise the challenges faced by staff and the impact it may hold.

The emotional burden of teaching, as well as other roles within a school, can pose a significant drain on the individual staff member's emotional resources, in addition to their other teaching & pastoral responsibilities. There is evidence of education staff facing burnout, compassion fatigue and increased rates of job attrition due to situations that impact on staff

wellbeing (McCallum, 2021). This compounds existing issues in the recruitment and retention of teaching staff within England (House of Commons, Education Committee, 2017) and will have broader societal and financial implications which will, in turn, affect the wellbeing and outcomes of CYP.

There is limited research on the potential role that moral injury and entrapment play within SEND education within the United Kingdom. SEND teaching and educational support staff are subject to established rigours of working within education, high levels of scrutiny, workload and demands. This is compounded by supporting a population group with additional complex needs, often requiring a higher level of 1:1 support, thus demanding higher levels of resources.

In the present empirical study, the researcher sought to address the role of moral practice and values, and the direct consequences of transgressions of such values. The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences and views of SEND school staff who have encountered challenging or traumatic experiences through their work. This would add to the wider understanding on the role of moral injury on staff wellbeing and how it contributes to broader concepts such as burnout, compassion fatigue and may contribute to higher rates of job attrition.

To investigate the research questions, it is important to explore an in-depth examination of staff experiences at an individual level to determine the presence and impact that being in situations or making decisions where they must act against their moral values may have on staff members within SEND educational settings. As such, the intention has been to proceed with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative methodology which is interested in understanding how people make sense of situations and self (Smith et al., 2009) and therefore, IPA is suitable in investigating how education staff make sense of their

experiences and the impact of potential instances of moral injury within the workplace.

Whilst this approach may not specifically aim to capture the range of factors leading to wider systemic issues that contribute to the concepts of moral injury and entrapment, it can instead bring to light how these wider issues affect individual experiences and their subjective understanding of such factors.

It is therefore hoped that through understanding this further, it will build on the expanding body of literature on staff wellbeing within SEND schools and lead to more supportive and ethically aligned workplaces, policy development, and further development of more specific wellbeing practices which encapsulate the potential negative impact on moral values, thus leading to better outcomes, improved wellbeing, and reduced role attrition within this field. As a result, a well-supported staff population will also create a secondary impact on their ability to support students, thus enabling better emotional wellbeing and education outcomes for CYP.

2.11 Aims of the Research and Research Question

The aim of the study is to investigate the impact of the phenomenon of moral injury within SEND school staff.

1. How do school staff experience moral injury within SEND education settings?

2. How do staff experience the systemic pressures present in situations where actions, or being party to incidents, contravene their moral values?

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, a description of the methodological and philosophical underpinning of this research will be outlined, with rationales given for the use of methodology, process and deviation from norm accounted for to allow the reader to understand how the research unfolded.

To investigate the research questions, it is important to explore an in-depth examination of staff experiences at an individual level to determine the presence and impact that being in situations or making decisions where they must act against their moral values may have on staff members within SEND educational settings. There remains a relative dearth of phenomenological research looking at education staff wellbeing (Greenwood, 2020), particularly around the impact on moral values in the work.

3.2 Study Design

3.2.1 Qualitative Approach

The aim in conducting phenomenological research was to understand what it was like for members of staff in SEND education settings when faced with scenarios or dilemmas which were challenging, and to present what that difficulty was like in a manner which preserved the phenomenological likeness and authenticity for the reader. As such, qualitative approaches to research offer methodologies that allow for the capturing of data which was rich in information pertaining to their thoughts, views and affect during, and subsequent to these experiences.

3.2.2 Considerations of Alternative Methodologies

Other qualitative methodologies were considered when deciding what approach would best answer the research question and study aims, particularly those that focused on an individual's lived experience (Table 9).

Table 9: Alternative Methodologies considered

Methodology	Summary and rationale for non-inclusion
Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Thematic Analysis was considered as it focuses on identifying and analysing patterns of meaning within qualitative data, usually through the form of semi-structured interviews. This methodology would have 'given voice' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to participant's experiences and illustrated key themes around the phenomenon of working in SEND education settings in ways which align or breach with a person's held moral values. However, as the focus of this methodology aligns more with the organising and summarising of patterns across the collective, rather than the subjective experiences of individuals which can then be analysed in summary, it was felt that Thematic Analysis may not be best suited to the research question.
Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999)	Grounded Theory was also considered as its approach aims to systematically collect information throughout the research process with the aim to generate new theories. This may have been of use as the concepts surrounding moral values and injury within SEND education in the UK has not been fully understood or conceptualised, thus would have allowed an understanding to have been posited on how this concept exists within the structures and realities of the environmental systems of SEN education. However, it was felt that before seeking to

investigate the 'why, the priority instead should begin with understanding the 'how' and 'what' through the subjective and individual experiences of staff within SEND education. Therefore, it was felt that Grounded Theory may be a useful methodology to explore in the future.

3.2.3 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022) is a methodological approach to understand an individual's story, how they have made sense out of their experiences and how these experiences echo or differ from wider group experiential themes. IPA holds a particular emphasis on meaning-making and the subjective experiences of individuals which aligns well with the research question looking at moral values in relation to their work.

The process of conducting a study using IPA methodology involves approaching the data collected systematically, focusing on a detailed analysis of personal experiences in a case-by-case basis, before then forming broader group themes.

IPA's theoretical and philosophical foundations stem from phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to exploring the understanding of the human lived experience. First conceptualised by Emund Husserl (Husserl, 1983), phenomenology concerns itself with what it means to be human, including what we hold important and how we, as humans, can make sense of our experiences. There is acknowledgement that whilst IPA aims to get as close as possible to understanding the personal experiences and world of the participants, this will always occur through the lens of the researcher who is an active agent in the idiographic analysis, therefore any interpretations will

be influenced by the researchers' own experiences. This is known as double hermeneutics (Montague et al., 2020). In line with a critical realist ontology, IPA does not aim to discover a single objective reality but instead aims to outline one of the many possible interpretations of an experience (Smith et al., 2022).

As a consequence, IPA has been criticised in its use in psychological research (Smith et al., 2022) due to its lack of rigour, as well as the time and labour-intensive approach, resulting in the use of a smaller sample of participants. Despite this, IPA was considered an appropriate methodology to examine the lived experience of moral injury within staff who work within SEND educational settings.

3.2.4 Reflexivity

Due to the double hermeneutic nature of adopting an IPA methodology approach, adopting a reflexive stance throughout the research process is especially important in order to understand how the researcher's understanding of their own positionality may influence the decision making, understanding and interpretations of the data. As such, I was highly aware of my position as a former staff member in SEND education in multiple roles and contexts.

To address these biases, several steps were taken to ensure that the analysis and interpretation of the data remained grounded in the interview data. Research supervision was utilised, as well as discussions with expert by experience consultants who were involved in the design of the study to review the exploratory notes, Personal Experiential Themes (PETS), and how these translated into participant Group Experiential Themes (GETS). Additionally, advanced methods workshops focusing on conducting research using IPA methodology was attended alongside peers and this space was used to both explore the practicalities of conducting this research rigorously, and to seek on feedback on analysis which was then reflected on and supported further cultivating the experiential themes.

Additionally, throughout the research journey, a reflective diary (Appendix N) was utilised to record any initial reflections and curiosities that emerged during the process of analysis. This reflective diary was reviewed repeatedly throughout the interpretation phase to see what thoughts and feelings were brought up recurringly and how this risked influencing the process.

3.2.5 Involvement of Experts by Experience

This research benefited from consultation with two experts by experience, both of whom have lived experiences as employees within a number of SEND education settings, in addition to current roles as a SEN provision manager within a mainstream setting, and a SENCo in an SEMH setting respectively. This context meant that they were uniquely situated to reflect on their experiences within SEND systems to support the shaping of research through reviewing of the semi-structured interview schedule, and discussions around findings in order to challenge any biases the researcher presented. The EbE's also supported the researcher in their understanding of historical and contemporary issues facing SEND education in the UK, including perspectives of the recently announced SEND reform White Paper.

Additionally, their experiences across a number of roles within education (teachers, acting SENCo, safeguarding lead, provision manager) meant that they supported the researcher in developing a greater understanding of issues currently facing the community of staff within SEND education and exploring ways to navigate possible barriers in engagement in the study. As a result of their involvement as experts by experience, both were not eligible for taking part in the study as participants, however, they would be eligible for compensation for their contributions to the research through vouchers in the same manner as participants.

3.3 Ethics

The research project was granted ethical approval by the UH Ethics Committee on 23rd May 2025 (Appendix B). An amendment was submitted on 16th June 2025 to amend the process regarding data collection and storage, which was approved on 17th June 2025 (Appendix C). One further amendment was submitted to amend the recruitment process to allow direct contact between the researcher and SEND schools to promote the study, and to expand the area of recruitment to include SEND schools across whole of England, which was accepted on 16th September 2025 (Appendix D).

3.4 Participants

3.4.1 Recruitment

As this research aimed to explore SEND school staff's experiences of moral injury, it was important to recruit a sample of participants across the range of occupations within the school environment. Consequently, participants were not only limited to teaching staff but was open to staff across the school system, including non-teaching or student facing roles such as administration, site management, kitchen staff etc. whose experiences of witnessing practice may also be of value.

Participant recruitment for this research utilised convenience sampling, primarily through word of mouth and other forms of advertising outside the educational systems. The process of recruiting participants was predominantly via poster advertisement (Appendix E) through social media, and other informal networks. These networks included sharing the poster via the researchers professional LinkedIn page, as well as dissemination via relevant

SEND professional network Facebook groups. Sharing the advert via Facebook posts was done using the anonymous poster feature in order to preserve the privacy of the researcher.

Following an ethics amendment in September 2025, emails were initially sent to SEND schools in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire (Appendix F) informing them of the research and asking that the poster be shared to staff or put up on any staff notice boards. The rationale for these areas being prioritised was due to geographical proximity to the research base in order to allow for the opportunity for face-to-face interviews. The intent was for further emails to be sent to SEND schools in other areas of the country, including ones in geographically different to those previously contacted (such as urban cities, more rural areas, different socio-economic profiles, etc.), however this did not occur due to an increase in interest in participation.

The advert included a QR code which directed potential participants to a Qualtrics survey to complete to register their interest in taking part in the study. On this survey was a full participant information sheet (Appendix G) which outlined the rationale of the study and what participation in the study would involve. Additionally, details regarding the storing and use of personal information was declared at this stage. Upon reviewing the participant information page, potential participants were then asked to complete the survey capturing personal information such as job role, age range, ethnicity and a declaration that they currently work, or have previously worked within the last 6 months, at a Special Educational Needs setting in England. Finally, potential participants were asked to sign to confirm that they were happy to be contacted by the research team.

3.4.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The area of study was limited to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) education settings. These settings include the following classifications: Social Emotional and

Mental Health (SEMH) Schools, Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD), Severe Learning Disability (SLD), Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD). Staff working within SEND provisions within mainstream schools were excluded for this research.

Due to the aim of homogeneity of participants in the sample, all participants were required to be aged 18+, currently employed, or have been employed within the last 6 months, be school staff within primary or secondary SEND schools in England and that they were not subject to any safeguarding investigation or disciplinary proceedings. Additionally, participants should be English speaking.

3.4.3 Participant Demographics

Table 10: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Role	Ethnicity	Gender	Age Range	Region
Maple	Teacher, Careers Lead, Head of Year	White British	Male	35-44	Southeast England
Oak	Head Teacher	White British	Male	35-44	Southeast England
Willow	SENCo	White British	Female	35-44	Southeast England
Juniper	Teaching Assistant	Black British	Female	25-34	West Midlands
Magnolia	Supply Teaching Assistant	White British	Female	25-34	West Midlands
Elm	Teacher & Careers Lead	White British	Female	35-44	Greater London

3.5 Interviews

Following completion of the Qualtrics survey, potential participants were contacted by the researcher via email to introduce themselves and to organise the interview. Participants were offered the choice of the interview taking place virtually via Microsoft Teams, or in person at either The University of Hertfordshire or at a location of their choosing.

Given the nature of the interview topics, there may be aspects of discussing or critiquing aspects of the schools in which the participants are currently or formerly employed. As such, the process and procedure around anonymisation of the interview, confidentiality and the storage of personal information and data collected during the interview were outlined at the start of the interview. Additionally, participants were informed that there should refrain from sharing of any student or staff's full names during the interview for confidentiality purposes. Participants were then asked again to verbally consent to being interviewed and that they were happy with the audio of the interview be recorded for data collection purposes.

Prior to the start of the interview, participants were reminded of what would be involved from them in taking part in the interview, including the risks and benefits of taking part in the research. Participants were informed that the interview session should not be considered as a form of therapeutic intervention and instead an opportunity to share their experience for research purposes.

Although there was the belief that there would be a low risk of harm occurring to participants during the study, participants were informed of their right to stop the interview at any point should they experience any harm, discomfort or upset and not wish to continue during the brief and debrief during the interview process.

Additionally, participants were informed and that they had the right to withdraw participation and their data without any need to provide a reason within a set period of one month from the date of their interview. Following this period, the analysis of their data would commence.

Following the completion of the interview, participants were provided with a debrief form (Appendix I) which included signposting information to support services that participants may access should they experience any discomfort or upset following the interview. Participants were also reminded that they would be contacted again by the researcher to organise their voucher in compensation of their involvement in the research.

All anonymised data, including transcripts will be held for up to 5 years after the completion of the study, in line with the University of Hertfordshire policy on data collection and storage. Following this, should the data be required to be kept beyond this, it shall be transferred to the OneDrive system of the principal supervisor who will then be responsible for destroying the data securely.

3.5.1 Semi-Structured Interview Approach

IPA research aims to capture detailed accounts of a person's lived experiences. To do this, semi structured interviews were adopted as a data collection method to allow the researcher and participants to engage in a conversation with a clear focus, whilst allowing the opportunity for the conversation to be shaped by the participants interpretations and themes.

The use of semi structured interviews is a common method for data collection in qualitative studies that utilise IPA methodology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Whilst steps were taken to ensure questions involved in this semi-structured interview remained open-ended and broad enough to explore and capture detail on participants' lived experiences, it is

acknowledged that the questions posed are predetermined and influenced by the researcher's own positionality and biases of the phenomenon which may shape staff's responses away from other areas they may have otherwise guided the conversation towards. Discussions involving experts by experience (EbE) in the formation of a finalised interview schedule was conducted to mediate this effect.

The semi-structured interview schedule used in this research can be found in Appendix H. This interview schedule reflects the funnelling technique posed by Smith (Smith et al., 2009) whereby initial questions gather a broader account of participant's experience which is followed by questions aiming to elicit salient details. Additionally, a final question aimed to give opportunity for participants to raise any other points they think relevant that has not been explicitly addressed during the interview.

3.6 Data Analysis

For this research, analysis was conducted by following an established IPA analysis process as explored in Smith et al. (2022). This is not intended as a prescriptive process of analysis and does not advise specifically on what might be identified and remarked on but instead emphasises that interpretations of the interviews should be through attending to the participant's voice and content.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Interviews conducted virtually were recorded and initially transcribed via Microsoft Team's inbuilt system. Interviews that took place in person were recorded using an Olympus DS-2600 dictaphone provided by the University of Hertfordshire (UH). These recordings were then stored on the primary investigator's University of Hertfordshire OneDrive system which is

encrypted. The data will be stored until the student researcher has been awarded their degree, upon which it will then be destroyed from the researchers UH OneDrive. All anonymised data, including transcripts, will be held for up to 5 years after the end of the study, in line with the University of Hertfordshire policy. After this time, a member of the research team, such as the primary supervisor, will be responsible for securely destroying the data.

Once the month-long withdrawal period had expired without request from the participant, transcription of face-to-face interviews were completed and transcripts from all interviews were reviewed whilst re-listening to the interview recordings to ensure accuracy of the transcripts and immersion with the data to ensure that the participant's voice is at the centre of the analysis. No participants interviewed for this research requested that their data be withdrawn.

Table 11 highlights the processes followed for the analysis of the research, adapted from the update framework suggested by Smith et al., (2022).

Table 11: Outline of IPA Analysis stages

Analysis Stage	Brief summary of actions taken
Stage One: Grounding in the participant voice	During this initial stage, multiple instances of reading and interpreting the interview transcript was conducted to increase familiarity with the general content. This was done in conjunction with listening to the audio recording of the interview to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of the analysis and to promote active engagement in the analytic process.
Stage Two: Idiographic Analysis	This stage involves initial analysing of the semantic and linguistic content within the participant's stories. By doing

	this, the researcher continues to grow familiar with the transcript and supports noticing initial interpretations and idiosyncrasies around how the participant communicates their lived experiences. Particular notice was given to metaphor, idioms and rhetoric which may indicate sense making (Appendix J).
Stage Three: Constructing Experiential Statements	The researcher then consolidates initial thoughts and formulates any underlying meaning from these experiences into experiential statements. These statement captures both participant's perspectives but also the researcher's own interpretation of meaning making.
Stage Four: Identifying connections between Experiential Statements	The researcher then utilises mapping to identify connections between statements, whilst keeping the scope of the research and the research question in mind.
Stage Five: Developing Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)	The data is then reorganised and clustered based on alignment of statements and given an overarching title. Further sub-themes within each PETs may also be identified (Appendix K).
Stage Six: Process repeated for each other interview	The researcher follows the same steps for each interview, trying to approach each one independently and analyse as unique stories, in order to form independent interpretations without influence from prior analysis.
Stage Seven: Development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)	The final stage of analysis consists of identifying patterns of similarities and differences between the PETs to form GETs which reflects to this group of participant's collective experiences (Appendix L). The organisation of PETs often revealed particular sub-themes that may speak to other specific experiences that fit within the broader GETs (Appendix M).

Chapter Four: Results

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the identified Group Experiential Themes (GETS) and group-level subthemes from the analytic process described in the previous chapter. Table 12 illustrates the GETS and group level subthemes for this study.

Table 12: Outline of GETS and sub-themes of participants' experiences of moral practice

Group Experiential Theme	Group-level sub-themes
The draw of SEND: An environment of nurture and belonging	A journey to SEND through early life experiences & instilled values A community of togetherness & camaraderie Shared stories around neurodivergent identity
The emotional tug of war: Navigating working in a value-driven way in the face of challenges within SEND education	The scarcity of resources and provisions Moral decision making, its consequences, and the lived experience of moral failing and distress The reward and nourishment of successful stories
An institutional straitjacket: Experiences of systemic entrapment	Negotiating external pressures and the gaze of scrutiny Incongruence and friction between holistic care and academic attainment. Power imbalance in questioning leadership and systems when experiencing moral dilemmas.

4.2 Theme 1: The draw of SEND: An environment of nurture and belonging.

This first theme explores participant's early experiences in entering education professions and their route into working within SEND settings specifically. For some, this journey felt almost pre-determined due to early life experiences and aspirations from a young age. For others, this career presented itself as an opportunity through their life and alternative careers, or whilst exploring their own neurodivergent identity and sense of self. In all circumstances, there was a sense of there being some form of pull or draw about SEND which meant that for many, they could not view themselves engaging in similar work within mainstream settings.

4.2.1 A journey to SEND through early life experiences & instilled values

Participants explored the longitudinal nature of how their professional identities as SEND staff members often linked with early life experiences. Oak describes how growing up within residential SEN settings on account of their father's role, led to them feeling, both figuratively and literally, 'at home' within this particular environment and how it has led them to approach situations arising within the school:

> With dad being a headteacher, I've literally grown up on the sites of EBD, then become an SEMH school since I was three (line 120).

> And to me, growing up in this environment … living on the sites of schools and stuff, I've always felt it's so important if you can help someone, you should help someone. And I get an immense sense of satisfaction and pride from doing that because I know that I'm good at it, this might sound cocky, but I know that I'm good. If a child is in crisis and needs help, I know that I can make a difference with them in that moment

and make them feel better (lines 225- 228).

For Willow, their journey into working in education involved the discovery of a true passion for this line of work:

> I started working in a after school club just to make some extra cash. And then I was like, I actually quite like working with kids, this is quite fun. And then decided I wanted to become a primary school teacher (lines 23-26).

> I ended up getting into undergrad, which was a joint honours of educational development and special and inclusive education. And that actually became my favourite thing ever. So special needs then became my love. So I then wanted to only teach in special [schools] (lines 31-34).

It was then further reflected by Willow, that this role and journey have allowed aspects of themselves to emerge, which they can attribute to shared traits and values instilled from family members. These were noted to be core values held in relation to their work:

> I think I didn't realise what a patient person I was. And then I think having the father that I have, who's a very emotional man, I think that that's then made me a very patient, empathetic person. (Lines 43-44).

Meanwhile, Elm reflected that the values they hold were instilled through their religious beliefs and faith, which they aim to draw from in promoting a compassionate lens within their work:

> But yeah, my faith kind of makes me go, do you know what? We're all human. We all make mistakes. We all come into this building every day with X, Y, Z going on…. So, there is that aspect. We're all human beings. We're all doing our best. We're not perfect.

(lines 244-253).

However, it was also noted that for Magnolia, a career in education, particularly SEND, was not something that they ever envisioned for themselves, but similar to Willow, has discovered the virtue of these settings for both students and the staff working at them:

> I never really realised I would be going to specialist schools. So I suppose in one way, if you maybe asked me at the beginning, I probably have been a bit like, I'm not sure about that. But actually, now I've been to them, I think it's actually a lot more eye-opening about the education system, how helpful they are for people. (Lines 22-24).

Further to this, Magnolia's hesitation around considering SEND education may have also been influenced by early life experiences relating to societally held stigmas and generalised lack of awareness or understanding of supporting additional needs or differences in the past:

> I think in terms of like specialist schools now, I think when we were at school, it was sort of wasn't, it was like a taboo, wasn't it? It was a subject that was a bit, you know, if someone had specialist needs, they weren't … viewed sort of outcast in ways, which I think is quite sad. (Lines 40-42).

In summary, participant's early life experiences often influenced their expectations of working within education, through witnessing the opportunity that this work presents to support others, or by having certain assumptions around these environments challenged experientially. For some participants, therefore, working within SEND may have felt like their calling, or that they needed to continue a legacy or make use of values or attributes gained through their early life experiences that intertwines their personal and professional identities.

4.2.2 A community of togetherness & camaraderie

Participants frequently remarked on some of the protective factors of working within SEND education and in particular, the trust and support that was experienced from fellow staff members within this environment. This camaraderie amongst colleagues offered a form of sanctuary whilst managing the shared intense demands of the role, reinforcing the idea of belonging.

> you kind of feel everyone's very supportive of us, of the staff and the students all together. (Maple: Line 249).

It is common within SEND education settings to be present in an environment that can be highly emotive, with staff often facing distressing presentations, verbal abuse and experiencing physical abuse directed towards them. Having a cohort of supportive peers who can empathise with and assist an individual when facing some of these challenges can act as a protective factor.

> Something happened previously and they did say, it's not fair for you to be here. Let's swap you out with someone else, which I think is very nice. As a member of staff though, yeah, they are, you know, they ask if you're okay and things like that and they can say, do you want to go for a break? (Magnolia: Lines 183-184).

Maple offered thoughts around how this environment of peers differs from their experiences in mainstream school and highlighted how the smaller staffing group in SEND resulted in a ‘tight knit’ group, allowing everyone to bond with each other rather than feeling compartmentalised.

> it's a smaller sort of staff grouping, but that was when I started, obviously, since then it grew quite a lot since, but the environment itself is just very sort of, everyone's there to

> sort of pretty much support each other and look after each other, and I think that's really nice. I didn't really ever get that well… I think within the departments in mainstream schools (Maple: line 227)

In conclusion, participants highlighted the protective nature of working amongst a supportive and understanding group of colleagues which acted as a shared space where the intense demands of the role are mitigated by a mutual understanding and compassion.

4.2.3 Shared stories around neurodivergent identity

Half of the participants, spoke of aspects of their experiences of their own recent discoveries of neurodivergent identities and how this intersects with their professional identities when working within specialist education environments supporting a student population which comprises a range of needs, including neurodivergent needs. This kinship and shared lived experiences between student and staff serves as a bridge in fostering empathy.

> I think I've recently got an ADHD diagnosis. So I think it then kind of clicked for me as well. I was like, oh yeah, this is just the way they learn, and this is the way I deliver it to them. And that's what helps and works. (Willow: lines 53-56).

For a number of participants, being around students with neurodivergent needs aided in them noticing aspects of their behaviours and needs which echoed their own experiences, thus encouraging them to be curious about their own neurodiversity.

> I think part of it is because, I mean, I've had anxiety and things like that and that's really impacted me. And at school, I wouldn't say I enjoyed my time at school, I was a good student, I liked learning, but the social side was really hard. And then it happened that a few years ago, I was thinking to myself, I wonder if there's more to it. Anyway, when I went to the SEND school where I was based ... I thought I could see myself somewhere

here. And initially it was kind of smaller class sizes… so that you can get to know them and you can kind of have that connection with them. (Elm: lines 76-83).

I suddenly thought, I see a lot of myself in her. And then I clicked she just been diagnosed with ADHD and autism. And I thought, and I had been thinking about it for a while. So I actually went through my own process and I'm diagnosed with both (Elm: lines 88-95).

For Juniper, working in this environment not only allowed them to reflect on their own neurodivergent identity, but also for their child and shared that being a part of specialist setting afforded them access to training and better understanding of neurodiverse needs and how best to make reasonable adjustments to an environment to suit these needs and preferences:

I think my eldest son is on the spectrum. I think he's got ADHD. He's very similar to me, wants to know the who, what, why's, when, where and why's of everything. Like he's very brainy, but his attention, he does struggle with that a little bit.… and what I found that was nice is some of the things that I had access to working in the school, those were things I could implement at home that could support like his structure and stuff.

And it also kind of helps, it was helping me along the way understand myself too… it kind of came at the right time that I went into that, especially as I had my diagnosis like a month or so later. (Lines 121-131)

It was noted by some participants that through working within the specialist environment, they were able to feel more comfortable in putting in place adaptations conducive to their emotional and sensory needs, and how this felt like an act which normalised such practices to the students as well:

> And I think just the fact that, you know, we're in a school where there are sensory tools available, so I get mine out. One of the kids goes, I thought only kids were allowed. I was like 'what? Who said?' He's like, 'I don't know'. I've got my headphones around my neck most of the time and I'll just turn on the music and that's it. Not obviously while I'm teaching, tempting as it is, so like walking around or whatever. (Elm: Lines 699-705)

This may not necessarily be a universally held experience, however, and Juniper remarked that their own recent diagnosis led to them to question how they experienced working within the school, which may be as a result of having gained greater insight into their own needs and, by extension, the needs of the students they supported:

> But it was just very difficult because I didn't... I don't know if it was [that] there was a disconnect between my understanding of SEN because I've recently found out myself that I was diagnosed with ADHD last October. So, I'm also on that journey to understanding myself and just how I may perceive things and stuff. (Lines 11-13)

Additionally, Elm noted that despite mutual understanding of shared experience of neurodiversity, there are times in which there can be an incongruency over their sensory needs and the wider school environment, but instead aimed to use this as an opportunity to promote neuro-affirmative language.

> So then when I went back to school in September, all my classes know that I have autism and ADHD. And I'm like, do you know what? Sometimes it's difficult because my sensory needs sometimes interact with their sensory needs in a bad way, like they're making noise and they're tapping or they're clicking. And I'm like, guys, I can't think. And I'm like, just, you know, I'm like, okay, guys, I think my ADHD and your ADHD might be playing games here. (lines 190-195).

Moreover, a recognition of peer neurodivergent identities and needs further fosters the previously noted sense of community and acceptance amongst staff groups.

> And we've got another member of staff who is ADHD, a hyperactive profile. I'm combined profile, but more inattentive. So that's been quite interesting because sometimes we're in a meeting, 'sorry, that's what I'm like', 'no, it's fine, that's mine. That's my ADHD'. 'Sorry, I blurted that out'. I was like, 'well, I do that sometimes too'. I said, 'but sorry, the fact that I can't find what you're saying is because of mine'. So sometimes it makes for a longer meeting, but it means that we understand each other. (lines 225-232).

As noted in the previous sub-theme, a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding is important in fostering an environment of inclusivity and support, and this extends to feeling a sense of belonging, and a mutual shared understanding of each other's needs and preferences. Thus, it can be understood that a specialist environment which promotes non-neuronormative expectations of behaviour and social communication may promote a welcoming and safe environment for people who are neurodivergent.

4.3 Theme 2: The emotional tug of war: Navigating working in a value-driven way in the face of challenges within SEND education

The second group experiential theme captures the lived experience of the varying extents in which working within SEND education environments can present distinct challenges, and the impact these hold on an individual's emotional wellbeing. Participants described the drive to provide meaningful change and care to students, and how this can be stifled by scarcity of resources, resulting in a sense of failing their students. These challenges

often made it difficult to uphold the key moral values the participants hold, with consequences on their wellbeing when able, or unable, to work aligned to these values. However, it also speaks to the vital role that success stories hold in providing the reward that keeps staff professionally nourished.

4.3.1 The scarcity of resources and provisions

An example of a challenged faced within SEND education was related to a lack of funding, resourcing and the limitations around a school's ability to offer bespoke provisioning for students.

> that can be a frustration, but that's going to be the same frustration that every teacher in every school up and down the country said, well, we need more resources. (Oak: Line 812).

The consequences of these financial pressures lead to individuals, and institutions as a whole, grappling with the opportunity cost of forgoing certain choices due to these financial constraints.

> there's obviously things that you feel unfair because you know that certain students would benefit from; every student would benefit from counselling, for example. I can't provide it for everyone, and that's frustrating. Or a certain kid would benefit from a bit of extra one-to-one or a literacy intervention. Well, I can only afford one literacy teacher. What we could do with two, maybe three. (Oak: 803-807).

This is a particularly challenging aspect to working in these schools, due to the evolving needs of the students and the ever-changing landscape of how best to provide meaningful and specialist support.

> I think the type of students we work with have slightly changed. It is definitely more the mental health side of things, less and less of the old-fashioned EBD angry boys … But you have to adapt the practice with the types of students that we've got and we introduced the nurture group because again it was a certain type of student that was coming through, we need to make sure we can meet the needs there. (Oak: Lines 193-195).

This issue creates the sense of an impending threat; looming and challenging the safety and equilibrium of the school's capacity to perform its duties effectively.

> it was the crunch towards the end as it's, you know, as the education SEN system is completely just crunched. It's it was becoming unmanageable and untenable for me to work in the same expectation with completely different working conditions, because you could just see the funding crunch coming and coming and the most amount of need in that room, which was too much. (Willow: Lines 92-94).

Living and working under this sense of threat not only felt like it restricted staff's abilities to comprehensively meet all student's needs to the best of their abilities, but also led to corresponding challenging emotions of guilt and shame.

> So it just it disheartened everything for me as well because I'm like, I know how much we can do for these kids. And then feeling really upset that I couldn't give the same results and levels because it seemed so unfair to them that the situation was not the same for them. (Willow: Lines 142-143)

Oak's positionality as a headteacher at the school gave them particular insight into the unique challenges that is facing SEND education due to the scarcity of resources and can be considered as one of the most pressing issues when managing the day to day running of the

school, particularly for those in leadership positions.

> We dictate it to some degree of what we spend the money on. Salaries are salaries and they have to go up as they have to go up and that sort of thing. It would be obviously so much better to have just one more member of staff kind of thing is often the way that you do it. But it is frustrating, but it's one of those things that, well, that's the reality. (Lines 1010-1013)

However, it was reflected how this stress and anxiety can spread across through the school system, affecting members of the school team in different roles.

> At one point, it just felt like it was all about money and what cut costs, what's going to cut costs and stuff (Juniper: Line 868).

In summary, a scarcity of resources can be seen as a greatly limiting factor, preventing SEND schools from being able to offer truly bespoke and person-centred care. This issue contributes to feelings of overwhelm, and stress and subsequent disenfranchising of staff from this environment.

4.3.2 Moral decision making, its consequences, and the lived experience of moral failing and distress

As with the previous sub-theme above, there were similar shared reflections surrounding how moral dilemmas and decision making can often lead to repercussions impacting both fellow staff and the students they are charged with supporting. These experiences can often be accompanied by uncomfortable feelings around the ethical and moral choices that were made, questions around these decisions, and witnessing the outcomes of them.

One example of ethical decision making within education which can present itself as a moral dilemma is around a permanent exclusion of a student. These decisions often follow a standard process which would involve different levels of leadership including the senior leadership team, headteacher and governors. However, Oak shared an awareness of the real world and long-term consequences of these decisions on the student:

> But I think sitting in the head teacher's chair when you've got to make that decision to say, OK, I'm very, very close [to permanently excluding]. And I knew that I could sit around a table and justify the decision that we've made, because it would perhaps be the better thing for the school. I was so worried about what was going to happen to this child if we did that. (Oak: Lines 676-662).

Decisions surrounding student's ongoing support can also lead to both direct and indirect negative consequences on the staff team tasked with supporting them on a day-to-day basis. This can create additional moral predicaments when weighing up the impact of decisions, the outcome of which may come with a personal emotional cost:

> it's ultimately on me that if something bads happened to a member of staff, that's my fault. Even if I wasn't there, it's still my fault. A member of staff got hit in my school, in our school. If I'd have excluded them the other week and they wouldn't have happened (Oak: 1050-1053).

> He's punched the headteacher and it's OK because he didn't get suspended. So what does that psychologically say to the kid, well, if you punch the headteacher, what's it going to do to the TA? (Oak: Lines 726-727)

> I'm also looking at the staff team, particularly SLT who know the ins and outs of what's going on and how it was going to affect us knowing that, although it's my decision, I've

said before, I try and include the team in the decision that we're making, obviously it's ultimately my decision (Oak: lines 646-648)

Day to day decision making that directly impacts staff has been described by Maple as a “thankless task” (line 678), and that there are often situations in which it feels impossible to avoid negative consequences on peers:

you're going to make these decisions at times where people aren't going to agree with you and it's going to upset someone's day. But we're doing this for the students in the school and making sure we can keep things going. And you are having to make these decisions where you're putting someone in a place where they don't necessarily want to be, because the bigger picture is it fits better for the majority of things. So you're going with the best-case scenario. And sometimes it's, yeah, it's not an easy decision to make. (Maple: lines 678-683).

Whilst it may offer some defence to take a rational or pragmatic lens to these decisions as illustrated above, the experience of directly affecting another staff’s wellbeing can often feel like a betrayal, especially when it feels incongruent to the sense of community and support as mentioned in a previous theme:

I think when you're making those decisions and sometimes things don't go right, I'd probably put a lot more blame on myself when I started (Maple: Line 677)

Sometimes you are just trying to fill a gap and at times that doesn't work. And that's a, yeah, it's a tricky situation and you feel bad. I feel responsible because it's my decision that's led that out, you know, to be that outcome and that's obviously, like you say, it has an impact on people. (Maple: lines 662-665).

you feel such a sense of, I want to look after them as well, that I hate it when a member

> of staff goes home upset because, whether it's because something, sometimes staff get upset by things. (Oak Lines: 1033-1034).

One unique perspective was shared by Juniper, who, as a teaching assistant, may not have been privy to the decision-making process from their leadership team but instead experienced these decisions being shared with the staff. As such, they may have similarly experienced a sense of betrayal of the image of a supportive network from the leadership team as it may have felt that the responsibility of upholding this decision was burdened on other staff:

> It was just a lot of the decisions that were made by SLT, they weren't even kind of discussed with the teacher and staff. We would have a meeting, and it was just like, 'oh, this is from this week, this is what we're doing'. And if anyone had any questions, it was just like, 'well, this is what's been decided'. Like there was never any reasoning or there was nothing, and at one point, the acting head teacher at the time was like, 'it's not SLT's job to deal with challenging behaviour, that's teaching staff's job'. (Juniper: lines 368-374)

Furthermore, staff within SEND settings often experience a range of challenging emotions following situations which developed in a way that did not align with their own beliefs, or hold true to the moral values that inform their views on working in schools and with children with additional needs. These feelings were characterised by shared themes of guilt, shame and personal responsibility and failure:

> I think I took it more personally in the sense of I saw it as a personal failure rather than as a status of the education system failure (Willow: line 131).

> I felt very much like I'd failed the child because he was not dealt with in a respectful

> way that I would have dealt with in that situation and then I did kind of reflect on it and a little bit of that kind of like helplessness in the situation because I'm like, well, I'm not in a position of power. (Willow: lines 212-216).

> It was like a sense of helplessness, especially if, especially if it was a situation that if it went as bad as it could have, could have been like fatal or something like that. So it's just really scary to think that these things are just dealt with as a whole. (Juniper, 683-684).

If left unaddressed, the aftermath of this could potentially be significant and possibly lead to a changes in the way in which a member of staff may view their work, their relationship with the role or environment, and which may then lead to adverse repercussions such as burnout, compassion fatigue or other negative effects on an individual's health and wellbeing. This is something that was observed by Magnolia:

> one member of staff actually, he didn't come to work for two days because I think he was quite obviously impacted by the effect that it had. So he obviously didn't feel like coming to work, which I completely understand if you've been directly involved in that intimate, if you've obviously been, I suppose, attacked, but you've been bitten, like spat out, had your hair pulled, it's going to upset you and you might feel quite vulnerable, I suppose, and you don't want to necessarily go back into that environment immediately, where which I imagine happens quite a lot, to be honest. (Magnolia: lines 280-282).

Additionally, it was noted that living with a felt sense of moral failings can leave some of these negative feelings present for a long period. Oak noted that the former headteacher's decision to leave another school which subsequently deteriorated had a significant effect on them.

> I know [former head] in particular was mortified and still now carries a heavy load from when he left [school] and it went downhill, that that still chews him up, that he knows that there's generation of kids, but years and years worth of good work, it's gone down the pan. (Oak: lines 183-185).

The legacy of this was also noted to play a role in the former headteacher's decision-making process in similar scenarios years later:

> And [former head] had a massive fear that him leaving here and that happening. So he wanted to make sure that I was going to be in a situation that we could make sure that didn't happen. (Lines 187-188).

In summary, this subtheme notes examples of participant experiences of challenges or decisions in the course of their work which can lead to moral dilemmas and subsequent negative consequences on their wellbeing and perception of their position as a professional in this environment.

4.3.3 The reward and nourishment of successful stories

Participants described how witnessing stories of positive change, of successful interactions, and moments of joy experienced by the students, stood out as key examples of what makes this role rewarding and allowed them to recognise when their work is aligned with their values. There was an acknowledgement that working within SEND schools brought along additional challenges compared to mainstream schools:

> You do SEND because you love it, not because you have to, because it's a challenging job. You can do that in mainstream. Here you do it because of the love for the kids." (Willow: lines 692-631).

you've only got to have one positive in your day to outweigh all the negative nonsense that you've had to put up with as well. (Oak: lines 88-89)

It was voiced by Juniper that often the impact of having a caring and compassionate staff may have on the students can be invisible, or harder to recognise, until it is specifically voiced:

> It's only when I, towards when I was leaving, I felt like I was having any impact because usually I'm the kind of person that when I do work, it's nice to see the rewards, but I understand that you don't always. So it's when staff started leaving, the kids were like, I hope you don't leave, like you're my favourite. And I was just like, I didn't think you had to really cared about me … So it was nice to know that I had an impact on them more so than I initially thought by the time I had gone. (Lines 116-119).

These rewarding moments were acknowledged to occur in the day-to-day aspects of supporting students in their learning:

> It was just seeing almost like the light switch on in them, like, I can do this or I understand it now." (Juniper: Line 139)

But it was also acknowledged that seeing the longer-term growth and achievement, even after students have left, can often highlight the impact that staff may have on a young person's life and outcomes, even if it does not appear easily visible at the time:

> That change from being completely erratic, crazy, not able to sit in a classroom, not being able to access an education, to leaving at the other end of the school journey with qualifications, being able to be polite, hold a conversation, shake someone's hand, look them in the eye, please and thank-yous, all the things that make up a decent human being, polite, respectful, kind, and that sort of thing, knowing that you've played a part

in that is massive. Now I like doing that regardless, because I feel like somewhere in their mind I've had some input into that. (Oak: lines 336-343).

I think it's an episode of Friends where Phoebe's trying to find a selfless good deed. And I think to me, that is this job. We all enjoy working with students, but ultimately, if you didn't get a feel-good factor from it, I don't think any of us would do it, because why would you put up with so much if at some point you didn't get some sort of sense of satisfaction, some sort of sense of joy, some sense of pride? (Oak: lines 92-94)

In summary, the reward of seeing progress and growth within the students they are supporting contributes a great deal to the draw of working within these settings, despite the numerous challenges also identified.

4.4 Theme 3: An institutional straitjacket: Experiences of systemic entrapment

All participants shared experiences in which they felt that external forces placed them in situations which encroached on their personal values, creating professional challenges that tested their ability and resolve to work in a way which aligned with these moral codes.

4.4.1 Negotiating external pressures and the gaze of scrutiny

Due to their positionality as a headteacher, Oak focused on reflecting on some of the systemic pressures facing SEND education, including parental expectations, local authorities and the demand for SEND spaces, and OFSTED inspections. These various pressures were outlined in during the following excerpt which highlight the growing nature of some of these pressures on the school system:

you can string together days of sunshine, but then there's almost always some cloud

> lingering at some point, whether it be the SEN funding, whether it be needs-led models that they're looking at, changing designations of the schools, parents that are massively challenging, questioning what the school is doing and that sort of thing. (Oak: lines 38-39).

This discussion included reflections on the pressures of OFSTED inspections and the impact this holds on the school system and staff's wellbeing:

> OFSTED, that's hugely stressful, hugely panic inducing for all the staff, which then has a negative impact on the students because staff are walking around stressed, they're behaving towards students changes and then it doesn't help anybody until they've been and gone and then everyone goes, we've got to wait another few years and it comes back again, this sort of thing. (Oak: lines 995-996)

OFSTED inspections have recently gained nationwide attention regarding the impact they have on staff, particularly school leadership teams. As such, this scrutiny and oversight may create moral dilemmas for headteachers and leadership around the decisions in relation to how best to support students and how this may be reflected onto the headteacher's impression of self-worth and legacy:

> I think as we're getting closer to Ofsted now, I do have that worry that if the Ofsted comes out bad, I look like an idiot. I look like I don't know what I'm doing. And it might be that I don't know what I'm doing. That's fine, I guess, but the sort of embarrassment from that (lines 989-992)

However, it was shared that aligning themselves to their moral values meant that navigating the pressures of external judgement felt easier as they felt reassured that they were still aligning with a person-centred approach to care that centres the student's needs. However,

there was a recognition that the established and traditional formats of these inspections made this a challenge:

> Ultimately, if we're morally making the right decision for a child, if Ofsted end up not agreeing with that, I can live with that. I can live with Ofsted saying this, you should have done this and you've done that. Well, actually, I thought it was best with a child. If I can justify that in my mind, and Ofsted say we're crap, then I can live with that. But the chances are if we're doing the right for the kid, Ofsted should recognise that we're doing the right thing, she should be fine. But I know there's a lot of debate about, I think particularly with the old framework or the older frameworks, that you do things for Ofsted's sake rather than for the children's sake. (lines:789-795).

Accordingly, there is a view held that a more personalised and bespoke approach to appraise and support schools in their ongoing development may be more appropriate and less stressful.

> To me, we'd be much better off if you've got a school effectiveness advisor who comes in every term, knows the journey of the school, is constantly giving things to work on and improve on, that to me would be a better system than what we've got at the moment (line 995)

Another example of a source of scrutiny that schools face are the views from parents of the students at the school. Whilst parents are an important stakeholder in the school's success and have an obvious vested interest in their children's wellbeing and success in the school, the presence and use of social media was noted to hold particular power in relation to the external view of the school and its reputation:

> Parents being difficult is a worry because you are worried that on multiple levels

> because you have to worry about it in terms of potentially an awkward conversation and a backwards and forwards, but then you worry about the fact that it can go unchecked because they'll be living in Facebook groups, they'll be living on Instagram, they'll be living in word of mouth sort of situations and they can go out and say something or they can go to the paper and say something and you think, well I can't really fight back and tell them the truth in this situation or it goes out on a Facebook group that we've not got access to, that goes out verbatim, potentially changes a viewpoint on a school, because people always cling to the negative a lot more. So that worries is big. (Oak: lines 1028-1030)

Finally, one other example of an external pressure is the current demand on SEND school spaces and pressures from local authorities to deliver on this demand. This reflects broader macro issues surrounding demand for diagnosis, post-covid educational support and changing political policies surrounding SEND needs and the push for integration within mainstream schools. However, the real world implication for school systems, and in particular leadership staff, is that they are often faced with external pressures to accommodate more students, coming at the cost of the school's ability to fully support all students effectively, or alternatively having to turn down places for student who would benefit well from accessing specialist support:

> The sheer weight, and again it's partly perhaps because of the structure that we've got in the school, that the consultations for example, where we've got, have developed a good reputation around the county, there's an awful lot of parents who want to send their kids here. The way SEN is in [county] at the moment, perhaps not as organised as it could be … we're getting more and more consultations. So the fact that I've got to reply to them and basically say, no, we're full (Oak: lines 533-535).

In summary, the pressures of external forces of oversight and accountability may often create a tug of war for professionals working in a way which aligns with their moral values.

4.4.2 Incongruence and friction between holistic care and academic attainment.

Most participants reflected on the role of specialist education taking a person-centred approach to supporting children, both in terms of their learning progress but also in terms of holistic growth and emotional wellbeing.

> Here the schools seem to have a bit of a value more on, but they can achieve and they should be able to achieve. And I'm like, absolutely don't take away from the achievement, but pastoral comes first, then education will come naturally after. (Willow: lines 180-181)

Many reflected that they felt that the virtue of such settings is the ability to work flexibly in prioritising all aspects of care around a young person and their families.

> when I've got SEND in my head, my values for the students are, they can communicate, regulate and be independent as possible and feel like a contribute to society for themselves and feel good within themselves. And I always put the pastoral as the priority because without that, you're not going to thrive as much. You can do well in education, but you're not going to thrive in yourself if you don't have those skills (Willow: 176-177)

> I think that was a really rewarding day. It was something really simple that she just got like a bubble bath and like a foot spa, put bubbles in it and it made all the bubbles and she had like she seen one of the little boys haven't been that engaged for ages … I think small things like that makes you realise that it's nice that they have specialist facilities and people who really care about them. (Magnolia: 63-65).

This view may speak to a contrast with neo-liberal and neuro-normative ideas that a person's worth and value stems from their ability to be productive and having achieved academic success. Instead, it suggests that an individual and SEND school's success lies in the development of areas of self which enables individuals to thrive within the community and wider society as they enter into a new stage of life:

> we do our very best to get them academic success, because you need that to get onto certain college courses and that sort of thing. And if that's what their ability leads them to, fantastic, we will absolutely push that. But to me, either as importantly, if not more importantly, it's can you function as an appropriate human being, as an appropriate adult in the wider world? Whether you've got GCSE, maths, and English or not, can you hold a conversation? Have you got basic manners? Can you sit around a dining table and eat food without people thinking that's disgusting? Can you deal with adversity without shouting, screaming, and smashing windows? All the skills that you need to be able to function in a workplace, whatever that may be in the future, and to me, that developing them as a human being in regards to their emotional outbursts, their behaviour, all the bits and pieces, the social skills that they may be lacking and all the rest of it is so, so key to what we do. (Oak: lines 69-77)

When an individual holds these values, it can be especially challenging when working within a structure or environment which does not also align with the same values. In certain cases, it may be that this incongruence in beliefs may create an inhospitable environment and result in an individual feeling that they are not able to remain there:

> And it's working to an extent, but it has kind of made me realise that if those are your priorities and what your most valued thing is, just them being in lessons and getting on with education, then maybe I don't fit here…. I'm kind of seeing it as I'll put in a couple

> of years here, but this may not be the setting I stay in…. I need to work in a therapeutic pastoral approach school that really does say, does do what they say on the tin. Because here we promise that we're a therapeutic approach, holistic, trauma informed, etc. And I'm like, we're not doing those things properly or as well as we should be. So to me, I'm like, then, well, maybe I don't fit here. (Willow: lines 243-250)

> I found it difficult how they dealt with the students. It was almost as if they, it's almost as if they wanted them to live and be their diagnosis. Like there was no work around, there was no focus around like coping strategies, like them understanding themselves and working on strengths and stuff. It was very much a focus on what they cannot do. (Juniper, 15 – 19)

Additionally, these external pressures can be experienced as an entrapment which can lead to further significant consequences on the staff's wellbeing, levels of stress and burnout. Elm identified that the school's prioritisation of academic attainment meant that expectations of the students and staff were high; "SLT promised all parents that their kids would leave with seven qualifications." (line: 365), and that this left them feeling confused, and under pressure to push themselves and their students to align with these expectations:

> I sometimes wonder why the people who are choosing the qualifications are the ones choosing them, because they're not actually there, they don't see it. And they'll play it off like, oh, you know, it's fine. (Lines 284-286)

> I was so overwhelmed. I literally got to the point where I'd come out of that lesson with the ones trying to do the project qualification and everyone would just look at me and go, oh dear…. But my God, I just, because I'd get frustrated with the kids because I know, but then I know it's not their fault. The TA would get frustrated with the kids and me. I'd get frustrated with the TA, but now we're on the same page, but just having to

muddle through anyway for the time being. I suppose that's not what you want to be feeling. You don't want to be feeling like you have to muddle through something. (Elm: 348-358).

And that feels wrong on both levels, because on the one hand, you're pressuring [the students] into a qualification that probably, if you did a unit award in it, would be fine, but [the school] don't want to do a unit award because that's an award. (Elm: lines 324-325)

This was echoed by Willow who shared the following dilemma faced when offering students the opportunity to check in with them and re-regulate during lessons:

But I was, inadvertently, direct, indirectly told, that's great that you want to do that, but you can't sacrifice your job and the role. And I'm like, yes, but there's a gap here. And what are we going to do then to fill that gap? 'Well, they need to learn. They need to just get back into class and they can come and talk to you at breaks and lunchtimes'. But I'm like, 'but I'm not available during breaks and lunch times. I have other roles, other duties'. And also, if they still have that need, that need is still going to be there. They're missing out on 2 hours of learning that they could have actually probably just needed that little time to offload and to just have a little bit of regulation. But because the priority of the school is; 'no, that's not our priority, they need to be in lessons they need to learn.' (Lines: 191-201).

As a result, the school's enforcement of this rule regarding students not accessing pastoral support outside of break times held consequences for both Willow and the students in the school:

And I would see more behaviours, more challenges, and I can see them getting into

> their lower self-esteem and their low mood is continuing. And I was like, I find that really frustrating because I would happily, not happily, I will sacrifice my lunch break or whatever time that is because that is the priority. They need me right now. So I will do that for them. (lines 212-215).

Despite this, it was identified that there were opposing views around the prioritisation of emotional development, where there should be more balance, and the importance placed on academic learning due to the nature of these schools being educational settings first and foremost.

> They would repeatedly say things like, there's no academic expectations, even though we were an education establishment. So a lot of the times we weren't getting any work at all from some of the young people. (Juniper, lines 20-21)

> when we spoke amongst ourselves, we would be like, it feels like a youth centre, like there's no focus on pretty much anything. (Juniper, line 28)

In summary, a perceived mismatch between the priorities of the professionals within the school, and the ethos of the school regarding academic versus holistic support may lead to a number of consequences. Many staff shared their view that the most rewarding and effective support offered to students occurred away from academic learning. Consequently, pressures, expectations or even policies that demand the opposite of this may create an element of moral entrapment, an individual may feel placed into a position of differing ideals could create situations where they have to act or make decisions that conflict with their held values. As such, this may lead to further consequences such as moral injury.

4.4.3 Power imbalance in questioning leadership and systems when experiencing moral dilemmas.

This final subtheme addresses the lived experiences of participants witnessing situations that challenge their professional moral beliefs, and the subsequent silencing that follows. This explores moments in which participants reflected on the perceived power imbalances acting against their ability to speak out or challenge such situations. This often was prevalent at the early stages of their professional careers:

> I've definitely been in situations where I'm thinking as an adult, you're getting this wrong, you're making this worse. Particularly early on in my career. Well, I wasn't perhaps confident enough to step in and tell what was it a deputy head at the time to back off from this kid because I'm like you're goading him and he's going to do something in a minute. (Oak: Lines 756 – 758).

Accordingly, Oak's response to this perceived injustice was of frustration, particularly around the lack of ownership of the member of leaderships role in escalating the situation. Their views around the staff members use of their authority over the student may have also played into the earlier reflection about lack of confidence in challenging this incident.

> [I felt] Annoyed, just massively annoyed that it's just completely unfair. The deputy head then goes and tells the story to the head teacher, and I'm thinking, that's not really where it sat. That's not really, yes, the child's behaviour was outrageous in the first place, because I think they'd probably thrown rocks at the member of staff, but all right, he's thrown rocks at you, then take yourself away, swap with somebody else. But the deputy head teacher was like, 'no, I'm in charge, they're going to do as they're told, et cetera, et cetera'. And I'm thinking, if you'd have backed off, I felt I could have got that kid to do what needed to be done, but he just wasn't going to do it for you. So there's a

frustration there and an anger that the kid had been wronged. (Oak: Lines 777-782).

Additionally, the perception of power imbalance and the ability to challenge the professional hierarchy played a key role in Willow's experience of witnessing reactive physical interventions from a headteacher early in their career which infringed with their own views around the use of physical interventions:

> Now, where I've come from, you never go hands on unless it is a threat to life or a damage to something or protection. It's the last resort that you would do but here it's a bit more like, come on, off you go. And I'm like, that sat wrong with me (Willow: Lines 312 – 315).

> the moral, not moral battle I have, or the inner battle I have is more about their behavioural responses to things and the way they react to behaviours and obviously safe space here, but with my head teacher, I find his normal reaction to behaviours is hands on first and it's a, no, I'm in control here. (Willow lines 308 – 312)

Willow reflected that their subsequent response was influenced by a reluctance to experience confrontation and a recognition that systemic power over them as professional may be used to silence expressions of moral infringements, which can promote the isolating sense of being a silent witness, a role which may sit uncomfortably for some professionals:

> I found that really challenging because it's my head teacher. I can't pull him up on that. I find that very… I hate confrontation. I'm not a person of confrontation." (Willow: line 329).

> I don't like confrontation and I'm a people pleaser, I often won't then voice up in meetings because I find that challenging to then, I know it's the right thing to do, but I know I'm going to be told no or shut down. And I think I then, I will then, rather than

> bringing it up and being told no, I will indirectly do what I think is the right thing, but not just not vocalize it. (Willow, lines 489-491)

> Concerns that were raised by staff were very much shushed. We had incidents of like, racist behaviour, sexualised behaviour that I feel weren't dealt with appropriately, like even on the lowest level of explaining like why we shouldn't say these things, why these things are unacceptable, potentially illegal and the consequences that would follow in the real world. There was just a lot of protecting of the young people, which I understand because of the way their cognition works and how that things may be perceived. But I feel like we weren't doing them, we weren't doing them any favours. We were doing them like no service whatsoever. And I just felt really bad for them. (Juniper, lines 29-36).

It was suggested that these experiences of moral entrapment could arise from systemic issues and failings whereby staff are not being suitably upskilled in procedures or training around safe practice with behaviour management. As such, staff have experienced being put in situations that may not be suitable, and have risked putting a staff member or student in harm's way:

> if you're going to employ someone in a school that's SEN and you're obviously a supply member, they should really make sure that you are fully trained. (Magnolia: line 191).

Willow also reflected how an initial lack of suitable training could have led to a potentially morally injurious experience, arising from being instructed to follow county policies surrounding absconding, and how this experience contradicted in their feelings around ensuring a student's safety. This led to thoughts around consequential harm and reflected on how this could trigger significant guilt:

someone else from the interventions team came to support and then they said, ‘miss, if you not had the training on what we do when we have a child who's trying to leave’. And I said, well, no. And he goes, ‘well, if they're trying to leave, the [county] policy is you let them go’. And I was like, ‘but this child is autistic, will run into a road that does not sit and we're right next to a road’. So I'm like, I don't, I don't, that doesn't sit right with me. (lines 550 – 554)

Finally, participants reflected on ways in which they can take back power through small acts of defiance which they feel allows them to act in a child’s best interest and aligns with their values, despite systemic pressures to act in a differing way.

One of the particular ones that keeps coming up is the students wearing headphones and listening to music in lessons…. But the school rules and the school mantra is, you know, they don't have music on, they don't have this in lessons unless it is written within their EHCP. So that is another thing I'm kind of adding into some EHCPs where I'm like, this child benefits from this and should be allowed access to that. And that's again my little protest against what they're doing. But again, I'm told, often told, look, you need to toe the party line. (Willow: lines 401 – 408).

SLT will actively be there and witness it. They won't interject and then they'd send a passive aggressive e-mail at the end of the day; ‘Staff didn't deal with this appropriately’. But it got to the point where I would respond and be like, but it doesn't help that you were there and did nothing and then sent this e-mail…. and I feel like that's ultimately what led to [being placed on] garden leave. I feel like I was too vocal (Juniper, 448-435).

In conclusion, staff experience of moral entrapment through the form of institutional silencing, constraining policies and decisions which lead to becoming an accessory to

inappropriate or harmful practice, and external scrutiny and pressures which lead to decisions that may go against moral values. These constraints were demonstrated to have been felt as a betrayal of the institution they were part of, and acted as a contradiction to feelings around a community of mutual support and camaraderie discussed earlier. Finally, these systemic entrapments can diminish individual authority to make decisions to act in a way in which avoids potentially morally injurious events, which can create a sense of hopelessness or futility to challenge such injustices.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Overview

This research project aimed to contribute to a lack of literature investigating SEND education staff's experiences of moral values and injury within their work using a qualitative methodology. Six staff members from SEND education settings across England were interviewed and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted on these interviews to further understand their lived experiences of working within their moral values, and their experiences when these values were transgressed by their own actions or actions of others.

5.2 Summary of the Findings

These results highlight shared participant stories and lived experiences of entering the world of SEND education and the emotional hooks that link their personal values and persona with their professional identity. The findings then highlight the constant pressures, dilemmas and experiences of conflict that present themselves within the day-to-day workings within SEND education.

Whilst facing these challenging experiences, these staff were frequently faced with choices regarding how to continue acting in a way that aligns with their moral values. However, it was identified that individual autonomy over this was rarely held in isolation, and that broader systemic powers also played a key role in enabling and preventing the moral practice that is congruent with harmonising the professional and personal values held. There were many

experiences of moral entrapment (Lissman et al., 2024) whereby the individual felt ensnared by structural barriers and pressures to perform in certain ways. The consequences of facing such experiences identified in this research will be explored further in this chapter.

5.3 Contextualising findings in existing research and theory

In the first Group Experiential Theme (GET), 'The draw of SEND: An environment of nurture and belonging', the staff members explored their various experiences in discovering a professional career within education settings supporting CYP with additional needs. For some, they reflected on how this professional identity was shaped from their early life experiences and upbringing, shaping both their personal identity, but also perhaps the professional identity that they would adopt in later life (Bebeau & Monson, 2011). Some of the participant's stories evoked a sense of duty or that devoting themselves to a caring role felt like a calling (Barber, 2002).

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a framework in which it is believed that human motivation and behaviours are driven by intrinsic motivations which are fostered and shaped within the early life experiences. It is believed that when a person is able to act in a way which aligns with their core identity and values, this can act as a protective factor against burnout and overwhelm (Savchenko et al., 2022). This is consistent with the experiences shared by the participants in this research, who noted that factors such as faith, family and environment played a role in shaping their values in wanting to help others and working within SEND schools help to fulfil this value. However, research has also identified that an individual's vulnerability to the adverse consequences associated with moral injury, such as guilt or shame, can be increased by being within an environment congruent with these intrinsic motivations (Doyle et al., 2023).

A community of compassion and understanding may be linked with Tajifel and Turner's (2004) Social Identity Theory which posits that individuals understand their sense of self through their membership in groups where validation of social norms and shared values occur. As such, it could be felt that there is special importance in the participant's felt sense of a community of support within SEND education settings as staff may seek out such spaces to understand their sense of self through positive group identification, thus leading to a sense of acceptance and safety in the face of other challenges.

Additionally, this in relation to later themes around challenges in addressing harmful practice, may influence a unique paradigm whereby staff may be understood to feel less inclined to challenge or report issues within the school. This 'grey area' between the personal and professional relationships (Ashforth & Johnson, 2014) may also hold some form of moral entrapment whereby challenging the idea of being within this group through 'whistleblowing, may feel like a betrayal to the relationships built. Whilst this has been found across recent literature (Bergmann & Aven, 2023), stories around this dynamic within SEND staff group may be novel within this research.

Another aspect which links the sub-themes relating to both early life experiences and neurodivergent identities is that there may be some form of neurodivergent empathic link between some participants and their students. This may relate to the 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012) which posits that a breakdown in reciprocity and understanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals, due to differences in communication styles, contribute to miscommunications and misunderstandings rather than any deficits held by neurodivergent individuals. As such, shared lived experiences, similarities in presenting needs, and strategies employed to support wellbeing within an environment that prioritises neuro-normative needs may support within an educational and relational alliance and 'hook' participants within these

settings. Normalising neuro-affirmative practice and representation within SEND settings may offer a form of collective resistance against neurotypical systems and structures that historically contributed to neuro-normative practices that led to institutional harm (Connolly et al., 2023; Fisher et al., 2025).

Additionally, returning to an environment that, for some, included elements of harm stemming from their experiences within school (see Elm's contribution on page 94) may have offered certain staff a corrective emotional experience (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2004). This could have come in the form of re-authoring the narratives (Epston & White, 1990) around schools being a harmful setting by promoting an element of nurture and belonging which they may have not experienced themselves.

This first GET aligns closely with the systematic literature review's focus on relational inclusion' in SEND schools. Crucially, this empirical study may offer a novel perspective, illustrating how an environment of safety, compassion and care may be experienced as providing a protective mechanism for staff wellbeing, as well as for the students, expanding on previous literature.

The second GET: 'The emotional tug of war: Navigating working in a value-driven way in the face of challenges within SEND education' focused on participant experiences of the various facets of working within SEND education settings. This included many unique challenges faced by staff on a day-to-day basis, and the internal conflicts and moral distress that arose due to such experiences which precluded or challenged their identity as responsible carers (Sadovnikova et al., 2016). This theme also encompasses shared experiences around the protective elements of recognising the growth and achievement of the students' they support and the felt sense of reward this inspired.

Participants shared their experiences of working amidst structural and systemic issues

such as financial and resource scarcity and how this affected their ability to fulfil their role effectively. These constraints can be conceptualised using Bronfonbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to illustrate how aspects such as the exosystem around an individual, i.e. government initiatives, local authority funding, scarcity of specialist staffing / therapeutic resources available, can directly influence the school environment and the staff within this (microsystem).

These scarcities in resources represent a significant barrier to staff's ability to offer meaningful and safe care, thus raising internal conflicts and injury when this acts against their moral values. Experiences whereby staff felt incapable or unskilled to effectively support students may have possibly introduced a sense of vicarious trauma (Ormiston et al., 2022) through witnessing a child experience harm or ill effect as a result of lack of accessing a provision they may need. Additionally, there were repeated references to a felt sense of failure and guilt relating to the participant's inability to offer an equitable level of care to all students in the face of dilemmas and opportunity costs because of a lack of resources. This may be interpretated as a form of moral injury (Shay, 2014) which occurs during these times of transgressions in moral values as a result of actions, or inaction (Litz et al., 2009).

The role of moral injury may contribute to a number of issues facing staff within SEND settings, as reflected by the participants. In particular, it was noted that making decisions which resulted in adverse consequences to the staff group triggered strong adverse feelings, such as self-blame (Kraines et al., 2017), and this may be relating to breaking that sense of camaraderie and support as identified in the previous GET (Nielsen et al., 2024). Furthermore, these feelings may be perpetuated by negative self-beliefs and thoughts through the form of catastrophising (Gellaty & Beck, 2016) as reflected through statements such as "personal failure" and "I'd failed the child", thus reinforcing feelings of guilt and shame.

Given that there are many examples of scenarios in which potential moral injury, burnout, and compassion fatigue can foster, opposing stories of success can raise contrasting feelings of hope and reward. Luthans et al's (2015) exploration of 'Psychological Capital' posits that psychological strength is built upon four states; hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO) which contribute to protective factors within workplaces, such as education settings. Stories of success noted by participants helped to foster feelings of validation of the work they have done, and reinforced beliefs in the value of the emotional energy they have used to support the CYP, despite day-to-day challenges faced.

The final GET: 'An institutional straitjacket: Experiences of systemic entrapment' represents collective reflections of how staff moved away from the internal moral struggles towards the experiences of systemic moral entrapment (Lissman et al., 2024). This theme explored participants reflections on the psychological impact of being unsupported, or even silenced by systems within which they work. The imagery of a straitjacket used in this theme intended to illustrate the constraining nature of systemic policies and regulations which may have prevented participants in acting in a way aligned with their moral values, or influenced them to perform an action in breach of these values.

The concept of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014) occurs when an institution or system in which the individual operates acts in a way which significantly transgresses the trust and wellbeing of that individual. As explored in the first theme, many staff enter the role of educators and support staff as the roles offer work in line with their values of carers and ability to nurture. It can therefore be felt that when an individual bears witness to harmful practices which contradicts the school's 'mission' of providing an environment of nurture and support, this acts as a betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). This is particularly present within the second subtheme exploring an incongruence between held views around prioritising holistic

support versus promoting a focus on academic attainment, echoing a theme explored within the systematic literature review. Participants reflected on how there is a felt sense of expectation to 'succeed' in the eyes of the system by promoting more focus on academic outcome such as examination grades and certifications, but by doing this, they may be 'failing' within their own priorities of empowering students to learn and develop in a way which promotes focus on emotional wellbeing and interests.

Furthermore, the prioritisation of academic achievement within certain environments may be seen as imposing neurotypical norms and expectations on to a population with differing needs, and therefore might act in contrast to neuro-affirmative practice (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2024). This could then be seen as a form of systemic ableism (DeMatthews, 2020).

The subtheme exploring the internal experiences of facing external scrutiny within the school focused particularly on OFSTED inspections, but also of local authority pressures and parental views as shared via platforms such as social media websites. Bronfonbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), explores how interconnected environmental systems and structures influence the development and experiences of individuals. As such, it can be understood that the outcomes and wellbeing of students are directly linked with their interactions with those within their microsystem, such as family, school and teachers. As one looks outwards, the exosystem, where factors such as regulatory systems such as OFSTED or local authority decisions, or even further to the macrosystem, where government policies (such as the SEND reform paper), economic structures, or even wider societal attitudes around neurodiversity and learning disabilities all play significant roles in influencing an individual's experience. Oberg (2026) further explores this model in relation to the systemic components of ethical conflict and emotional burnout in educators.

The panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1975) experienced by participants reflects the creation of a sense of external threat to their view of self as a professional, and this oversight and accountability may also lead to thoughts or concerns around job security. As a result, this may trigger feelings of threat which may lead to changes in how staff are presenting in a school environment. Due to emotional modelling (Brunssen & Kastrup, 2025), this may reflect a sense of threat and unsafety within the school environment onto students. Through the three systems model of compassion focused therapy (Gilbert, 2010), judgement or scrutiny can trigger an overactive threat system response which can inhibit an individual's ability to access the soothe system which is essential for promoting emotional regulation. Furthermore, challenging held views around school being safe, thus may contribute to staff burnout (Chang, 2009) and impact student emotional safety within the environment. This scrutinising gaze may also contribute to participants practicing their profession in a way which is incongruent to an authentic and value driven way, and instead shift to a practice that aligns with the expectation of the external stakeholders, thus risking alienation from the identity that brought them to the role as explored in theme one.

A final sub-theme explored participant's experiences in witnessing poor practices and feeling disempowered to challenge these due to perceived power imbalances or systemic hierarchy. It was reported that some participants found any expression of discontent or attempts to challenge such practices were suppressed or actively silenced. This can lead to a situation whereby staff develop a form of 'learned helplessness' (Miller & Seligman, 1975) where they feel demoralised by their inability to enact meaningful systemic change and positively influence the wellbeing of the students they feel responsible for, thus leading to professional apathy.

This may be a contributing factor towards moral entrapment and attitudes around

wishing to remain within such environments, thus adding to issues of job attrition relating to professional wellbeing (McInerney et al., 2018). Additionally, institutional failure and systemic silence of staff may represent a form of relational trauma (Emerick, 2019) whereby leadership no longer represent figures of safety and trust and may contribute to a lack of containment from the institution (McCausland, 2023).

5.4 Quality Assessment

One limitation of this research is the manner in which the systematic literature was approached, due to the researcher's inexperience as a research practitioner conducting this form of review (Riaz et al., 2010). Despite best efforts to refine the inclusion and exclusion criteria and subsequent search terms for the literature searches, a large number of studies were included in the initial screening (1529), however a limited number of these were included as a large number (1520) were eventually removed as a result of not being truly related to the research question. Future research would aim to involve a second screener across the earlier stages of the review, rather than for final validation on the selected studies, as well as seeking further guidance from experienced researchers to further refine and adapt search terms.

Whilst this study aimed to capture a sample of participants aligned with the recommendation of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), it fell short of the ideal participant number of 8. However, this study remains within the range suggested by Turpin et al., (1997) as appropriate for doctoral psychology research utilising IPA methodology. Whilst this may restrict opportunities for broader application of the results onto the wider population, it instead allows the focus on how shared and differing experiences were made sense of by participants, and still contributes to the limited literature available regarding UK SEND staff's experience of moral injury and entrapment.

There may be a number of factors contributing to not achieving full participant numbers, including methodological limitations such as not sharing the research poster across all geographic areas of England. The rationale of sharing across areas local to the hub of the research (Hertfordshire) was to allow for the reasonable option for participants or researcher to travel to facilitate a face-to-face interview if that was the wish of the participant.

It may also be relevant that since this study focused on exploring themes around moral practice, transgressions and consequences, this may have been targeting a professional population already facing considerable emotional and psychological stressors, and therefore there may have been a reluctance to engage in research on this due to a perceived cost to them emotionally, or placing an increased demand on their already limited capacity.

Intentionality was given to ensuring that all staff members within SEND education settings were included in the recruitment criteria, instead of the more common population sample of teaching staff which may have offered a more homogenous sample, which is an important methodological consideration in IPA. The rationale for this was in the hope that underrepresented stories and voices from staff who have a significant role in the student's school life away from teaching and education focused work (e.g. catering staff, site managers, administrators and other business staff), may also be captured. Despite this intent, all participants fell into the category of teacher, or teaching-adjacent roles (teaching assistants, SENCo) and so the themes may reflect this to an extent. It may have been that the recruitment poster and accompanying information did not state clearly enough that all roles in the school were encouraged to get involved. As such, future attempts in this research may wish to further explore this topic amidst a more homogenous group of support and administrative staff within schools.

Finally, it is acknowledged that no definitive consensus around the meaning and

definition of moral injury currently exists, and therefore there will be variance in the way individuals might identify that they have committed or bore witness to a moral violation, as well as a variance in how the subsequent difficulties were experienced. As a result, participants may have conceptualised their experiences differently, and, due to the double hermeneutic nature of IPA, it is possible that the researchers' biases and lens through which they were interpreting the data meant that certain quotes or themes were attended to more. It is thus believed that alternative interpretations of the transcriptions and alternative group level experiential themes might be discovered if analysed by others. Attempts to mitigate such direct influence from researcher bias was done through discussions with the research supervision team, advanced method's workshop group, experts by experience. Additionally, the use of a reflective log (Appendix N) to note initial impressions and interpretations was regularly reviewed to identify any recurring themes or aspects which may have unduly biased the idiographic approach to analysis.

5.5 Clinical Implications and Recommendations

The association between experiences of moral practice, injury, and entrapment within SEND education settings suggest that this is an area which should be considered as a priority in a number of areas relating to supporting the emotional and mental wellbeing of staff. Firstly, more help, through discussion and support, could be offered during early career stages, such as teacher training or staff induction, to better prepare staff in identifying and navigating the various moral demands and emotional consequences of the work.

One way this may be developed further in practice is through the implementation of regular reflective practice spaces within SEND education. Whilst there is currently no therapeutic pathway or manualised approach to supporting presenting issues relating to moral

injury, reflective practice within professional settings has been evidenced to act as potentially protective against the developments of moral injury (Hegarty et al., 2022; Williamson et al., 2025).

In terms of real-world implementation, it is recommended reflective practice within schools be embedded into the ethos and culture of the school. As such, it should be promoted from both a top-down and bottom-up perspective, through having protected time privileged for this space without having other competing demands (such as marking, telephone calls to parents etc.) or other school related meetings during this time. Additionally, the practice should be co-produced with staff involvement to ensure that their voice and priorities are held at the focus of the space to promote it as a valued and helpful space.

Further investigations into reflective practices that addresses issues surrounding transgressions in moral practice or entrapment within SEND education settings, in addition to other professional contexts, would be valuable in further exploring targeted support for staff's emotional and psychological needs and wellbeing within the context of SEND education.

Additionally, initiatives that develop workplace solidarity groups promoting social justice values may act as a way of addressing systemic power imbalances that contribute to moral entrapment within SEND settings. These groups could advocate for structural professional changes which would allow for school and local authority policies and practices to better align with the values held by the staff being tasked with enacting these practices, and would assist in removing disparity in held power within these systems.

Finally, there could be a greater role in clinical psychology, being well situated through clinical and research training, to play a larger role within MHSTs in understanding and addressing complex emotional challenges, such as moral injury and entrapment, within schools directly. By working with school staff, parents and carers as well as across leadership and

commissioning levels, clinical psychology can support in co-producing systemic change required to address a number of the powers influencing decisions and policies which may trap staff within structures that facilitate institutional betrayal and harm. This can also be done in partnership with Educational Psychologist working across these settings.

5.6 Invitations for Future Research

This research explored the experiences of six SEND school staff who work across England. However, there remains a huge number of unshared stories which may further contribute to the understanding of the role of moral values and injury within this context. This research would welcome and invite future studies to further explore these stories across a wider range of SEND settings. One way in which to do this would be for future research to take place across additional geographic and socio-economic areas of both England, and the other nations within the United Kingdom which would allow voices and stories specific to contexts and environments to be heard.

As identified in Chapter One, the state of SEND education is entering a transitional period following the announcement of the SEND Reform White Paper in February 2026 (DfE, 2026). Whilst this research was grounded in having been completed prior to the dissemination of this reform paper, it would also be welcome for future research to explore and capture the stories relating to its implementation, and any subsequent experiences of these structural and systemic initiatives and its role on staff's wellbeing. This feels particularly relevant during a period of material policy changes (OFSTED) in regard to the manner of which OFSTED inspections take place following parliamentary inquiry after the death by suicide of Ruth Perry, which was ruled as being contributed to by an OFSTED inspection (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2023). Shifts in the manner and conduct in which schools are appraised will remain

a key area of focus to ensure that it does not continue to pose a public health issue due to the negative impact that it may hold on the mental health of educators.

This research hoped to gain further understanding of how participants made sense of their lived experiences in working within a moral framework and the experiences when those values are transgressed. One area of future research could centre around aiming to further identify and understand common themes and practices which contributes to moral injury and entrapment within an SEND education context. This may thus benefit from a qualitative approach such as reflexive thematic analysis or grounded theory.

Finally, this research aimed to bring attention to the role in which moral practice and values are experienced within SEND teaching, and the results indicate that transgressions of these by individuals themselves, or by systemic practices and pressure hold a significant impact on an individual's wellbeing. In a time where difficulties in professional contexts are framed around concepts such as burnout, stress, overwhelm and compassion fatigue, it is important to recognise the role moral injury and entrapment may hold in contributing to the psychological challenges facing SEND staff. As such, future research should explore how best to tailor staff training, support, and continuous development to help these staff address and manage these experiences in the most effective manner.

5.7 Conclusions

The current context and expectations of SEND education are forever evolving, with more and more demands being placed on staff to meet the numerous presenting needs of the CYP they are charged with supporting, combined with less and less capacity and fewer resources in order to fulfil this task. As such, the emotional and psychological toll of this

working environment can lead to significant consequences on staff members wellbeing and ability to perform their professional duties.

Whilst it is recognised that many such issues and challenges explored in this research will be present within mainstream settings, it can be viewed that some of the challenges and moral dilemmas may remain specific to SEND education settings through their designation of specialist settings. This can include aspects around the regularity of physical restrictive practices and other such behavioural management policies, conflicts between views and values surrounding the priority of such settings, and the ever-increasing demand for specialist SEND education leading to various challenges and dilemmas on how best to support the specific complex needs of the students under their care.

This research journey demonstrated shared narratives around the draw of working within an environment that facilitates the opportunity to care and act as protective factors for an often marginalised and vulnerable community. However, the day-to-day challenges of this work often creates an exhausting dilemma around how to best perform these duties within structural parameters, and also acting in line with the morals an individual holds. Finally, there are systemic factors which can often lead to individuals feeling entrapped into a professional context which does not feel safe or supportive. All these factors can create an environment of tension between what could be, against what actually is, and that this can contribute to negative effects on a professional's wellbeing.

Societal framing of occupational burnout and stress within education roles have been widely reported and often places the focus on individual's abilities of cognitive load management and personal resilience. Consequently, targeted support has often focused on developing an individual's skillset to cope with these challenges.

However, this research argues that focusing solely on the concepts of burnout or

overwhelm alone may be insufficient in capturing the experiences of moral practice and work, and how transgressions, both individual and systemic, can impact on an SEND staff members' mental wellbeing. The conclusions and implications of this research for individuals, education systems and professional bodies highlights the need to address the systemic and hierarchical factors which contribute to entrapment, and the importance of promoting more open discussions around staff mental and emotional wellbeing in relation to their moral values and practices.

5.8 Plans for Dissemination

It is recognised that this research can only hold values if shared with relevant stakeholders so that the findings can contribute to shared understanding and facilitate conversations that promote changes in the approach of supporting staff wellbeing and thus, providing greater care to students.

The intention is to share the research with the study participants, and create and share a poster or leaflet summarising the study in an accessible way, which can then be shared across SEND education settings, forums and networks. Opportunities to publish the findings of the research within relevant professional publications and academic journals are also planned. This may include The British Journal of Special Education, or the European Journal of Special Needs Education.

5.9 Final Reflections

Conducting this research has been a transformative process and has continually illuminated the personal resonance from my experiences within a number of SEND context,

and has shaped my relationship with the work as an insider-outsider researcher. What stood out most was the courage, vulnerability and passion in which the participants shared their stories, and it is my hope that my interpretations of how they made sense of their experience resonates with them. This research has further strengthened my belief that SEND school staff represent an undervalued population in today's society, and that there should be further priority given to ensuring that they are equipped, both practically but also psychologically, in continually supporting the various complex needs of the wonderful students they support, as they dedicate so much of themselves in this work.

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Appendices

5.10 Appendix A: Literature Database search strings

ERIC (ProQuest)	noft(("inclusive education" OR "inclusion policy" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management" OR "school discipline" OR "restrictive practice")) AND noft(("experience*" OR "perception*" OR "attitude*" OR "perspective*")) AND noft(("student*" OR "teacher*" OR "school staff" OR "parent*" OR "caregiver*")) AND noft(("United Kingdom" OR England OR Scotland OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland"))
Scopus - Student	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (student* OR pupil* OR child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR learner*)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*")) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education") AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland")) AND PUBYEAR > 2001 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "HEAL") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))
Scopus - Staff	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (teacher* OR staff OR educator* OR "school personnel" OR "school staff" OR headteacher* OR "teaching assistant*")) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (parent* OR carer* OR caregiver* OR "family member*" OR guardian* OR "foster parent*" OR "adoptive parent*")) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (student* OR pupil* OR child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR learner*)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*")) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education") AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland")) AND PUBYEAR > 2001 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "HEAL") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))

Scopus - Parent/Carer	TITLE-ABS-KEY (parent* OR carer* OR caregiver* OR "family member*" OR guardian* OR "foster parent*" OR "adoptive parent*")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*")) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education") AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland")) AND PUBYEAR > 2001 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "HEAL") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))
ERC (EBSCo) - Student	AB (student* OR pupil* OR child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR learner*) AND AB ("restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management") AND AB (experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*") AND AB (school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education") AND AB ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland")
ERC (EBSCo) - Staff	AB (teacher* OR staff OR educator* OR "school personnel" OR "school staff" OR headteacher* OR "teaching assistant*") AND AB ("restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management") AND AB (experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*") AND AB (school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education") AND AB ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland")
ERC (EBSCo) - Parent/Carer	AB (parent* OR carer* OR caregiver* OR "family member*" OR guardian* OR "foster parent*" OR "adoptive parent*") AND AB ("restrictive practice*" OR exclusion OR exclusions OR seclusion OR restraint OR "physical intervention*" OR "behaviour management" OR "behavior management") AND AB (experience* OR perception* OR perspective* OR attitude* OR view* OR voice* OR reflection* OR understanding OR opinion* OR "lived experience*" OR qualitative OR interview* OR narrative* OR testimony OR ethnograph* OR phenomenolog* OR "focus group*") AND AB (school* OR classroom* OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "special education") AND AB ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR Britain OR British OR England OR Scottish OR Scotland OR Welsh OR Wales OR "Northern Ireland")

5.11 Appendix B: Ethical Approval from UH Ethics Committee (May 2025)

To: Robin Hunter

Your application for ethics approval for the study listed below has been approved by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. **Please read this letter carefully.**

Study Title: Exploring Moral Practice and Values in Special Educational Needs Settings: A Qualitative Approach

Your UH protocol number is: **0568 2025 May HSET**
This reference must be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

If you wish to use the UH Ethics Committee logo disclaimer in your communications with participants, please find it in our UH Ethics Canvas site under 'Units - Application Forms': UH Ethics Approval (instructure.com.

This ethics approval expires on 31/03/2026

Amending your protocol

Individual protocols will normally be approved for the limited period of time noted above. Application for minor amendments (including time extensions) of a protocol, may be made for a maximum of 4 working weeks after the end date of that protocol.

It is expected that any amendments proposed via the online system will be minor. Should substantial modification be required, it would be necessary to make a fresh application for ethical approval.

Note that you must obtain approval from the relevant UH Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority **prior to implementing any changes**. Failure to do so constitutes a breach of ethics regulations (UPR RE01).

Adverse circumstances
Any adverse circumstances that may arise because of your study/activity must be reported to ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk as soon as possible.

Permissions
Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study/activity must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

Ethics Administration Team

ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk

5.12 Appendix C: Ethics Amendment Approval (June 2025)

To: Robin Hunter

Your application for an amendment of the existing protocol listed below has been approved by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. **Please read this letter carefully.**

Study Title: Exploring Moral Practice and Values in Special Educational Needs Settings: A Qualitative Approach

Your UH protocol number is:

0568 2025 Jun HSET

This reference must be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

The Protocol Number issued from the online system replaces any previously issued protocol numbers and should be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

If you wish to use the UH Ethics Committee logo disclaimer in your communications with participants, please find it in our UH Ethics Canvas site under 'Units - Application Forms': UH Ethics Approval (instructure.com.

This ethics approval expires on 31/03/2026

Amending your protocol

Individual protocols will normally be approved for the limited period of time noted above. Application for minor amendments (including time extensions) of a protocol, may be made for a maximum of 4 working weeks after the end date of that protocol.

It is expected that any amendments proposed via the online system will be minor. Should substantial modification be required, it would be necessary to make a fresh application for ethical approval.

Note that you must obtain approval from the relevant UH Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority **prior to implementing any changes**. Failure to do so constitutes a breach of ethics regulations (UPR RE01).

Adverse circumstances
Any adverse circumstances that may arise because of your study/activity must be reported to ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk as soon as possible.

Permissions
Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study/activity must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

Ethics Administration Team

ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk

5.13 Appendix D: Ethics Amendment Approval (September 2025)

To: Robin Hunter

Your application for an amendment of the existing protocol listed below has been approved by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. **Please read this letter carefully.**

Study Title: Exploring Moral Practice and Values in Special Educational Needs Settings: A Qualitative Approach

Your UH protocol number is:

0568 2025 Sep HSET

This reference must be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

The Protocol Number issued from the online system replaces any previously issued protocol numbers and should be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

If you wish to use the UH Ethics Committee logo disclaimer in your communications with participants, please find it in our UH Ethics Canvas site under 'Units - Application Forms': UH Ethics Approval - Ethics Forms.

This ethics approval expires on 31/03/2026

Amending your protocol

Individual protocols will normally be approved for the limited period of time noted above. Application for minor amendments (including time extensions) of a protocol, may be made for a maximum of 4 working weeks after the end date of that protocol.

It is expected that any amendments proposed via the online system will be minor. Should substantial modification be required, it would be necessary to make a fresh application for ethical approval.

Note that you must obtain approval from the relevant UH Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority **prior to implementing any changes**. Failure to do so constitutes a breach of ethics regulations (UPR RE01).

Adverse circumstances
Any adverse circumstances that may arise because of your study/activity must be reported to ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk as soon as possible.

Permissions
Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study/activity must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

Ethics Administration Team

ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk

5.14 Appendix E: Recruitment Poster

University of Hertfordshire UH Ethics Committee

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

DO YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE WORKING IN AN SEN SCHOOL?

HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED IN A SITUATION WHICH YOU FEEL WENT AGAINST YOUR MORAL VALUES?

This research is looking to understand the role that 'Moral Injury' may play on school staff when they have been involved in situations or decisions that infringe on their moral values.

Sharing your experiences may provide valuable insights into how being involved in incidents impact your wellbeing and may lead to developments in staff support

What would be involved:

A one to one interview (either in person or via Microsoft teams) where you'll be asked to share your experiences and thoughts in a private, non-judgemental space.



Who am I?



Robin Hunter (He/Him)
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
The University of Hertfordshire

QR Code
to register interest

How to get involved:

If you are interested in taking part or would like more information, please scan the QR code.

Alternatively, email me:
r.hunter2@herts.ac.uk

Or my supervisor, Dr Emma Karwatzki on:
e.karwatski@herts.ac.uk

Protocol Number: ***0568 2025 Sep HSET***
Approving Committee: The University Of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with delegated authority.

5.15 Appendix F: Email shared with SEND schools

Outlook

[Draft] FAO Senior Leadership Team – Research Study on Staff Wellbeing in SEN Schools

From

1 attachment (1 MB)
Moral Injury Research A4-Final.jpeg;

FAO: Senior Leadership Team
Cc: Mental Health Lead

Dear Senior Leadership Team,

I am writing to you regarding a research study I am conducting as part of my doctorate in Clinical Psychology at The University of Hertfordshire. The study aims to better understand the emotional and moral challenges faced by staff working in Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, particularly in situations where incidents or demands at work may conflict with personal or moral values, and how these experiences may impact personal wellbeing.

Having previously worked within SEN Education settings, I recognise how emotionally demanding the challenges of this work can be, and how it may contribute to stress, burnout, and reduced wellbeing.

This research aims to give voice to these experiences, with the hope of developing greater understanding and informing future development of specific staff wellbeing practices within SEN settings

I would be extremely grateful if you would be willing to share my research poster with your staff team. You may also wish to display it in a staff room or on a noticeboard for those who may be interested in taking part.

I would be delighted to discuss the study further, or answer any questions you may have, either via Microsoft Teams or even in person if at all feasible, at your convenience.

Thank you very much for considering my request.

Best wishes,

Robin

Robin Hunter (he/him)
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
University of Hertfordshire
School of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences

5.16 Appendix G: Participant information sheet as presented in Qualtrics survey used to register interest to participate in the research study

Exploring Moral Practice and Values in Special Educational Needs settings.

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a doctoral study as part of Robin Hunter's Doctorate in Clinical Psychology training at The University of Hertfordshire.

Before you decide whether to do so, it is important that you understand the study that is being undertaken and what your involvement will include. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Do not hesitate to ask us if there is anything that is unclear or for any further information you would like to help you make your decision.

Please do take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The University's regulation, UPR RE01, 'Studies Involving the Use of Human Participants' can be accessed via this link: University of Hertfordshire Policies and Regulations.
(after accessing this website, scroll down to Letter S where you will find the regulation)

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of this study?

The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Special Educational Needs Staff who have been involved in experiences or decisions in the course of their work that have breached their moral values. This study will particularly focus on the challenges faced by staff, understanding the decision process behind such incidents and the emotional responses and impact that follow these challenges. The study will also hope to understand the sense making staff hold to preserve their wellbeing and ability to continue their work and any further support they feel would be of value.

Do I have to take part?

It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. Agreeing to join the study does not mean that you must complete it. You are free to withdraw without giving a reason up until the start of data analysis which would typically be a month following completion of the interview. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part at all, will not affect any treatment/care that you may receive (should this be relevant).

Are there any age or other restrictions that may prevent me from participating?

You must be 18 years old or over to participate in this study. You must either be currently employed, or have been employed within the last 6 months, at a Special Educational Needs setting in England. Additionally, you should not be subject to any ongoing safeguarding investigation or disciplinary proceedings. Additionally, all participants must be able to engage in interviews in spoken English.

How long will my part in the study take?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be invited to attend a semi-structured interview. The interview will take up to 90 minutes and will involve some pre-determined questions with some prompts. These prompts will provide an opportunity for us to explore your responses with you further. The interview will ask about your experiences of working within SEN Education and to explore any experiences you have had where you have had to act, not act or be party to decisions or situations which you found uncomfortable with and may have contravened your moral values. You will be asked open-ended questions to support with getting an understanding of your own personal lived experience on this topic.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you'll firstly be given this information sheet to keep, and you will also be asked to sign a consent form. You will then be invited to take part in an interview with the primary researcher. This interview will last around 90 minutes and can take place in person or virtually via Microsoft Teams. All interviews will be voice recorded for the purpose of the study. You will also be asked to provide your name, contact details (email and telephone/mobile number). As the project is using interviews, verbatim extracts and quotes may appear in the results section of the study which may be disseminated through academic journals and research conferences. All participants will be anonymized using a pseudonym and any quotes will be selected with the intention to minimize any possibilities of identification and will be attributed only to the assigned pseudonym. If you change your mind about taking part in the study, you can stop participating in the study up until the start of data analysis. You will be advised on the deadline to withdraw by your interviewer and this date will also be included in your debrief. In addition, if you decide to stop after you have completed individual interview, you can withdraw by contacting the lead researcher (see contact details below). Following this, your data will be securely destroyed by a member of the project's research team.

What are the possible disadvantages, risks or side effects of taking part?

I do ask that you only share what you are comfortable to share during the individual interview, and that you do not have to respond to all the questions asked if you do not wish to. If you do find the discussion difficult, you can withdraw yourself from the interview while it is ongoing, you will not be asked why you have withdrawn and there will be debriefing. This will be an opportunity to discuss anything you may have found difficult about the discussions held, the content of the debrief discussions will not be recorded or included in the project findings. If you experience serious distress and feel you require ongoing support, you will be signposted to the appropriate support or service.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We hope that you will find the research activities interesting and an opportunity to contribute to the existing knowledge base on Education Staff's wellbeing and provide further scope for the development of targeted wellbeing support for staff who have suffered moral injury in the course of their work, thus reducing risk of burnout and compassion fatigue. All participants who complete interviews will be eligible for a £20 Love2Shop voucher as compensation for your time.

How will my taking part in this study be

kept confidential?

The research team holds responsibility in making sure your participation is kept confidential and that any information and data is kept secure and is only utilised as outlined in this information sheet. All data collected will be stored in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016. All data collected will be kept confidential and only accessed by members of the research team. Any identifiable information within the interview transcript will be anonymised using pseudonyms by the researcher, and will be stored in a secure folder on the University of Hertfordshire's One Drive, only accessible to members of the research team. The only instance in which confidentiality will need to be breached is if you disclose the intent in harming yourself or others. In this case, I would first discuss this with you and then report this to the relevant services.

What will happen to the data collected within this study?

All data will be analysed for the writing up of a thesis on this topic. The data will be stored on an encrypted folder within The University of Hertfordshire's One Drive, only accessible to the project's research team.

All anonymised data, including transcripts, will be held for up to 5 years after the end of the study, in line with the University of Hertfordshire policy. After this time, a member of the research team, such as the primary supervisor, will be responsible for securely destroying the data.

The anonymised data will also be used to write a journal article which will be subsequently submitted for peer review with the view for further publication in a relevant journal. Additionally, the anonymised data may also be used in presentations for further dissemination of the study.

Will the data be required for use in further studies?

The data will not be used in any further studies.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by: The University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. The UH protocol number is (0568 2025 Sep HSET)

Factors that might put others at risk

Please note that if, during the study, any medical conditions or non-medical circumstances such as unlawful activity become apparent that might or had put others at risk, the University may refer the matter to the appropriate authorities and, under such circumstances, you will be withdrawn from the study.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please get in touch with me, in writing, by phone or by email:

Principle Investigator:
Robin Hunter
Email:
r.hunter2@herts.ac.uk

Alternatively, please contact:

Principal Supervisor:
Dr Emma Karwatzki
Email:
e.karwatzki@herts.ac.uk

Although we hope it is not the case, if you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached

or treated during the course of this study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar at the following address:

Secretary and Registrar
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane
Hatfield
Herts
AL10 9AB

Thank you very much for reading this information and giving consideration to taking part in this study.

I have read the above information and would like to continue.

I confirm that I am aged 18 or over

Yes
No

I confirm that I work, or have worked within the last 6 months, at an SEN Education Setting in England.

Yes

No

I confirm that I speak English to a level that would allow me to engage in an interview on the named subject.

Yes

No

Thank you for your interest in this research. Unfortunately you have not met the eligibility criteria to continue with the research.

We appreciate you taking taking the time to partake in this survery.

In this section, you will be asked a series of demographic questions, such as age, gender, ethnicity and occupation role. This helps us better understand the diversity of our participants. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for research purposes.

If you are not comfortable answering any questions, you may select "*Prefer not to answer*".

Gender

Male

Female

Non-binary / third gender

Other (please specifiy)

Prefer not to say

Age range

18-24 ○ 25-34 ○ 35-44 ○ 45-54 ○ 55-64 ○ 65+ ○ Prefer not to say ○

What is your job role?

(if you do not wish to share, please leave the box blank)

What is your ethnicity?

White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British

White: Irish

White: Other (please specify)

Asian or Asian British: Indian

Asian or Asian British: Pakistani

Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi

Asian or Asian British: Chinese

Any other Asian background (please specify)

Black African, Caribbean or Black British: African

Black African, Caribbean or Black British: Caribbean

Any other Black background (please specify)

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups: White and Black Caribbean

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups: White and Asian

Any other multiple ethnic background (please specify)

Other ethnic group (please specify)

Prefer not to say

Contact Information:

Name

Email Address

Contact Number

Please list any preferences on when you would like to be contacted

Consent Form for Study

Please carefully read each of the statements below and place a tick in the box if appropriate.

By completing and signing this form, you are providing your consent for Robin Hunter to reach out to you regarding taking part in the research Project.

If you do not understand any of the below items, please contact the research team to ask for clarification before signing the consent form.

I confirm that I have been given a Participant Information Sheet (a copy of which is attached to this form) giving particulars of the study, including its aim(s), methods and design, the names and contact details of key people and, as appropriate, the risks and potential benefits, how the information collected will be stored and for how long, and any plans for follow-up studies that might involve further approaches to participants.

I have also been informed of how my personal information on this form will be stored and for how long. I have been given details of my involvement in the study. I have been told that in the event of any significant change to the aim(s) or design of the study I will be informed, and asked to renew my consent to participate in it.

I have been assured that I may withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage or having to give a reason.

In giving my consent to participate in this study, I understand that voice recording will take place and I have been informed of how/whether this recording will be transmitted/displayed

I have been given information about the risks of my suffering harm or adverse effects. I have been told about the aftercare and support that will be

offered to me in the event of this happening, and I have been assured that all such aftercare or support would be provided at no cost to myself. In signing this consent form I accept that medical attention might be sought for me, should circumstances require this.

I have been told how information relating to me (data obtained in the course of the study, and data provided by me about myself) will be handled: how it will be kept secure, who will have access to it, and how it will or may be used.

I understand that if there is any revelation of unlawful activity or any indication of non-medical circumstances that would or has put others at risk, the University may refer the matter to the appropriate authorities.

Finally please provide a signature below:



Block 7

Thank you for your interest in this research. Unfortunately you have not consented to all aspects of the consent form, you will not be able to continue with involvement with the research.

We appreciate you taking taking the time to partake in this

survery.

Block 6

Thank you for your interest in this research and for taking the time to complete the survey.

A member of the research team will be in contact in due time to discuss your future involvement.

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5.17 Appendix H: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Icebreaker question

Can you describe how you're feeling today / arriving at this interview, and which kind of weather best represents it?

Theme / Focus Area	**Interview Question**
Background and entry into role	Please tell me about how you came to work in a school and what that journey has been like for you?
Motivation for SEN work	What drew you to working in SEN education, and what that experience has meant to you personally?
Positive experiences / meaning	Tell me what it feels like when your work feels most meaningful or fulfilling?
Values	What values do you hold that you feel are important in the work you do? Can you think of a time when you felt you were staying true to your values in your work? What was that like for you?
Challenges and tensions	Tell me about times when working in this role has felt particularly difficult or testing for you? Tell me about a time when something at work didn't sit right with your values and morals?
Moral or emotional challenge	Can you tell me about an experience that really stayed with you — perhaps one that challenged you emotionally or morally?
Experience unfolding	Can you walk me through what that experience was like for you, as it was unfolding?
Reflection and meaning-making	Looking back, what do you think shaped how you responded or felt at that time? What did that experience mean for you in terms of your sense of right and wrong?

Role and self-reflection	How do you make sense of your role in that experience now?
Impact and aftermath	Can you tell me how that experience changed the way you see yourself as a professional or as a person?
Perception of environment	Please share how that experience changed how you see your work, your colleagues, or the school environment in any way?
Managing challenges	What helps you come to terms with difficult moments in your work?
Closing reflection	Is there anything else that feels important for you to share about your experiences in this role?

5.18 Appendix I: Participant Debrief information sheet

University of Hertfordshire UH Ethics Committee

Participant Debrief Information Sheet

Title of the Study:

Exploring Moral Practice and Values in Special Educational Needs settings: A Qualitative Approach

Thank you for your participation!

Thank you for taking part in the study. Your time and experiences are greatly appreciated and will make a valuable contribution to this research.

What was this study about?

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and sense making of special educational needs staff where they feel that their moral values have been transgressed in the course of their work.

Existing research across different professions have highlighted that moral injury is a response to a situation where a person either acts, fails to prevent or is party to incidents which transgress their moral values.

It is understood that there are numerous challenges faced by staff working within special educational needs schools whereby staff roles have become multifaceted where they often play the role of educator, pastoral support and counsellor in response to the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges which students present with.

As such, the emotional burden of teaching can pose a significant drain on the individual staff member's emotional resources, in addition to their other teaching responsibilities. Consequences of this that have been evidence are that teachers face burnout, compassion fatigue and increased rates of job attrition due to situations that impact on staff wellbeing.

This study aims to build upon previous research by exploring how this phenomenon is experienced within special educational needs settings where there are additional challenges to working, particularly in the context of working with a vulnerable population often with co-occurring mental health issues. By examining staff's perspectives, the study will contribute to the evidence base on how societal views, service structures and staff wellbeing practices influence an individual's ability to manage their wellbeing in the context of experiences where moral distress has occurred.

What happens next?

The principal researcher will now transcribe the interview in order to be used for anaylsis. Once a summary of the interview transcript has been written, you will be invited to review and provide feedback to ensure its accuracy.

The researcher will then use this transcript to identify key themes in working within Special Educational Needs Education settings when moral values have been transgressed. These findings may be disseminated and published in a relevant academic journal to support their application in clinical practice.

The researcher will also contact you again to share the £20 Love2Shop voucher, once the recruitment and interview process for the study has been concluded.

What if I want to withdraw?

If you would like to withdraw your data from your study, you may do so within one month of the interview (day you receive this form). To withdraw, contact the primary researcher using the details below. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part at all, will not affect any treatment/care that you are receiving.

Support Resources

Should you feel that discussing your experiences has brought up unexpected emotions, we would encourage you to reach out to these resources:

Organisation: SHOUT UK
(Free 24/7 confidential mental health text support in the UK.
Contact: https://giveusashout.org/
Text SHOUT to 85258

Organisation: Samaritans
(free, one-to-one helpline, 24 hours a day)
Contact: https://www.samaritans.org;
116 123

Organisation: Education Support Partnership
(independent mental health and wellbeing support service to all staff working in education)
Contact: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/
National Helpline: 08000 562 561,

Organisation: Schools in Mind
(A free network for education professionals to share expertise about mental health and wellbeing.)
https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/schools-in-mind/

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please get in touch with me, in writing, by phone or by email:

Principle Investigator: Robin Hunter
Email: r.hunter2@herts.ac.uk

Alternatively, please contact:
Principal Supervisor: Dr Emma Karwatzki
Email: e.karwatzki@herts.ac.uk

Although we hope it is not the case, if you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar at the following address:

University of Hertfordshire UH Ethics Committee

Secretary and Registrar
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane
Hatfield
Herts
AL10 9AB

Thank you very much for taking part in this study.

5.19 Appendix J: Examples of idiographic analysis process from transcript excerpts

Experiental Statement	#	Timestamp	Speaker	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
The sustinence of success stories in allowing staff to continue to work despite facing challenges day in and day out. Emphasises tha value of working as educators in playing a role in shaping succesful outcomes for CYP.	84	00:07:20	Oak	And then I feel probably one of the most important things we do as staff is role model appropriate behaviour, which is why it's so important.	D: emphasizes "role modeling" and offering a "fresh start" policy (welcoming a student with a smile even if they were abusive the day before). Also explores the rewarding events that contribute to the fuffiling and value of working in SEN. Contradictions of challenging vs rewarding - binaries of complex environment. L: Cultural reference - Friends regarding altrustic actions, need feel good factor to survive challenging aspects of the role. Evoking battery analogy and rewarding charges - challenging drains. C: Contribution and hard work of staff has added 'value' to students life and outlook - paired with neo-liberal / capitalist view on productive in societal view?
	85	00:07:28	Oak	We do so much training on the way we talk to the students, the way we interact with the students, the way we welcome in the building every morning.	
	86	00:07:36	Oak	regardless of what they've called you the day before, they come in the next day and you can have a smile and a high five, it's good to see you, welcome back in again, let's start, it's a new day, let's go again.	
	87	00:07:46	Oak	So it's challenging, but you've only got to have one positive in your day to outweigh all the negative nonsense that you've had to put up with as well.	
	88	00:07:57	Oak	Or one student sends an e-mail that, just got into my college course.	
	89	00:08:01	Oak	you get a thank you here or a parent will e-mail in to say I just wanted to let you know that this has happened outside of school, we're really grateful and that sort of thing that you just get one little success story, you know that it's been worth it despite the fact that it can be stressful and hard work and hugely time consuming and all those sorts of things.	
	90	00:08:17	Researcher	You can hold both positions being challenging and rewarding.	
	91	00:08:20	Oak	Absolutely, I think if it wasn't for that reward side of it,	
	92	00:08:24	Oak	I think it's an episode of Friends where Phoebe's trying to find a selfless good deed.	
	93	00:08:29	Oak	And I think to me, that is this job.	
	94	00:08:31	Oak	We all enjoy working with students, but ultimately, if you didn't get a feel-good factor from it, I don't think any of us would do it, because why would you put up with so much if at some point you didn't get some sort of sense of satisfaction, some sort of sense of joy, some sense of pride?	
	95	00:08:48	Oak	[Student] came in the other day, and he just looked	
	96	00:08:53	Oak	Like a million bucks.	
	97	00:08:54	Oak	I mean, his North Face jacket on, little goatee, looked chiseled.	
	98	00:08:57	Oak	He's obviously keeping himself fit.	
	99	00:08:59	Oak	He's working at leisure centres, has been doing really well.	
	100	00:09:01	Oak	He's talking about that, saying, pushing me to whether I want to go to management.	
	101	00:09:04	Oak	Maybe I'm not quite sure.	
	102	00:09:05	Oak	He said, but I think what I really want to do is join the RAF.	
	103	00:09:08	Oak	I've been doing some research and I really think I want to be a gunner in the RAF.	
	104	00:09:12	Oak	So I need to do this and I need to do that.	
	105	00:09:13	Oak	And what conversations are we having versus the lad who's smashing the living daylight windows at the back of the school?	
	106	00:09:19	Oak	You think it's not necessarily	
	107	00:09:22	Oak	us that's done that, but I'd like to think that we'd put a couple of percentage points in there to make him be able to do that, which then is to me is reinforced by the fact that he came back, because if he didn't think we'd added value, when we'd asked him to come back and do an alumni chat to the students, he said, No, no, don't do that, because the school's rubbish.	
	108	00:09:38	Oak	So he's obviously thought the school's done something for him, he wants to give a little bit back, so that little bit of...	
	109	00:09:43	Oak	Positive reinforcement there is really, really nice as well.	
	110	00:09:45	Oak	And then I think we've got four or five lined up over the next few weeks and months to come and speak to students.	

Experiential Statement	#	Timestamp	Speaker	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
The evolving nature of SEND and how shifts in student presentation may evoke feeling of uncertainty or feeling de-skilled. Importance of staff body to be diverse to allow ensure wide range of needs being met.	192	00:15:40	Oak	But it has changed, it really, really has changed.	D: The shifting presentations of students, from more behavioural to mental health and wellbeing focused needs. Requiring adaptation and a shift in approach e.g. nurture group. As such, a diversity of staff is important in order to be representative and able to cater for students. L: Repetition of the word "change(d)" - suggesting a new or unfamiliar fronteir to what the head has previously experienced. Frequent use of "mix" - eclectic needs that may be beyond the "typical EBD" profile that they are familiar with and perhaps there is a feeling of de-skilled as a professional? "Love playing Pokemon **OR** playing football / "old fashioned EBD angry boys" vs "mental health.. autistic" - are these mutually exclusive? C: Does this experience bring back feelings of fear/naivety evoked earlier in their career. Re-inforcing the importance of having a diverse staff team to support the needs. The need for the system to be adaptable to presenting needs.
	193	00:15:42	Oak	I think the type of students we work with have slightly changed.	
	194	00:15:46	Oak	It is definitely more the mental health side of things, less and less of the old-fashioned EBD angry boys, although our year sevens are slightly gone back the other way.	
	195	00:15:54	Oak	But you have to adapt	
	196	00:15:59	Oak	the practice with the types of students that we've got and we introduced the nurture group because again it was a certain type of student that was coming through we need to make sure we can meet the needs there and again that even comes down to the mix of staff that you've got and that we're able to appoint at times that means that you've got skill sets to work with the kids that love playing pokémon that are really autistic, through to the other end of the scale where they're really sporty and they want to be physical and football and all that sort of thing so you've got to have that mix we've got a good mix of age gender and an increased ethnicity in the school in terms of the staffing profile which we	
	197	00:16:29	Oak	perhaps didn't have as much or as strong as representation as we could have done and should have done in the past.	
	198	00:16:33	Oak	But that sometimes just comes down to good luck, who applies on the job and yeah, on the day, whether you've got an opportunity to appoint people.	
	199	00:16:41	Oak	So yeah, that's been good.	

Experiential Statement	#	Timestamp	Speaker	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
The burden of institutional failings on individual staff members, and personal & professional sacrifices made to continue to support students	130	00:08:43	Willow	In my previous setting, where I was for the longest time, I found that	D: Reflecting on the changing landscape of SEN (contrasting the early years (high staffing, lower pupil needs) of career, with the final years (increased needs, less experienced staff). Taking individual responsibility of this change- leading to guilt / shame due to perceived injustic for the students this has brought. L: Rhythmic repetition of 'same' - adherence to conforming with standards and status quo without further support. "burning out a little bit" - underselling the emotional toll this held? C: Experience of moral injury? in the way they experience having "failed" their students despite systemic failings and limiting resources. There may be a chaining between their professional identity of supporting children and external factors leading to worse outcomes which leads to personal consequences.
	131	00:08:49	Willow	that was the hardest experience, but I think I took it more personally in the sense of I saw it as a personal failure rather than as a, status of the education system failure because I was in the same school, the same approach.	
	132	00:09:06	Willow	I was doing everything the same way, but where I would have had when I first started in my first class, I think I had	
	133	00:09:13	Willow	10 pupils and I had three learning teaching assistants.	
	134	00:09:18	Willow	And then I had, and that level of need in that room, I was like, yeah, there's a couple of challenges.	
	135	00:09:22	Willow	And again, my energy was probably new and high and loving everything, but it was different compared to where I ended up in my last three, two, three years there, where you had more and more need, less qualified and experienced teaching assistants,	
	136	00:09:38	Willow	plus the same outstanding expectations that we want from all of our staff.	
	137	00:09:42	Willow	It was just like I was holding myself to such a high account that I was never going to be able to meet my own expectations based on what things, the old model.	
	138	00:09:52	Willow	It just was, you're trying to make the same situation without the same conditions and it was just not going to work.	
	139	00:09:56	Willow	So I think it did lead to me burning out a little bit.	
	140	00:10:00	Willow	And I think	
	141	00:10:02	Willow	Yeah.	
	142	00:10:02	Willow	So it just it disheartened everything for me as well because I'm like, I know how much we can do for these kids.	
	143	00:10:08	Willow	And then feeling really upset that I couldn't give the same results and levels because it was seemed so unfair to them that the situation was not the same for them.	
	144	00:10:19	Willow	So they didn't get the same quality and condition that previous students.	

Experiential Statement	#	Timestamp	Speaker	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
The loss of their professional identity and role in the face of systemic challenges.	86	00:05:55	Willow	Yeah, I mean, I...	D: Initially reluctant to shift role due to professional identity as a teacher and their long career prior. Succumned to pressure to take role which they accept is a development for their career but yearns for the connection being a teacher offered. L: Systemic Failures - "crunched, unmanageable, untenable" "was too much" - direct emotional impact on staff - overwhelm. "I'm not admin, I'm a teacher" - Identify strongly with role in the school, switching role may be betrayal of identity? C: Resistance to the idea of taking the new role, before then resignation and accepting the new role speaks to the moral dilemma of sacrificing professional identity in the face to systemic challenges. Did they compromise their own values too much? Leading to regret and lack of joy?
	87	00:05:57	Willow	did 10, effectively 10 years with a bit of a gap in the middle in one special needs school in [City].	
	88	00:06:04	Willow	And that's where I lived and worked.	
	89	00:06:05	Willow	So it was perfect.	
	90	00:06:07	Willow	And I loved that school.	
	91	00:06:08	Willow	It spoke to it taught me a lot and I loved a lot of it.	
	92	00:06:10	Willow	But also it was the crunch towards the end as it's, you know, as the education SEN system is completely just crunched.	
	93	00:06:17	Willow	It's it was becoming unmanageable and untenable for me to work	
	94	00:06:22	Willow	in the same expectation with completely different working conditions, because you could just see the funding crunch coming and coming and the most amount of need in that room, which was too much.	
	95	00:06:33	Willow	So I ended up moving to [County], North [County].	
	96	00:06:37	Willow	So it just, that was the way life went.	
	97	00:06:40	Willow	So then when I moved here, I ended up working in another severe learning difficulty autistic school in [town], which I did for a year.	
	98	00:06:49	Willow	And I was like,	
	99	00:06:50	Willow	It's fair, it was a long drive from where I lived, number one, but also I was like, SLD is not necessarily, I prefer a little bit more interaction with back and forth and communication.	
	100	00:07:01	Willow	So I found that just didn't feel in the same way.	
	101	00:07:05	Willow	So then when I joined this school, I was, this is a moderate learning difficulty school.	
	102	00:07:12	Willow	And	
	103	00:07:13	Willow	I was coming purely as class teacher.	
	104	00:07:15	Willow	That's what I applied for.	
	105	00:07:16	Willow	And they said, well, what about applying for the Senco role?	
	106	00:07:18	Willow	And I said, no, thank you.	
	107	00:07:19	Willow	I'd rather, I'm not admin, I'm teacher.	
	108	00:07:21	Willow	And then they were like, well, do you want to do the Senco role?	
	109	00:07:24	Willow	And I was like, oh, fine, go on, I'll do it.	
	110	00:07:25	Willow	So now I'm in it and I'm getting the qualification and I'm adding the bows and all of that to my arrows to my bow, whatever it is.	
	111	00:07:32	Willow	But I	
	112	00:07:34	Willow	I can see, I'm like, yeah, this is fine, but it's not, it doesn't bring me as much joy as the other ones did.	
	113	00:07:40	Willow	But then I'm also like, I don't think I can go back to teaching and planning all of those lessons.	
	114	00:07:44	Willow	So there's pros, pros and cons.	

Experiential Statement	#	Timestamp	Speaker	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
This professional experience has shifting understanding of exclusion vs inclusion & support and the virtues of working in a holistic and person centred way.	40	00:02:35	Magnolia	I think in terms of like specialist schools now, I think when we were at school, it was sort of wasn't, it was like a taboo, wasn't it?	D: Compares historical understanding from own school days (taboo, outcasts) to present understanding - person-centred specialist support L: Emotive terms - outcast,taboo - explores isolation and marginalisation of SEND community C: This work has challenged previously held views around difference and SEN needs, and may have elicited some elements of guilt or shame from these jnarratives from the past.
	41	00:02:44	Magnolia	was a subject that was a bit, you know, if someone had specialist needs, they weren't...	
	42	00:02:48	Magnolia	viewed the sort of outcast in ways, which I think is quite sad.	
	43	00:02:52	Magnolia	Whereas now I think it's obviously really helpful in the education system that there's, so the school that I go to isn't, the specific one I go to, I've also been to a few actually, but the one I go to is for students who can't obviously behave within the classroom.	
	44	00:03:04	Magnolia	So I actually think going to the school, because I've been in school with people who obviously can't behave in the classroom and they probably need to be on their own.	
	45	00:03:10	Magnolia	This is actually creating an environment for them to be one-on-one and obviously help them educate and learn.	
	46	00:03:17	Magnolia	So I think my personal experience is, and all the children are really, really nice, and I think you probably obviously get to know them on more of a one-to-one basis there, whereas on a wider classroom, if that makes sense.	

Experiential Statement	#	Timestamp	Speaker	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
Consequences of an unsuportive environment and threat to the health and wellbeing of staff	278	00:23:55	Magnolia	The feedback I've got from other staff basically is that they've been in positions where they've had to be in a hold and then no one's really offered to swap them out.	D: This reflection contradicts the theme of schools offering an environment of support to staff. It also reflects of the significant consequence on staff's health and wellbeing when systemic issues impact staff's ability to perform duties effectively. L: "attacked.. been bitten, spat out, had your hair pulled" - Listing violations and physical assaults highlights potential threats highlights risks and emotional toll this may hold. C: System contributing to staff burnout - How may this play out for staff where supporting each other is a key value but feel unable to support due to lack of capacity / strength.
	279	00:24:03	Magnolia	And I think that's quite poor really because it probably makes them feel like tired.	
	280	00:24:06	Magnolia	And then I think one member of staff actually, he didn't come to work for two days because I think he was quite obviously impacted by the effect that it had.	
	281	00:24:14	Magnolia	So he obviously didn't feel like coming to work, which I completely understand if you've been directly involved in that intimate, if you've obviously been, I suppose, attacked, but you've been bitten, like spat out, had your hair pulled, it's going to upset you and you might feel.	
	282	00:24:28	Magnolia	quite vulnerable, I suppose, and you don't want to necessarily go back into that environment immediately, where which I imagine happens quite a lot, to be honest.	

5.20 Appendix K: Example of clustering of experiential statements into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Experiential Statement
Discovery of professional self & passion for field
Identified values that support working
How these values align with working in SEND
Conflict between nurturing, student facing work vs 'souless' paperwork
Losing their professional identity after change in role
Procedural tasks (meetings, reports, etc.) taking them away from student facing work
Emotional cost of sacrificing time to prioritise student needs
Placing blame of failure on themselves rather than systemic failure
Struggle of prioritising self to maintain balance and manage emotional toll
Impasse between ethos of school (academics) and personal values (holistic)
Feeling 'out of place' within the professional environment
Feeling trapped in role due to financial safety and uncertainty that they will find better environment
Sense of feeling de-powered to challenge system
Witnessing harmful practice and feeling unable to challenge it.
Feeling helpless to confront due to junior role
Being upskilled by peers in previous settings
Feeling responsible to regulate student's emotions
Finding sources of support from trusted colleagues
Enacting small acts of resistance by promoting inclusive practices
Journey of understanding: from more 'behaviourist' to more neuroaffirmative in understanding

PETS	Experiential Statement
Professional values and how they relate to SEND Education	Discovery of professional self & passion for field
	Identified values that support working
	How these values align with working in SEND
	Journey of understanding: from more 'behaviourist' to more neuroaffirmative in understanding
Conflict between personal values and professional priority	Conflict between nurturing, student facing work vs 'souless' paperwork
	Losing their professional identity after change in role
	Procedural tasks (meetings, reports, etc.) taking them away from student facing work
	Impasse between ethos of school (academics) and personal values (holistic)
	Feeling 'out of place' within the professional environment
	Feeling trapped in role due to financial safety and uncertainty that they will find better environment
Emotional consequence of systemic issues in SEND	Emotional cost of sacrificing time to prioritise student needs
	Placing blame of failure on themselves rather than systemic failure
	Struggle of prioritising self to maintain balance and manage emotional toll
	Feeling responsible to regulate student's emotions
Witnessing harm, the moral battle of how to challenge when feeling de-powered	Sense of feeling de-powered to challenge system
	Witnessing harmful practice and feeling unable to challenge it.
	Feeling helpless to confront due to junior role
An environment of encourgement and learning from peers	Being upskilled by peers in previous settings
Navigating working within an incongruent environment	Finding sources of support from trusted colleagues
	Enacting small acts of resistance by promoting inclusive practices

5.21 Appendix L: GETS overview

Group Experiential Theme	Sub-Theme	Maple	Oak	Willow	Juniper	Magnola	Elm
The draw of SEN: An environment of nurture and belonging	A journey to SEN through early life experiences & instilled values	X	X	X		X	X
	A community of togetherness & camaraderie	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Shared stories around neurodivergent identity			X	X		X
The emotional tug of war: Navigating working in a value-driven way in the face of challenges within SEN education	The scarcity of resources and provisions	X	X	X	X		X
	Moral decision making, its consequences, and the lived experience of moral failing and distress	X	X	X	X	X	X
	The reward and nourishment of successful stories	X	X	X	X	X	X
An institutional straitjacket: Experiences of systemic entrapment	Negotiating external pressures and the gaze of scrutiny	X	X	X	X		X
	Incongruence and friction between holistic care and academic attainment.		X	X	X	X	X
	Power imbalance in questioning leadership and systems when experiencing moral dilemmas.	X	X	X	X		X

5.22 Appendix M: Organisation of GETS & quotes example

An institutional straitjacket: Experiences of feeling entrapped by the system											
Negotiating external pressures and the gaze of scrutiny				**Incongruence and friction between holistic care and academic attainment.**				**Power imbalance in questioning leadership and systems when experiencing moral dilemmas.**			
Participant	Line	Quote	Notes	Participant	Line	Quote	Notes	Participant	Line	Quote	
Oak	38-39	You get some really, you can string together days of sunshine, but then there's almost always some cloud lingering at some point, whether it be the SEN funding, whether it be needs-led models that they're looking at, changing designations of the schools, parents that are massively challenging, questioning what the school is doing and that sort of thing.		Oak	69-77	Because to me, we do our very best to get them academic success, because you need that to get onto certain college courses and that sort of thing. And if that's what their ability leads them to, fantastic, we will absolutely push that. But to me, either as importantly, if not more importantly, it's Can you function as an appropriate human being, as an appropriate adult in the wider world? Whether you've got GCSE, maths, and English or not, can you hold a conversation? Have you got basic manners? Can you sit around a dining table and eat food without people thinking that's disgusting? Can you deal with adversity without shouting, screaming, and smashing windows? All the skills that you need to be able to function in a workplace, whatever that maybe in the future, and to me, that developing them as a human being in regards to their emotional outbursts, their behaviour, all the bits and pieces, the social skills that they may be lacking and all the rest of it is so, so key to what we do.		Oak	755-758	I'm well aware that when a child is in crisis, that the biggest influence on that is the adults. And I've definitely been in situations where I'm thinking as an adult, you're getting this wrong, you're making this worse. Particularly early on in my career. Well, I wasn't perhaps confident enough to step in and tell what was it a deputy head at the time to back off from this kid because I'm like you're goading him and he's going to do something in a minute.
Oak	370-374	*I think so often the SEN students have had a tougher time of it, particularly here in the school of social, emotional, mental health. They're not necessarily born with a physical disability or anything like that. And I think a lot of times with our students is that you can look at them and not know that there's a SEND need. And I think that then comes with a huge amount of judgment on them, on the parents, because there's still a lack of-- although I think it's massively improved in the last few years.*	Unsure	Oak	78-80	And yeah, in myopinion, it's more important that than whether they get a five or a six in their GCSE or whether it was a four or whether they've only managed to get their functional skills because you're only going to see those pieces of paper at a certain point once you're in door at college. If you've got that piece of paper, fine, because you could get them the qualification. But if you've not taught them how to act in that environment, they're going to fail.		Oak	764-774	But as the TA watching the deputy head essentially go to kid and push them, not physically push them, but just kept going on and on and on and on and on. You've made your point, mate. It's enough, stop there. Trying to intervene myself to say, look, can we go forward, can we do this, can whatever we do to try and de-escalate it. But eventually the kid did lose his rag. I think he threw a massive stone through a window and the kid got suspended. I'm like, that didn't need to happen and it didn't need to happen because the adult got it wrong. The adult made, almost pushed that situation to happen when it didn't need to because the adult wouldn't let go of their ego that they felt they'd been wronged, couldn't let go of that. It was their emotional outburst that triggered the child to do what they did.
Oak	533-536	The sheer weight, and again it's party perhaps because of the structure that we've got in the school, that the consultations for example, where we've got, have developed a good reputation around the county, there's an awful list of parents who want to send their kids here. The way SEN is in [county] at the moment, perhaps not as organised as it could be, careful what I say, that we're getting more and more consultations. So the fact that I've got to reply to them and basically say, no, we're full, but I've got to do that in an individualised way to say, no, we're full to you because of this, this and this. And the time that it takes to do those, that takes away from perhaps doing a learning walk, perhaps spending time sitting with a kid, just looking at their maths work to build that confidence.		Juniper		I found it, was, I found it difficult how they dealt with the students. It was almost as if they, it's almost as if they wanted them to live and be their diagnosis. Like there was no work around, there was no focus around like coping strategies, like them understanding themselves and working on strengths and stuff. It was very much a focus on what they cannot do. They would repeatedly say things like, there's no academic expectations, even though we were an education establishment. So a lot of the times we weren't getting anywork at all from some of the young people.	Contrasting	Oak	777-782	[I felt] Annoyed, just massively annoyed that it's just completely unfair. The deputy head then goes and tells the story to the head teacher, and I'm thinking, that's not really where it sat. That's not really, yes, the child's behaviour was outrageous in the first place, because I think they'd probably thrown rocks at the member of staff, but all right, he's thrown rocks at you, then take yourself away, swap with somebody else. But the deputy head teacher was like, no, I'm in charge, they're going to do as they're told, et cetera, et cetera. And I'm thinking, if you'd have backed off, I felt I could have got that kid to do what needed to be done, but he just wasn't going to do it for you. So there's a frustration there and an anger that the kid had been wronged.
Oak	625-634	We spent a huge chunk of the school budget hoping that we're going to get it reimbursed from county, putting together an alternative provision package for it which we started for a week and a bit and very quickly disengaged and was then back out on the streets causing problems. So again, okay, do we push ahead with perm-ex? This kid is going to be in a gutter or in prison or worse in no time at all. It's okay, right, we'll give him one more try in school, which again with any other student of any other nature, it would have been a permanent-exclusion straightaway. And we've tried, we've tried, we've tried. And we've got now a sort of mix of score and alternate provision. And it's hard work, really hard work, and it has an impact on the other students. And again, that's the other thing to weigh up, is like how much is his negative behaviour and disruption preventing other students from doing well.		Willow	176-177	And when I've got SEND in my head, my values for the students are, they can communicate, regulate and be independent as possible and feel like a contribute to society for themselves and feel good within themselves. And I always put the pastoral as the priority because without that, you're not going to thrive as much. You can do well in education, but you're not going to thrive in yourself if you don't have those skills. And here the schools seem to have a bit of a value more on, but they can achieve and they should be able to achieve. And I'm like, absolutely don't take away from the achievement, but pastoral comes first, then education will come naturally after.		Willow	308-329	the moral, not moral battle I have, or the inner battle I have is more about their behavioural responses to things and the way they react to behaviours and obviously safe space here, but with my head teacher, I find his normal reaction to behaviours is hands on first and it's a, no, I'm in control here. You will do what I've asked you to do. Go outside and regulate and then encourage them to regulate physically. Now, where I've come from, you never go hands on unless it is a threat to life or a damage to something or protection. It's the last resort that you would do but here it's a bit more like, come on, off you go. And I'm like, that sat wrong with me because I physically watched it happen and I'd been called as support to come and support a behaviour. But then I saw like the dysregulation of this child. But because I was newer to the school, I was like, well, let me observe how you tackle behaviours here. Let me see what you do. Because I hadn't had any proper training on any of this stuff here with what we do. And I found that really challenging because it's my head teacher, I can't pull him up on that. I find that very hate confrontation. I'm not a person of confrontation.
Oak	789-795	Ultimately, if we're morally making the right decision for a child, if Ofsted end up not agreeing with that, I can live with that. I can live with Ofsted saying this, you should have done this and you've done that. Well, actually, I thought it was best with a child. If I can justify that in my mind, and Ofsted say we're crap, then I can live with that. But the chances are if we're doing the right for the kid, Ofsted should recognise that we're doing the right thing, she should be fine. But I know there's a lot of debate about, I think particularly with the old framework or the older frameworks, that you do things for Ofsted's sake rather than for the children's sake.		Willow	243-250	And it's working to an extent, but it has kind of made me realise that if those are your priorities and what your most valued thing is, just them being in lessons and getting on with education, then maybe I don't fit here. So for me, I'm doing my SENCO qualification. I'm kind of seeing it as I'll put in a couple of years here, but this may not be the setting I stay in. Because that's such, I didn't, I think what it did make me realise though is that is such an important value to me. And I need to work in a therapeutic pastoral approach school that really does say, does do what they say on the tin. Because here we promise that we're a therapeutic approach, holistic, trauma informed, etc. And I'm like, we're not doing those things properly or as well as we should be. So to me, I'm like, then, well, maybe I don't fit here.		Willow	402,405-406	One of the particular ones that keeps coming up is the students wearing headphones and listening to music in lessons... But the school rules and the school mantra is, you know, they don't have music on, they don't have this in lessons unless it is written within their EHCP. So that is another thing I'm kind of adding into some EHCPs where I'm like, this child benefits from this and should be allowed access to that. And that's again my little protest against what they're doing. But again, I'm told, often told, look, you need to toe the party line.
Oak	989-992	I think as we're getting closer to Ofsted now, I do have that worry that if the Ofsted comes out bad, I look like an idiot. I look like I don't know what I'm doing. And it might be that I don't know what I'm doing. That's fine, I guess, but the sort of embarrassment from that		Willow	646-650	So part of it, I'm sad because a part of me is like, I am looking at going into a private special needs school with a SEN unit and I hate that I have to then sacrifice the wellbeing of these kids who deserve so much, but because I can't do it here. And again, it's like, I'm not trying to create myself as this almighty power here, but I do think that is going to be a real loss the pastoral side and the personalised approach that it's these kids are then in the state funded education are going to have the biggest loss because people can't cope and they're just not getting it. And I just, I feel sad that I have to sacrifice it for them to go to people who have money to do it, but it's the necessary evil.		Willow	486-491	So I think it's made me more quiet. In this experience of this school, I am a lot less vocal here. I won't speak up as much in meetings because I feel more kind of eyes on when I'm going, I know that what I'm going to say does not agree with what other people will do. And that because I don't like confrontation and I'm a people pleaser, I often won't then voice up in meetings because I find that challenging to then, I know it's the right thing to do, but I know I'm going to be told no or shut down. And I think I then, I will then, rather than bringing it up and being told no, I will indirectly do what I think is the right thing, but not just not vocalize it.
Oak	995-996	To me, we'd be much better off if you've got a schools effectiveness advisor who comes in every term, knows the journey of the school, is constantly giving things to work on and improve on, that to me would be a better system than what we've got at the moment of Ofsted that's hugely stressful, hugely panic inducing for all the staff, which then has a negative impact on the students because staff are walking around stressed, they're behaving towards students changes and then it doesn't help anybody until they've been and gone and then everyone goes, we've got to wait another few years and it comes back again, this sort of thing.		Magnolia	58-65	One that I went to a couple of weeks ago was very, very specialist in SEN, and it was all non-verbal children in the classroom and that was quite a nice day because they were quite short on staff and the lead, the room lead teacher, she was really, really grateful. The end said it's been like a really good day. There was no instances where something broke out and they all seemed like they had a nice day. It's when you can obviously see, especially with somebody who's obviously got an extreme learning difficulty like non-verbal or autistic, it's then they've obviously achieved something that they've had a nice day and they're like fully engaged in something. I think that was a really rewarding day. It was something really simple that she just got like a bubble bag and like a foot spa, put bubbles in it and it made all the bubbles and she had like she seen one of the little boys haven't been that engaged for ages and he was there for like an hour and I think small things like that, makes you realise that it's nice that they have specialist facilities and people who really care about them.		Magnolia		But then as a side point, I would say if they're going to, if you're going to employ someone in a school that's SEN and you're obviously a supply member, they should really make sure that you are fully trained. I would say from an agency side of things, which when I leave the agency or probably would feedback, I think you should probably say, you know, you need to have a certain level of training or provide even online, do you know what I mean?

5.23 Appendix N: Selection of Reflective Logs

03/11/2025	Reflections following first interview

Just finished the first participant interview and I found it more challenging and emotionally draining than I had expected. I think there were times that I was more preoccupied with my own nerves and trying to notice themes around moral practice, that I was perhaps missing out on other important insights into how the participant made sense of other experiences within schools.

I was noticing that I was maybe being a bit too reliant on using the semi-structured interview format and perhaps could have allowed a more 'in the moment' curious response which may have allowed the conversation to flow into richer experiential themes.

It felt as though some of the discussions remained situated in structural observations and the 'what', rather than necessarily delving deeper into the personal experiences of this. I am wondering why this may have been. Perhaps the manner in which I was approaching the interview meant that it did not feel safe enough for the participant to share their own personal reflections or sense making; or maybe the topic itself meant that it felt safer for them to discuss it from a more 'third person' perspective and focused on the structural and practical elements rather than internal mechanisms associated with it.

03/12/2025	Reflections following third interview

One aspect of yesterday's interview that has really stuck with me was around discussions of feeling around how some decisions made by the senior leadership team felt like a betrayal, especially considering how supportive and close knit the staff team was felt to be.

This evoked a recollection of an experience within a school I had previously worked in where a staff member was punched by a student, and the student showed very little remorse about this. The staff member shared their concern around the safety of themselves and other members of staff to the leadership team but unfortunately found that the leadership minimised their concerns and also the consequence given to the student was felt to be especially lenient given the action of physical assault against a staff member.
This ultimately factored into this staff member's decision to leave the school at the end of the academic year and I remember feeling especially frustrated about this as they were a very positive and enthusiastic member of staff who I had learnt a lot from.

I am wary that this experience has contributed to my own thoughts and feelings around staff's wellbeing and being let down by structures and leadership within professional

settings. Whilst working within SEND settings means supporting CYP with additional needs and often behaviours that challenge, I still strongly believe that no one should fear attending work due to a risk of violence and that the responsibility of school management is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all within the school system.

Perhaps this is why I have noticed siding more with staff when they discuss their experiences of systemic failures and how it's left them feeling. I also wonder whether my position as a trainee at Herts has fostered an attitude that means I view this as a systemic and social justice angle. I suppose this is the virtue of bracketing so that I can notice when my biases may lead me and I can then aim to ensure that this does not unduly influence how I approach interviews or the analysis process.

20/02/2026	Reflections following Advanced Methods Workshop for IPA

I've been feeling quite daunted recently about approaching the analysis for the interviews. I think that having recently used Thematic Synthesis for my SLR has meant that I've been wearing a different set of lenses in which to engage with information, and I'm conscious that using IPA would require me to analyse the data in a slightly different way. I've been worried that this could be rather challenging to not fall into 'habits' of focusing on the themes and instead ensuring that I engage in the data in a way which privileges the participant's voices and sense making.

Following today's AMW, I've come away with a few more questions but also a bit of a clearer idea of how to approach this task, particularly around the initial noting and focusing on the Descriptive, Linguistic and Conceptual noting.
It was validating hearing some of the other members of the AMW talk about how they're also feeling a little lost with this stage of the process and we were able to share some laughs about this.

I've been thinking about what school-aged Robin, who always struggled through literature comprehension exercises in English lessons, would think about me approaching my doctoral research using some of the same skills that I had dismissed as silly tasks back then. I do feel a strong element of apprehension around doing this part of the analytic process 'right'. I know that the Smith, Flowers and Larkin says that there's nothing prescriptive about the process, but since I have not done qualitative, let alone IPA, methodology before; I'm wanting to hang onto the structure to give me a safety net so I'm able to do this as best I can so that I am doing the participants justice through this research.

Despite these worries, I'm excited to give it a go!

02/04/2026	Reflections during writing of results

I'm noticing that Oak's contributions are featuring quite heavily in the analysis and write up and wondering whether this may be an issue.

I remember coming out of the interview with them feeling that it had gone very well, and the conversation seemed to cover a wide range of different topics, which is reflected in the transcript.
However, I'm also conscious that there may have been an unconscious bias attributed to their contributions as a result of them holding the position of head teacher, and whether this means that I have inadvertently privileged their contributions due to the power of perceived 'expertise' attributed to this role.

I do feel that the inclusion of the selected quotes all hold a space within the research and I will continue to include their excerpts in areas which feels appropriate, however I plan to bring this to supervision to discuss with the team so I can explore whether this may impact on the rigour of the research.