An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study exploring the experiences of lone mothers throughout the Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process.

Taniqua Fuller

University of Nottingham

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Abstract

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2023), 16% of families in the UK were classified as lone-parent households. This means that approximately 1 in 6 families fell into this category. Of these, 85% were headed by lone mothers raising at least one dependent child. Research suggests that lone mothers are at risk of heightened blame and social judgement which can permeate into professional settings. From a sociological perspective, this marginalisation can leave lone mothers feeling disempowered and less able to voice their concerns due to systemic bias that undermines their credibility and agency. This raises important questions about how lone mothers navigate statutory processes.

The Education Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process emphasises the importance of centring the voices of children, young people (CYP) and their parents/carers within the statutory assessment process. While existing research explores parental experiences of the EHCNA, it largely overlooks the specific experiences of marginalised groups. A systematic literature review (SLR) found that there were limited studies which gained the experiences of lone mothers navigating processes regarding their children's education, none of which discuss the EHCNA. This study addresses this gap through discussing the experiences of lone mothers navigating the EHCNA process. Grounded in an emancipatory and social justice context, the findings highlight systemic barriers, limited access to information and a strong desire amongst participants to improve the process to ensure equitable parental involvement.

To gain an in depth understanding of experiences, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was used to capture the voices of four lone mothers from diverse demographic backgrounds through semi-structured interviews. Five master themes were interpreted using IPA including: '*A power imbalance', 'I'm not in control here', 'Parental support', 'Empowerment'* and '*shaping a child-centred process for the future'*. Despite the challenges, lone mothers demonstrated resilience through positioning themselves as persistent advocates for their children. While the themes align with broader findings on parental experiences in education, this study offers a distinctive lens on the intersection between lone motherhood and statutory assessment processes, highlighting issues such as: marginalisation, isolation, emotional burden, and self-blame. The findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on systemic iniquities in education, offering practical implications for educational professionals to ensure that all parents can fully and meaningfully engage in the EHCNA.

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Abbreviations

ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ASC – Autism Spectrum Condition

BPS - British Psychological Society

CoP – Code of Practice

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

CYP – Children and Young People

EHCNA - Education Health and Care Needs Assessment

EHCP - Education Health and Care Plan

EP – Educational Psychologist

EPS - Educational Psychology service

HCPC - Heath and Care Professionals Council

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

LA – Local Authority

FST – Family Stress Theory

NNPCF - National Network of Parent Carer Forums

PEP – Principal Educational Psychologist

PRU – Pupil Referral Unit

RTA – Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SEMH – Social Emotional Mental Health

SEND - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SENCo – Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator

SLR – Systematic Literature Review

OT – Occupational Therapist

WoE – Weight of Evidence

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 – Thesis Overview

This chapter presents an introduction to the research area and a rationale for the area of study. It discusses the national context that informs the research, along with the researcher's interest in the topic and a clarification of key terms. Additionally, relevant psychological theories are examined, and the purpose for the study is outlined.

1.2 – National Context

It has been ten years since the revision of the statutory assessment process of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in England. This process, known as the Education Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process was introduced under *The Children and Families Act 2014* and brought into effect through the publication of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) (Department for Education (DfE) & Department of Health (Doha), 2015). This means that every school within England has a duty to follow the legal guidelines specified within the CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) which involves the identification, assessment and monitoring of SEND for children and young people (CYP) from birth to age 25. While the majority of SEND can be met through universal and targeted SEND support, for those who require additional support, schools are required to evidence a graduated response where cycles of support are conducted through a plan, do, review approach. During this time, the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) requires schools to allocate their notional allowance of £6000 per pupil towards the support of identified needs. In circumstances where identified areas of need exceed the provision that schools can provide within their SEN support response, external agency support (e.g. Occupational therapists, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, communication and autism team) may be enlisted as part of the graduated response (DfE & DoH, 2015). Additionally, an application for additional funding can be sought through the statutory assessment process.

This statutory process, overseen by the local authority (LA) may result in the production of an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (DfE & DoH, 2015). This is a legislative document which collates the educational, health and social care needs of CYP and is designed to outline outcomes and the provision above which a school can ordinarily provide to support these needs. This process incorporates the views of parents/carers, the voice of the young person in need and the assessments of various professionals including educational psychologists (EPs) (DfE & DoH, 2015). Since then, there has been a number of published research articles and theses which have reviewed the impact of the EHCNA process through examining parental

experiences (Malkin, 2023), knowledge of school staff (Gore, 2016), experiences of CYP (Eccleston, 2016), and the quality of EHCPs (Cochrane & Soni, 2020).

Whereas prior research has sought to collate the experiences of whole groups, this current research study seeks to delve into the experiences of a subgroup within parenthood, lone mothers. This acknowledges the impact of multiple identities and beckons for further understanding into the potential variation of parental experiences due to individual identity.

1.3 – Defining Lone motherhood

This research will be adopting the definition of lone motherhood provided by Skew (2009) which describes it as a mother who is not cohabiting while raising dependent children without receiving additional support from a partner. This definition recognises the unique challenges and responsibilities that can be experienced as the mother assumes multiple roles within the family structure, including caregiver, breadwinner, and emotional support provider (Skew, 2009). As parental rhetoric views *'good'* parenting as being able to encompass all the aforementioned roles while being a role model for future members of the workforce, blame is placed upon mothers who do not adhere to this (Jenson, 2018). This normative expectation disproportionately affects lone mothers as they are more likely to be judged as falling short due to their structural and social positioning (Jenson, 2018). Prior research demonstrates that lone mothers feel the need to overcompensate in conversations with educational and medical professionals to demonstrate their *good* parenting to challenge common discourses surrounding lone motherhood (Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022). It is this heightened exposure to blame and marginalisation that makes lone mothers an important group to this study, especially in the context of navigating complex SEND processes.

Lone motherhood can arise due to various circumstances including divorce, separation, widowhood, or a decision to parent independently. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) estimated that in 2023, 16% of families within the UK were categorised as lone parent families. These statistics approximate that 1 in 6 families are lone parent households. 85% of these families were headed by mothers raising a minimum of one dependent child. Thus, lone mothers were chosen as the subject of this study as they represent a significantly larger proportion of single-parent households compared to lone fathers. Furthermore, lone mothers within the UK often face unique stressors that lone fathers may not experience to the same extent due to sociological ideologies such as pressure to prioritise family responsibilities over work (Radcliffe et al., 2022) and dominant societal views which see men as supporting partners rather than fulfilling the homemaker role reserved for mothers (Rich, 2021). Although this message is demeaning towards men, Rich (2021) also discussed that this narrative also helps

men when they desire to pursue other work-related achievements; whereas this rhetoric hurts the woman when she is seen to step out of the role that society reserves for her.

Here, it is important to note that this study does not seek to assume that there are uniform experiences in the lone motherhood population, but rather it seeks to explore the intricacies in this group and make individual claims about any vulnerabilities that may be faced.

1.4 – Theoretical frameworks related to the current study

This study draws on three key theoretical frameworks to conceptualise how lone mothers interpret their experiences of the EHCNA: intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), feminist perspectives (Levine, 2009; Rich, 2021; Carastathis, 2014), and Family Stress Theory (Hill, 1949). While these frameworks are not solely rooted in psychology, integrating insights from other disciplines such as sociology is crucial for understanding the broader social structures that shape the experiences of marginalised groups. This interdisciplinary approach not only highlights the systemic barriers these mothers face but also holds societal structures accountable for their role in perpetuating inequalities.

1.4.1 – Intersectionality and lone motherhood

Intersectionality is a framework termed by Crenshaw (1989), a critical race scholar and civil rights advocate who posits that different forms of discrimination co-exist and overlap in the lives of marginalised individuals. Crenshaw's work mainly focussed on the population of Black women, applying feminist epistemology with a social justice stance. However, the understanding of intersectionality has blossomed to promote an understanding that human beings can be understood through the application of a variety of social lenses where structural systems of power (e.g. media, political unions, religious institutions, policy, law) influence whether privilege or oppression are enacted upon an individual (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Intersectionality describes how personal characteristics can intersect with one another and present different challenges and injustices, which suggests that one's shared identity does not equate to shared experience (Crenshaw, 1991; May, 2010). This framework illuminates the multi-faceted nature of humanity, showing that it is not possible to apply a singular focus on one area of one's livelihood (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, sexuality) to capture the complexities of a lived experience. Additionally, it promotes the use of exploration to identify the categories which are most pertinent for an individual when encountering a social problem as these cannot be predetermined and therefore should not be assumed (Al-Faham, Davis & Ernst, 2019).

Figure 1.4.2 – A figure created by the researcher showing a pictorial representation of how intersectional categories overlap.
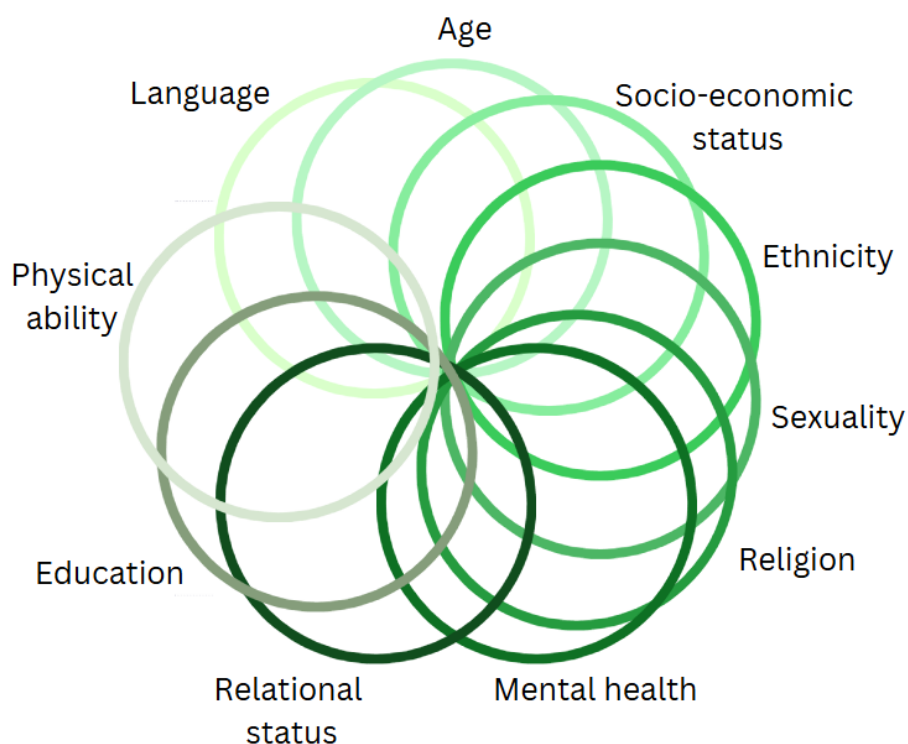
Although Figure 1.4.2 demonstrates a range of categories to consider within an intersectionality framework, it does not seek to imply that this is an exhaustive list as there are many more factors which can be considered within this framework.

In relation to lone mothers, this framework is particularly useful for understanding how overlapping social identities such as ethnicity and gender status intersect and influence how challenges and privileges are experienced. Lone mothers may experience diverse obstacles that are influenced by their unique backgrounds. For instance, those from lower socioeconomic statuses may face heightened financial stress and limited access to resources (Lynch & Lyons, 2016), while cultural norms may stigmatise lone motherhood, leading to social isolation (Cumming, 2014). Gender norms often position women as primary caregivers, which can amplify the societal and professional scrutiny that lone mothers face in advocating for their children, particularly those with SEND (Levine, 2009). Access to essential services such as childcare varies depending on family resources, further compounding the difficulties lone mothers can face (Moilanen, May, Räikkönen, Sevón & Laakso, 2016). Moreover, systemic barriers and experiences of discrimination can lead to mental health challenges, including heightened stress and anxiety (Caragata & Liegghio, 2013). Critical scholars further highlight how race and gender intersect, shedding light on discourses around Black mothers which refer to them as passive, disengaged or confrontational within conversations regarding their children's education (Cooper, 2009). As such, this research recognises that while individuals

may occupy similar social positions, they do not necessarily share a common identity, and each brings a personalised intersectional experience to their lived reality.

1.4.2 – Feminist perspectives and lone motherhood

Feminist perspectives highlight how intersections between gender, lone motherhood and parenting can lead to multiple forms of marginalisation where mothers can face stereotypes due to social structures which cause oppression (Carastathis, 2014; Garry, 2011). This is particularly due to narratives which, 'equate *'good' motherhood with middle class, heterosexual coupledom and lone motherhood with dysfunctionality'* (Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022, p. 504). These societal stigmas fail to acknowledge the dual burden of single mothers assuming the roles of both caregiving and providing financial support, a challenge that can stem from limited social and institutional support systems (Rowlingson & McKay, 2005).

Through conducting research looking into the difference in experience between lone mothers and dual carers raising children with disabilities, Levine (2009) citing the work of Schormans and Brown (2004) explained that lone mothers were more at risk of experiencing depression and heightened periods of stress in comparison to mothers who had partners. Additionally, through interviewing 15 lone mothers, Levine (2009) found that they often reported experiences of disempowerment through societal stigmas judging their abilities to cater for their children's needs. Levine (2009) further states that although helping professions seek to aid families, these systems 'often magnify mothers' feelings of powerlessness and shame' (p. 413). This indicates that embedded societal stigmas can lead to judgments that can inadvertently affect professional practice. Rich (2021) offers a critical feminist perspective through looking at issues through a sociological lens, likening the mother-child relationship to patriarchal structures where there is a lack of agency for mothers due to higher powers that demand conformity. Further to this point, Lawrence and Buchanan (2017) discuss how the filtering of these views into institutions (i.e. healthcare and education) ultimately maintains power dynamics and reinforces societal expectations.

These societal stigmas can result in social injustices where the inequitable distribution of knowledge, opportunities and resources in society contribute to the marginalisation of certain groups (McGarry, 2024). McGarry (2024) also outlines that social injustices arise when three key conditions are met:

- There are a lack of arrangements that enable all adult members of society to 'interact as peers', which is referred to as maldistribution (p. 22).
- Society categorises certain individuals as less deserving, denying them the opportunity to engage as full partners in interactions, known as misrecognition.

- Political power structures marginalise or misrepresent certain voices in society, a phenomenon termed misrepresentation.

In the context of the EHCNA process, these perspectives highlight the systemic challenges that lone mothers, particularly those raising children with SEND, may face. The intersection of gendered expectations, societal stigmas and institutional biases could contribute to feelings of disempowerment and marginalisation, ultimately affecting their ability to advocate for their child's needs. Therefore, the EHCNA process must be critically examined to ensure it does not reinforce these inequities through maldistribution, misrecognition or misrepresentation of lone mothers' experiences. Addressing these barriers ensures that all parents are recognised as equal partners in decision-making and are provided with the necessary resources to support their child's development.

1.4.3 - Family stress theory

Family Stress Theory (FST) originated from the work of Reuben Hill (1949), who developed the ABC-X model to explain how families respond to stressors and crises. Hill's (1949) framework suggests that a family's ability to cope with stress is influenced by the nature of the stressor (A), the family's resources (B), and their perception of the event (C), which together determine the crisis outcome (X).

When applied to the EHCNA process, FST highlights some of the pressures that lone mothers can face, including navigating systems with limited support, financial constraints, and institutional biases (Levine, 2009). The lack of adequate social and professional resources may exacerbate stress, leading to increased emotional and psychological strain (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). Additionally, societal misrecognition of lone mothers' roles in advocating for their children can reinforce power imbalances within professional interactions (Rich, 2021), further complicating the EHCNA process. Therefore, viewing the EHCNA process through the lens of FST could identify areas for structural change that provide equitable support for lone mothers, ensuring they are empowered when securing essential services for their children.

1.5 – Personal and professional interest in the lone mother population

The use of first-person terminology in this study is a deliberate methodological choice that aligns with a reflexive, interpretivist approach. It acknowledges my positionality and the subjective nature of knowledge production within qualitative research. This approach is particularly consistent with feminist and critical paradigms, which recognises my active engagement in the inquiry process. Therefore, references to my views will use first-person terminology from this point onwards.

As a woman without children who was raised in a two-parent household, I lack firsthand experience with motherhood and the unique challenges faced by lone mothers. However, my identity as a Black woman, coupled with my professional experience working within diverse communities, has given me insight into the systemic issues that often silence marginalised voices within education and elsewhere. I have witnessed how societal norms and biases can overshadow the experiences of individuals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

My passion for advocating for women, stems from a deep commitment to ensuring their voices are not only heard but valued. This commitment has sparked a growing curiosity about the experiences of lone mothers, particularly regarding the social stigmas and bias they encounter within educational systems. My professional role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) has brought me into frequent contact with families led by lone mothers. These interactions often involved discussions around bias and inadequate support. As there is limited research concerning the lone mother population, I aim to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of lone motherhood and advocate for more equitable practices within educational frameworks.

Combined with a personal interest in the subject area, this research regarding experiences of statutory, governmental processes also aligns with my professional interest as the ECHNA process is core to the EP role and parental voice is central to the EHCNA process. This research focus provided a natural way to find out about the experiences of lone mothers with the aim of synthesising effective supports that will support EP practice. Thus, my research proposal was presented to the Principal EP and Senior EP of the Educational Psychology service (EPS) where I am currently on placement. Both individuals were supportive and happy for me to proceed with this research, recruiting participants within the LA.

1.6 - Research rationale and development

This research seeks to develop a deeper understanding of how lone mothers experience working with professionals during the EHCNA process. Given the significant role of EPs in statutory assessments, it is crucial to explore how EPs engage with families, ensuring their voices are heard and their concerns validated. The relevance of this study for EPs is twofold: it informs the use of EP time while also fostering a more reflective and equitable approach to working with parents.

A critical component of this research is examining how EPs facilitate meaningful discussions with parents during statutory assessments. Beyond their professional expertise, EPs must draw on soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and rapport-building to ensure

that parents feel genuinely heard and valued in the process (Jones & Atkinson, 2021; Nolan & Moreland, 2014). Effective communication is key in navigating complex conversations, particularly when parents may already feel overwhelmed or disempowered by the system (Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020). Additionally, EPs must employ process skills, including structured questioning, reflective practice, and collaborative problem-solving, to guide discussions in a way that is both transparent and supportive (Jones & Atkinson, 2021).

The research is informed by a critical realist perspective, acknowledging that there is a reality independent of individual perceptions and recognising that access to reality is mediated by personal, cultural and social interpretation. It also enables the exploration of how participants make sense of their lived experiences while being governed by wider structural frameworks. This study also adopts a feminist stance which values marginalised voices through situating the participants as experts of their own experiences. These perspectives are further elaborated on in the methodology chapter. This research is also grounded in emancipatory and social justice values (Hutton & Heath, 2020), advocating for a more inclusive and parent-centred approach within statutory processes. By amplifying the voices of lone mothers, the study aims to highlight barriers they face and provide insight into ways professionals can better support them. This aligns with broader efforts to address inequities in education and special needs provision, ensuring that systemic structures do not inadvertently marginalise certain groups.

Throughout the research process, my own understanding of systemic structures and sociological perspectives evolved. Initially, I approached the study with a focus on individual experiences but, as the research developed, the influence of wider systemic factors became increasingly explicit. These structures that are often deeply embedded in professional practices were not fully explored in the literature review but became central to my later analysis. This reflective journey has not only informed the research but also contributed to my own professional development, challenging me to critically evaluate the role of EPs in fostering inclusive and equitable practices within statutory assessments. I shall conclude this thesis with my further reflections on myself as a researcher.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with insights into current research findings and contemporary practices that are most relevant to the present study. Therefore, this chapter presents a literature review to lay the groundwork for understanding how the development of SEND and educational policies have informed the current EHCNA statutory process. It also discusses the role and experiences of parents/carers throughout the development these frameworks, including their experiences with EPs.

Stemming from this, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted to provide a comprehensive examination of the current state of knowledge on lone mothers' experiences of interacting with school systems. These articles were then subjected to quality assessment through a mixture of Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework and Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long and Barnes (2003) TAPUPAS model with the addition of modified objectivity (Ryan & Rutty, 2019) to ensure that the included studies were methodologically sound. Overall, the chapter aims to contextualise the unique experiences of lone mothers, highlighting gaps in knowledge and guiding the rationale for further study.

2.1 – SEND Context

2.1.1 – A historical overview of SEND

Throughout the history of educational provision and legislation, consensus in legal frameworks has proven challenging when defining, educating and addressing the needs of children with SEND (House of Commons, 2019). These adaptations to statutory processes prove difficult for parents/carers to understand and necessitate the need for additional support to navigate them (House of Commons, 2019). The shift in educational policy from the publication of *The Education Act 1944* to the introduction of EHCPs illustrates a significant evolution in how SEND related issues are addressed and conceptualised within society and the educational system in the United Kingdom (UK) (Robinson & Joseph, 2023).

The Education Act 1944 emphasised the duty for LAs to provide education for CYP with SEND, however deficit-based terminology such as *defective children* and *educational deficiency* was used to describe SEND within the legislation. This terminology which was widely used in British society at the time, subsequently resulted in segregation through an understanding that CYP with SEND were '*ineducable'* and required separate tuition (Lindsay, Wedell & Dockrell, 2020, p. 2). In attempt to shift this narrative, 30 years later the terminology '*Special education needs'* was introduced in the publication of *The Warnock Report*

(Department of Education & Science,1978). The reform recognised the diverse needs of children with SEND and advocated for integration with appropriate support in mainstream schools. However, while it set the stage for inclusive education, implementation varied, and many children continued to face barriers to accessing the support they needed (Lindsay, Wedell & Dockrell, 2020).

2.1.2 – Development of SEND legislation

The introduction of Statements in *The Education Act 1981* represented a formalised approach to identifying and meeting the needs of children with SEND. Statements of SEN were legal documents outlining CYPs SEN and the support required to address them. Commenting on the statutory process, Lamb (2019) notes that parents/carers were not confident in non-statutory offers of support for their children out of fear that support could be taken away as these offers did not bear legal weight which led to a reliance on acquiring a statement to ensure security of provision. Parents/carers often viewed these Statements of SEN as a gateway to access additional funding and a necessary framework to ensure their children's entitlements were protected (Broomhead, 2013; Runswick-Cole, 2007). Parents/carers often likened the statementing process as a fight, where they had to learn to become efficient advocates to ensure their views were heard (Rogers, 2007; Hess, Molina & Kozleski, 2006). While Statements of SEN provided a framework for support, they were often criticised for being bureaucratic, lacking in flexibility and focusing primarily on educational needs without adequately addressing health and social care needs (Cabinet Office, 2003; Norwich & Eaton, 2015).

Since the publication of *The Children and Families Act 2014*, LAs are mandated to provide comprehensive information about available services for young individuals and how families can acquire these resources. This requirement was established through a Local Offer which documents the services, provision and support available to CYP. This offer is tailored to each LA to serve as a platform for direct engagement with CYP and their parents. Part of this Local Offer is the completion of the graduated response which ensures that support is personalised and adaptive through following an assess, plan, do, review cycle (DfE & DoH, 2015). This cycle considers the impact of quality first teaching on identified areas of need and seeks to implement targeted and specialised support if deemed appropriate. The goal of the graduated response is to provide timely, appropriate support before considering more formal measures like an EHCNA (Lamb, 2019).

The Children and Families Act 2014 induced a shift towards EHCNAs which replaced Statements with EHCPs with the aim of increased integration between education, health and social services and the use of person-centred planning with the aim to place the views of CYP

and their families at the forefront of the process (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). This process is reflected in Figure 2.1.2.

Figure 2.1.2 – A visual representation of the EHCNA process created by the researcher.
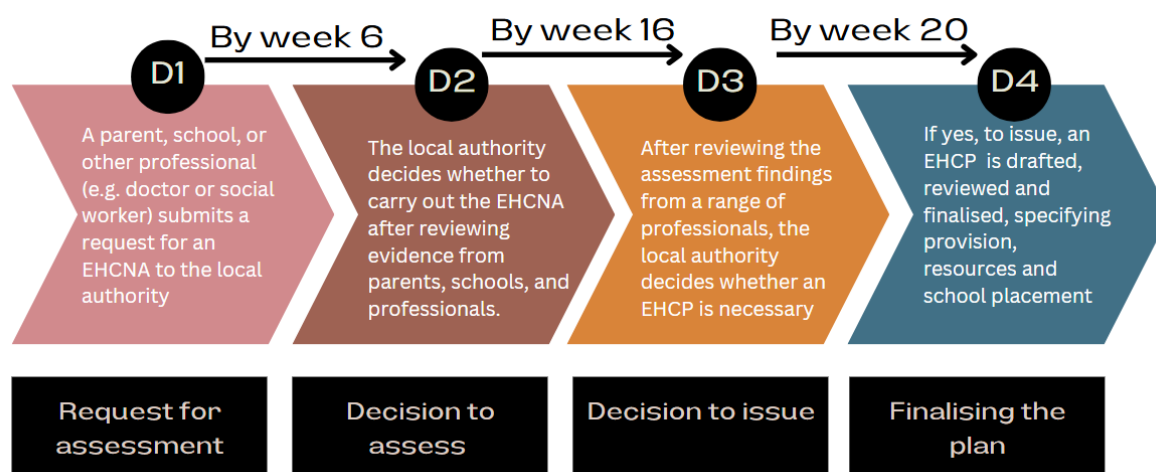
The aim of this change in statutory process was to place a greater emphasis on streamlining the assessment procedures and empowering CYP and their families to be active participants throughout (DfE & DoH, 2015). However, within current parental research pertaining to their experiences of the EHCNA process, parents/carers still describe a fight to feel heard and for their children to be understood (Starkie, 2024). Furthermore, parents/carers still hold the view that the acquisition of an ECHP is necessary to ensure that their children's rights to support are protected (Keville, Mills & Ludlow, 2023). These results question whether the change from Statements to EHCPs has been successful and calls for further exploration into factors such as professional conduct which support or hinder the EHCNA process.

2.1.3 - The role of the Educational Psychologist in the EHCNA process

A core role of EPs is the statutory contribution towards the EHCNA process through producing psychological advice (Buck, 2015). This involves the development of a psychological formulation that stems from information gathered through a range of sources. This includes: capturing the views of the CYP and their parents, the observation and assessment of the CYP, consultation with parents/carers and school staff (Capper & Sloan, 2022). The psychological advice is reviewed alongside reports gathered from health and social care to determine whether an EHCP should be issued (Capper & Sloan, 2022). Within the context of the EP contribution to the EHCNA, the acquisition of the voice of the child and their parents/carers is considered necessary to gain a holistic understanding of a child's needs and regarded as the key for providing effective intervention (Palikara, Castro, Gaona & Eirinaki, 2018). This highlights the importance of gaining a thorough understanding of parent/carer and child views in order to

produce an accurate representation of the child. However, statutory assessment processes for SEND, including EP contributions, have been critiqued for failing to deliver on their core objective to conduct ongoing, comprehensive assessments to build a well-rounded understanding of a CYP's needs prior to EHCNA (Lamb, 2019). Exacerbated by systemic constraints, the national shortage of EPs and the increase of requests for EHCPs has contributed to an overstretched system that struggles to meet the needs of all CYP (Lamb, 2019; House of Commons, 2019). Given the central role that parents/carers play in shaping the understanding of their child's needs, it is crucial to explore how their involvement is facilitated within the EHCNA process.

2.2– Parental Involvement

2.2.1 – Parental engagement with the EHCNA process

Parents/carers play a key role throughout the EHCNA process as they are often the primary advocates for their CYP to ensure that their educational, health and care needs are fully recognised and supported (Malkin, 2023). They are often regarded as having expertise in their knowledge and experiences of raising their children and their views are held central to the EHCNA process (De Geeter, Poppes & Vlaskamp, 2002). This aligns with Smith's (1987) sociological perspective which suggests that valuing parental experiential knowledge enhances collaborative decision-making and promotes a more holistic understanding of the child's needs. However, this was not always the case as De Geeter, Poppes & Vlaskamp (2002) describe that parents/carers were viewed as '*laymen*' by medical and educational professionals in the past indicating that they were perceived as having no specialised knowledge regarding the development of their children (p. 443). This viewpoint could contribute to parental feelings of disempowerment and reinforce belief systems that professional hold superior knowledge in comparison to parents. It also enabled the exclusion of parents/carers from making important decisions about their children's education. As *The Children and Families Act 2014* promotes collaboration between parents/carers and stakeholders throughout the EHCNA process, it is important to reflect on the experiences of parents/carers to identify whether they are effectively integrated within the process.

Parental understanding. In line with previous studies into parental experiences of the Statementing process, research has demonstrated that parents/carers view the EHCNA process as a pathway to ensuring that their children's rights would be protected and that they would not be excluded (Eccleston, 2016; Cochrane, 2016). However, apart from this key desire for protected supports, some studies report a general finding that the extent to which parents/carers understand the EHCNA process, has been found to impact their advocacy

experience (Eccleston, 2016; Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Sales & Vincent, 2018). For example, out of a sample of 6 participants (including parents and children), Eccleston (2016) found that 2 out of 3 families felt that they were not fully informed about what to expect from the process and experienced confusion due to a lack of understanding of what the process entailed. This included not knowing how to challenge the outcome of an assessment which could have resulted in parents/carers feeling disempowered and feeling unable to effectively advocate for their children's needs. Additionally, Cochrane and Soni (2020) found that parents/carers often reported a dependence on professionals to aid their understanding of their rights throughout the EHCNA process. Dependent on the levels of support acquired, this either contributed to or hindered their success of navigating the EHCNA process. This suggests that professionals involved in facilitating the EHCNA process should be increasingly aware of parental understanding, ensuring that the information shared is accessible and understandable for all.

Long timeframes. By the time that parents/carers have completed the graduated response and eventually reach the first stage of assessment in the EHCNA process, they often report delays in receiving support for their children (Starkie, 2024; Eccleston, 2016). These lengthy timeframes have been reported to amplify parents'/carers' feelings of being unheard due to being unable to receive supports at the time where a need was identified (Starkie, 2024; Eccleston, 2016). Some parents/carers describe this as a '*battle*', where they feel as though they have to fight to be heard and for their children's needs to be taken seriously (Starkie, 2024, p. 29). These difficulties often lead parents/carers to view the EHCNA process as a crucial means of securing appropriate, guaranteed support (Keville, Mills & Ludlow, 2023).

Empowerment. Research demonstrates that when professionals pro-actively include and empower parents/carers to use their voices within the EHCNA process, they often report positive experiences (Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Ahad, Thompson & Hall, 2022). This indicates that the amplification of parental voice serves as an effective way for professionals to promote positive experiences of the EHCNA process. This empowerment leads to parents/carers feeling as though their views were heard and respected (Ahad et al., 2022).

Parental anxiety. Within the context of the EHCNA, parental anxiety can be heightened, as the process is often emotionally charged due to decisions being made about long-term statutory support (Eccleston, 2016). Therefore, exploring the EHCNA process specifically, rather than general SEND experiences, allows for a more focused investigation into how parents/carers navigate these unique challenges, particularly in relation to their collaboration with EPs.

By actively eliciting and validating parent/carer voice, EPs help bridge the gap between the educational system and the family, fostering a sense of inclusion and partnership

(Eccleston, 2016). This not only aids in reducing parental anxiety but also enhances the quality of the EHCNA process, as parental insights and aspirations for their child enrich the assessment and recommendations (Malkin, 2023). Recognising the emotional impact of the EHCNA process, EPs are uniquely positioned to provide emotional support and reassurance, helping parents/carers navigate uncertainties and challenges (Redwood, 2015). By adopting a collaborative approach, EPs contribute to a process that prioritises trust, empathy and mutual respect, ultimately reinforcing the importance of parent voice as a cornerstone of effective and meaningful statutory assessments (Malkin, 2023).

2.2.2 - Parental engagement with Educational Psychologists

In consultation with EPs, parents/carers provide valuable insights into the child's home environment, behaviour and developmental history which contribute to a holistic assessment of CYP (McGuiggan, 2021). This collaboration, where the knowledge shared is accessible for all, often creates a sense of partnership and self-efficacy throughout problem-solving processes (Goodall & Montgomery, 2023). Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), addresses the factors that drive motivation, emphasising the relationship between autonomy (being independent), competence (feeling capable), and relatedness (connection with others). This means that the degree of autonomy that parents/carers have, coupled with their level of rapport with the EP and their self-perceived competence levels could significantly shape their motivation to engage with EPs. Research often reports that parental experiences working with EPs is generally positive due to feeling supported, heard and understood (Lawrence, 2014; O'Farrell & Kinsella, 2018). However, a key barrier which prevents parents/carers from engaging fully in consultation is a lack of understanding into the role of the EP (Lawrence, 2014), not having enough time to build a rapport with the EP (O'Farrell & Kinsella, 2018) and parents/carers feeling as though they are not as equipped as educational professionals to determine outcomes for their children (O'Farrell & Kinsella, 2018).

2.2.3 – Understanding the unique experiences of lone mothers in the EHCNA process

The aforementioned research has helped to identify key factors which support and hinder parental experiences of the EHCNA process. However, these papers consider parenthood as a whole population and do not reflect the nuanced experiences of subgroups within the parental population. It is important to acknowledge the differences in experiences within the parental population as this could provide valuable insight into how professional practice can be adapted and ensure that stories are not overlooked or suppressed (Levine, 2009). Levine (2009) argues that parental research is often focussed towards two-parent families which marginalises single-parent experiences. This oversight is problematic because

policies and service models are often constructed based on the experiences of traditional family structures, leading to potential harm when they fail to account for the unique challenges faced by lone mothers. As reported in prior research, lone mothers can encounter additional emotional, mental, financial, and logistical burdens, which are rarely addressed in general parental research (Younis & Eberhardt, 2024). For example, out 2232 women, 45% of lone mothers compared to 23.6% of partnered mothers experienced a common mental health disorder (Butterworth, 2004). As a result of underrepresentation in research, lone mothers' voices remain underrepresented and the supports available may not fully meet their needs or validate their experiences.

An example of this can be viewed within educational policy. The CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) promotes the involvement and engagement of parents/carers concerning the education of children, suggesting that meetings should be organised throughout the school day to aid parental attendance whilst their children are at school. However, this is still not always feasible for all parents/carers to attend, especially with social policy encouraging lone mothers into employment (Millar & Ridge, 2018; Standing, 1999). This suggests that for some parents/carers it requires resilience and problem-solving to become fully immersed in the EHNCA process. Thus, highlighting a need for creating a shared understanding about the specific needs and barriers faced by lone mothers to better inform policy and practice.

As the EHCNA process requires collaboration between parents/carers and professionals (e.g. SENCos, EPs, social care and health practitioners), this provides a universal framework to compare how lone mothers experience this process (DfE & DoH, 2015). Within this process, lone mothers may experience interactions with more professionals than they typically would in general SEND contexts. By focusing on the EHCNA, this research can explore specific dynamics in depth. To support the examination of these dynamics and wider factors which either help or hinder lone mothers to engage in the EHCNA, the perspective of Family Stress Theory (Hill, 1949) will be applied. By analysing how lone mothers adapt to or cope with the demands of the EHCNA process, patterns of resilience or struggle can be identified. This understanding can inform professional practice on how to support lone mothers more effectively, ensuring they can manage the stressor (in this case, the EHCNA) without feeling overwhelmed.

As the lone mother parental population is an under researched area, there is scope for exploring what factors are valuable when supporting lone mothers throughout the EHCNA process. By recognising that different subgroups within the parental population may experience the EHCNA process differently, educational professionals can tailor their support and communication, actively seek to understand the unique challenges faced by different groups and adapt their practices accordingly. Additionally, this research may serve as a reminder for

educational professionals to continually reflect on their biases and assumptions and encourage them to stay informed about the experiences of different parental subgroups.

2.3 – Systematic literature review

2.3.1 – The purpose of a systematic literature review

Currently, there is a lack of representation of lone mother's perspectives in parental research (Levine, 2009). Therefore, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) felt appropriate to identify what is known about the unique experiences of lone mothers when navigating SEND systems. Through using a systematic structure to find articles, this removes bias through incorporating all studies relevant to the review question (Nightingale, 2009). It also enables the synthesis and analysis of the available studies that focus specifically on the population and phenomenon of interest and supports the identification of patterns and insights that could inform more inclusive and effective policies and practices (Gough & Elbourne, 2002). Such a review would highlight the unique barriers lone mothers face within processes like the EHCNA and reveal where current service models may need to be adapted to ensure equitable support.

2.3.2 – Search strategy

The literature review was undertaken in June 2024 through screening for published research articles from the following databases: ERIC, Psych info, British Education Index, Web of Science and SCOPUS. Originally, this review aimed to answer the question, '*What are the experiences of lone mothers navigating SEND processes?*' However, the preliminary searches across the databases yielded eight articles and only two of these related to the research question. This indicated that there is little research pertaining to the experiences of lone mothers parenting children with SEND. Therefore, the research question and inclusion criteria were broadened to alter the population of interest from lone mothers raising a child with SEND to lone mothers parenting a child/adolescent. The phenomenon of interest was also broadened to investigate the experiences of lone mothers when interacting with school systems more generally instead of their sole experiences navigating SEND processes. Therefore, the research question was adapted to, '*What are the experiences of lone mothers when interacting with their child's school system?*' The inclusion criteria can be seen within Table 2.3.2.

Table 2.3.2 – A table outlining the inclusion criteria for studies selected in the SLR.

	Include:	Exclusion:
1. Population	Lone mothers raising a child/adolescent	Fathers, two-parent families, guardians other than mothers

2. Phenomenon of interest	Lone mothers interacting within educational systems including interventions, meetings, class-based involvement, programs	Experiences not related to school interactions
3. Context	Studies which investigate interactions within the school system including instances where there is not a statutory process	Interactions outside the school system (e.g., healthcare, extracurricular activities not organised by the school)
4. Study Design	Qualitative studies, mixed-methods studies	Quantitative studies without a qualitative component
5. Publication type	Peer reviewed journals	Other publications (e.g. magazines, books, policies)

Based on these changes, new search terms were selected through the use of key words within the research question and were expanded to include synonyms. To tailor the search in accordance with the research question, the search terms (Single mother* OR lone mother*) AND child* AND school* were used to identify research articles to include within the review. This new search produced 608 results across the 5 databases. The titles and abstracts of these articles were then screened for the presence of the terms '*school*' and either '*lone mother*' or '*single mother*'. After completing this step and removing duplicate journals, 82 articles remained. The full texts were then examined against the inclusion criteria (Table 2.3.2) and any articles which did not relate to the research question were excluded. The remaining articles were fully read to ensure their compatibility with the review before being included. This produced a total of nine articles to review. Another search took place in October 2024 to account for any articles that were recently published. Another two papers met the research criteria and were added to the review, resulting in a total of eleven articles. The full search strategy can be seen in Appendix 1. Refer to appendix 2 for a list of excluded studies.

2.3.3 - Data Extraction

The studies that were systematically selected were reviewed to identify the following:

- Author(s), year of publication, title, location of study

- Context of study and participant sample

- Research design and methodology

- Summary of key findings and limitations

An overview of the included studies can be found in Table 2.3.3.

Table 2.3.3 – A table providing an overview of studies included within the SLR

Study:	Context and sample:	Focus:	Research Design and Methodology:	Summary of key findings:
Morgan and Stahmer (2020) Narratives of single, Black mothers using cultural capital to access autism interventions in schools Location: USA	5 lone Black mothers parenting children aged 7-17 with a diagnosis of autism	To understand the mothers' initial experiences following their child's diagnosis, including their recollections of how they accessed services and support at that time.	90-minute narrative interviews analysed through thematic analysis	**Findings**: These mothers drew on unique forms of cultural knowledge, communication styles, and networks to advocate effectively for their children, often developing specialized strategies to overcome systemic barriers. **Limitations**: A small sample size which limited the generalisability of findings across diverse Black communities and socioeconomic backgrounds
McHatton and Correa (2005) Stigma and discrimination: Perspectives from Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers of children with special needs Location: USA	50 single Puerto Rican and Mexican mothers raising children with SEND	To explore the experiences of mothers when interacting with service providers.	Mixed methods design. An interview which included 160 questions (some of which were open-ended and some Likert-scale type questions). The data was coded and analysed through grounded theory methodology.	**Findings**: These mothers often encounter negative societal attitudes and biases, both within their communities and from professionals in educational and healthcare systems. These discriminatory experiences were reported to heighten feelings of isolation and anxiety, as well as challenges in advocating

| | | | | for their children's rights and accessing necessary resources.

Limitations: A limited sample size, which restricted the ability to generalize findings across Mexican and Puerto Rican communities or across other Latino populations. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Lavian, Kimhi and Shmuelovich (2024)** Single mother parenting of children with autism spectrum disorder: A qualitative photo-narrative study.

Location: Israel | 7 single mothers living in Southern Israel who were parenting as least one child with an autism diagnosis | To explore the experiences of mothers parenting a child with autism. | Narrative interviews which centred around photographs that participants took to explain their story.

A reflective diary written by the researcher during and after each interview.

The data was analysed through thematic content analysis. | **Findings**: These single mothers often face intensified caregiving demands and societal isolation, and they frequently relied on creative coping strategies and personal resilience to manage the complexities of raising a child with ASD.

Limitations: Alongside the limited sample size, the use of photo-narrative methods, while rich in descriptive detail, may have restricted the findings as participants had control over which aspects of their lives to photograph and share. |

Standing (1999) Lone Mothers' Involvement in their Children's Schooling: Towards a new typology of maternal Involvement Location: London	28 lone mothers with a low income from North London	To explore the involvement of lone mothers with the children's schooling.	Interviews were conducted with the participants. The method of data analysis was not specified, but the author identified categories of involvement based on the interview data.	**Findings**: The lone mothers within this study often faced unique challenges, such as balancing work and childcare responsibilities, limited financial resources, and societal stigma, all of which influenced their ability to participate actively in school-related activities. **Limitations**: This study was based on a specific cultural and economic context in the late 1990s, which may limit its applicability to present-day lone mothers who may face different societal pressures and have access to different resources.
Chia, Woo and Zhuang (2011) An Exploratory Study on Psychosocial Variables of Single Parent Involvement in Education	10 single mothers whose children had completed at least 2 years of primary school	To explore psychosocial variables that impacted their involvement in their children's education.	Phone interviews were conducted with participants. The data was analysed through QDA, a qualitative data analysis software.	**Findings**: Variables such as self-efficacy, social support, and perceived stress significantly impacted the degree and type of involvement single parents had in school activities and academic support.

Location: Singapore				**Limitations**: This study had a relatively small and specific sample, which limits the generalizability of its findings to all single-parent families
West, Miller and Moate (2017) Single Mothers' Experiences of Support at Their Young Children's School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach Location: USA	6 single mothers	To explore the mothers' experiences of support at their children's school.	40–90-minute semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed using IPA procedures.	**Findings**: Positive support from teachers and staff helped mothers feel valued and understood, enhancing their willingness to participate in school activities. Conversely, when school staff showed limited empathy or understanding of the mothers' unique situations, the mothers often felt marginalized or judged, which impacted their engagement and trust in the school system. **Limitations**: The interpretative phenomenological approach may limit broader generalisations, as findings are closely tied to individual experiences and interpretations.
Tsz-lok Lee (2023)	8 single Chinese mothers	To explore the mothers' views and experiences	1–2-hour semi-structured interviews that were analysed using	**Findings**: These single mothers frequently encountered social stigma,

		of childrearing and schooling.	RDQA, a qualitative data analysis software.	economic hardship, and a lack of systemic support, yet they often developed resilience and community-based networks to navigate these challenges.
Towards a textural sociological approach to single mothers' voices: a study of Hong Kong mothers Location: Hong Kong				**Limitations**: The methodology relies heavily on subjective narratives, which may not fully capture broader structural issues affecting all single mothers in Hong Kong.
Bruckman and Blanton (2003) Welfare-to-Work Single Mothers' Perspectives on Parent Involvement in Head Start: Implications for Parent–Teacher Collaboration Location: USA	5 single mothers who had children attending the 4-year-old class at a Head Start program	To explore the mothers' experiences of the Head start program.	1 hour-1 hour 30-minute interviews. The method of data analysis was not specified, but the authors generated themes from the interview data.	**Findings**: While these mothers highly valued involvement in their children's early education, they often faced significant barriers to active participation, such as demanding work schedules, transportation issues, and limited childcare options. The mothers expressed a strong desire for meaningful engagement with teachers and for support that acknowledges their unique circumstances.

				Limitations: The focus on a specific population within the welfare-to-work context, which may not represent the experiences of all single mothers involved in Head Start programs.
Bradley and Goldstein (2022) "People Think It's Easy Because I Smile, But It's Not Easy": The Lived Experiences of Six African American Single Mothers Location: USA	6 Black American single mothers	To explore the loved experiences of these mothers and gain their perspectives on how schools can support their families.	45–60-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted. The data was analysed through the constant comparative method by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to identify similarities and differences in participant responses.	**Findings**: These mothers often felt the need to mask their struggles with a positive demeanour. They encountered persistent stressors, such as limited access to support networks, economic barriers, and societal stereotypes. **Limitations**: The study focused on personal narratives which may not fully capture broader structural influences, such as policy or community support systems, that impact single mothers' experiences.
Vu, Huppatz and Onnudottir (2021) 'Although I had a failed marriage, I	12 single mothers (6 living in the city and 6 living in a rural	Exploring participants experiences of engaging with	2 focus groups which lasted approximately 1 ½ hours (6 city participants and 6 rural participants) followed by	**Findings**: Despite societal stigma and the personal challenges associated with single motherhood, these mothers were highly

won't be a failure as a mother': An analysis of Vietnamese single mothers' involvement in their children's schooling Location: Vietnam	province in Vietnam)	their child's schooling	narrative interviews for 90 minutes which 8 mothers agreed to. The creation of a photo journal to capture meaningful moments with their children throughout the day over four weeks. Data was analysed through thematic open coding to identify themes.	committed to their children's schooling as a way to affirm their capabilities as mothers. Many expressed a deep-seated drive to counter negative stereotypes associated with divorce and single parenthood in Vietnamese society by being actively involved in their children's academic lives. **Limitations**: The focus on single mothers within a specific cultural and national context may restrict the generalisability of findings to single mothers in other countries or cultural backgrounds.
Jacobs (2023) Parental educational support to adolescents: Exploring the role of emotional capital in low-income single-mother	6 single mothers and 6 adolescents	To explore how mothers in a low socio-economic community invest in their children's schooling	1-hour semi-structured interviews with each individual participant. Following this, a focus group was held with the adolescent participants. This data was analysed through thematic content analysis.	**Findings**: These single mothers often relied on their emotional strength and resilience to encourage their children's academic ambitions, despite facing significant financial constraints and social challenges.

families in South Africa				**Limitations**: The focus on emotional capital might overlook other important factors, such as material resources or structural barriers that also influence educational support.
Location: South Africa				

2.4 – Quality Appraisal

Two methods were used to appraise the quality of research included within the SLR, including Gough's (2007) WoE framework and Pawson et al.'s (2003) TAPUPAS model with the addition of modified objectivity (Ryan & Rutty, 2019). Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework consists of three key ratings that combine to form an overall judgment:

- WoE A – Quality of Methodology: Focuses on the rigor and specificity of the research methodology.

- WoE B – Appropriateness of Methodology: Evaluates whether the chosen methodology effectively addresses the systematic review question.

- WoE C – Relevance to the Review Question: Assesses the extent to which the evidence answers the review question.

These three ratings collectively produce WoE D, an overall weight of evidence rating that indicates how well the research evidence addresses the research question. Gough (2007) compared the WoE framework to Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long, and Barnes' (2003) TAPUPAS model, which assesses research based on Transparency, Accuracy, Purposivity, Utility, Propriety, Accessibility, and Specificity. Ryan and Rutty (2019), building on Pawson et al. (2003), argued for the addition of a *modified objectivity* principle to the TAPUPAS model. They suggested this addition to address research bias and to consider a wider range of interpretations, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of reality. Therefore, this review will use a combination of criteria from Gough (2007), Pawson et al. (2003), and Ryan and Rutty (2019) to evaluate the quality of each study, incorporating considerations of methodological rigor, appropriateness, relevance, and modified objectivity.

- **Transparency** – According to Pawson et al. (2003), transparency involves openly articulating how the researcher arrived at their research question, aims, objectives, and methods. It also requires a clear acknowledgment of the researcher's philosophical approach and personal values, which shape the study's direction. To achieve transparency, researchers could include a personal reflection on their experiences and assumptions related to the topic, conduct a thorough review of existing literature to identify gaps in knowledge, or critically examine and scope the proposed problem through a review of existing evidence to strengthen the study's foundation.

- **Accuracy** – To achieve accuracy, Pawson et al. (2003) explain that the research process should ensure that the voices of participants are authentically captured and reflected in the findings. This requires using methods and sources that are both appropriate and

relevant to the specific context under investigation. By carefully selecting data collection techniques that align with the research focus (e.g. interviews, observations, or document analysis), researchers can ensure that their inquiry remains rooted in the perspectives of those involved. Additionally, the interpretation of findings should be grounded in the data rather than preconceived assumptions, allowing for a more genuine and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

- **Purposivity** – Purposivity refers to a study's objectives being philosophically informed, meaning that the underlying assumptions and theoretical foundations should guide the research process in a meaningful way (Pawson et al., 2003). Additionally, the design and methodology must support the successful achievement of the study's goals. By carefully considering the suitability of their approach, researchers can enhance the validity and impact of their findings, ensuring that their work contributes meaningfully to the field (Pawson et al., 2003; Ryan & Rutty, 2019).

- **Utility** – Utility focuses on the practical relevance and applicability of the knowledge generated (Pawson et al., 2003). According to Porter (2007), research findings should be fit for use and directly beneficial to practitioners, ensuring that the results can inform real-world decision-making and practice. This concept aligns with the idea that research should not only answer theoretical questions but also provide meaningful insights that address the needs of those working within the relevant field (Pawson et al., 2003; Ryan & Rutty, 2019).

- **Propriety** – Propriety emphasises the necessity of maintaining ethical and legal standards throughout the research process. This principle ensures that studies are conducted with integrity, protecting the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants (Pawson et al., 2003; Ryan & Rutty, 2019).

- **Accessibility** – Similarly to utility, accessibility involves carefully considering the intended audience, the purpose of the study, and how its findings can be applied in practice (Pawson et al., 2003; Ryan & Rutty, 2019). Researchers must ensure that their work is not only relevant but also easily interpretable and usable by those it aims to benefit (Pawson et al., 2003; Ryan & Rutty, 2019).

- **Specificity** – Pawson et al. (2003) emphasize that the knowledge generated through research should not only be relevant but also meet the expected criteria within its specific field.

- **Modified Objectivity** – Ryan and Rutty (2019) propose that Critical Realism (CR), acknowledges that researchers cannot fully separate themselves from their own

assumptions and perspectives. Instead of viewing this as a limitation, CR recognizes that these assumptions are an inherent part of the research process and should be explicitly acknowledged. In fact, it suggests that a researcher's experiences and perspectives often shape their initial interest in the research question (Ryan & Rutty, 2019). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to examine the existing evidence base, ensuring that their study is informed by prior research and relevant literature. This process serves three key purposes: first, it helps shape the study's aims, objectives, and overall design; second, it highlights any underlying assumptions the researcher may hold and third, it enables the triangulation of various knowledge sources, strengthening the validity and impact of the research.

WoE A

To judge WoE A, the descriptors of transparency, accuracy, accessibility and specificity were used to ascribe a score: 1=low (little evidence of criteria being met), 2=medium (some evidence of criteria being met), 3=high (All criteria is met and discussed in depth). A combination of these scores results in an overall WoE A score of Low = 4-6, medium = 7-9 or high = 10-12.

WoE B

To judge WoE B, the descriptor of purposivity was used to ascribe a score: 1=low (little evidence of criteria being met), 2=medium (some evidence of criteria being met), 3=high (All criteria is met and discussed in depth). This standalone score formed the WoE B judgement.

WoE C

To judge WoE C, the descriptors of utility, propriety and modified objectivity were used using the following system: 1=low (little evidence of criteria being met), 2=medium (some evidence of criteria being met), 3=high (All criteria is met and discussed in depth). Propriety was rated as yes = high or no = low. An average of these low, medium or high scores were used to produce WoE C.

WoE D

To judge WoE D, the scores from WoE A, B and C were used to calculate an average overall weight. A table that provides the overall scores for the included studies can be found in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 – A table to summarise of the application of the weighting criteria proposed by Gough (2007) Pawson et al. (2003) and Ryan and Rutty (2019)

Author(s)	WoE A					WoE B	WoE C				WoE D
	Transparency	Accuracy	Accessibility	Specificity	Overall	Purpositvity	Utility	Propriety	Modified Objectivity	Overall	
Morgan and Stahmer (2020)	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	Yes	High	High	High
McHatton and Correa (2005)	High	High	High	High	High	Medium	High	Yes	High	Medium	High
Lavian, Kimhi and Shmuelovich (2024)	Medium	High	Medium	High	High	High	Medium	Yes	Medium	Medium	High
Standing (1999)	High	High	Medium	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	Yes	Medium	Medium	Medium
Chia, Woo and Zhuang (2011)	Medium	High	High	High	High	High	High	Yes	Medium	High	High

West, Miller and Moate (2017)	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	Yes	High	High	High
Tsz-lok Lee (2023)	Medium	High	High	High	High	High	High	Yes	Medium	High	High
Bruckman and Blanton (2003)	Medium	High	High	Medium	High	Medium	High	Yes	Medium	High	High
Bradley and Goldstein (2022)	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	Yes	High	High	High
Vu, Huppatz and Onnudottir (2021)	Medium	High	Low	High	Medium	High	Low	Yes	Medium	Medium	Medium
Jacobs (2023)	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	Yes	High	High	High

A table developed by the researcher which indicates the high-low ranking of eleven studies against the criteria proposed by Gough (2007) Pawson et al. (2003) and Ryan and Rutty (2019).

2.5 – Comparison of studies included in the SLR

The inclusion of studies from various countries was a necessary choice to capture the breadth of experiences mothers have when engaging with their child's school. Given that the current study explores the experiences of lone mothers through an intersectional lens, it is important to recognise how different cultural, social, and educational contexts shape these interactions. Heavily drawing on international research, the review highlights the ways in which intersecting identities such as single parenthood, socioeconomic status and cultural background interact with educational systems in diverse settings. This broader perspective deepens the understanding of lone mothers' experiences and strengthens the study's relevance across different contexts.

Using the Weight of Evidence framework criteria, all studies were assessed and compared based on their methodological quality, suitability, and relevance. Nine papers were judged as being high overall, as they gained a WoE D score between 10-12, while two papers was judged as medium (Standing, 1999; Vu, Huppatz & Onnudottir, 2021).

All papers were scored high on accuracy and all were considered to be ethical. Six papers to be judged as high on transparency (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020; West, Miller & Moate, 2017; Standing, 1999; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Bradley & Goldstein, 2022; Jacobs, 2023) while all others received a medium score due to the lack of reference to author positionality, reflexivity or references to prior experiences/assumptions of the topic. For example, McHatton and Correa (2005) gained a high score as they reflected on how their Latina backgrounds may have impacted on their interactions with their participants and their interpretation of data.

Three papers did not receive a high rating on accessibility and utility as there were vague specifications given as to how the research findings could be applied further (Standing, 1999; Lavian et al., 2024; Vu et al., 2021). Two papers did not receive a high rating for specificity or purposivity due to a lack of description concerning the interview process and what this entailed (Standing, 1999) and a lack of description about analysis technique (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). McHatton and Correa (2006) also received a medium rating for purposivity due to a lack of clarity as to how the Likert-scale questions reflected within data analysis procedures.

Six papers achieved high ratings for utility as they made distinct references to who the research was for and how to use their research whether this was to: inform policy (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020), promote home-school collaboration models (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023), to develop research agendas (McHatton & Correa, 2006), to better inform professionals working with this

population (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022) or to outline how schools and community based services can become involved to support this population of parents (West et al., 2017; Chia, Woo & Zhuang, 2011). Lastly, four papers received high ratings for modified objectivity as they discussed how their positionality as researchers could have impacted participant recruitment and triangulation of evidence due to underlying assumptions and previous experiences (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022; Morgan & Stahmer, 2022; West et al., 2017; Jacobs, 2023).

2.6 - Synthesis Method

To synthesise the results, each research paper was analysed individually. The process began with reading the paper in full to gain an understanding of the research. The next step involved the creation of descriptive codes which captured key ideas and findings. Coding was conducted manually and involved a close, line-by-line reading of the results and discussion sections of each paper. Priority was given to sections where participants' voices were presented (e.g. direct quotations) as well as to the authors' interpretations of those accounts. Not all parts of the papers were coded. Instead, the focus was limited to data that directly related to the experiences of lone mothers in the context of their interactions with their child's school system. Within those relevant sections, all content was coded to ensure a thorough representation of the findings. The descriptive codes aimed to remain close to the original language used in the studies, capturing both the surface content (what was said) and initial interpretations (what it seemed to mean). These codes were then organised into broader categories of shared meaning, identifying connections within and across studies. This process was repeated for each study. Following this, overarching themes were generated by identifying patterns across the categories of codes with a focus on the lived experiences of the lone mothers in relation to their interactions within their child's school system. This process led to the development of six central themes, including: 'experiences of discrimination', 'authority and expertise', 'becoming an advocate', 'supportive networks', 'parental knowledge and engagement', and 'the life adjustment'. In the next section, each theme is explained in greater depth.

2.7 – Synthesis of studies

2.7.1 - Lone mother experiences of discrimination

Seven studies discussed how lone mothers experienced multifaceted challenges which were often rooted in systemic biases and societal prejudices (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020; Standing, 1999; McHatton & Correa, 2005; West et al., 2017; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; Jacobs, 2023; Vu et al., 2021). Morgan and Stahmer (2020) examined the experiences of single Black mothers raising children with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) through a sociological lens, drawing on

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and cultural capital to explore how these factors influenced their experiences. They found that the mothers reported that they had to become more outspoken when requesting services from individuals who did not look like them or understand their experiences which the authors attributed to biases within structural and systemic systems that are racist, sexist and ableist.

Similarly, three Black mothers in Standing's (1999) study experienced racism which resulted in them moving their children to different educational settings, demonstrating the intersection of race, lone-parent status and educational access (Crenshaw, 1991). Another example of discrimination can be viewed in McHatton and Correa's (2005) study as they highlight the effects of social and structural discrimination at a systemic level where Mexican and Puerto Rican lone mothers described experiences of being overlooked for job promotions and being stereotyped in exchanges with medical professionals and when conversing with strangers in public. The mothers shared their experiences of interactions being cut short, being unaccepted, treated as lesser than and being stared at as if they were peculiar. They attributed these experiences to differences in ethnicity, language, customs and appearance where language and appearance accounted for a larger portion of experiences. Though not specific to educational settings, these encounters highlight the challenges of existing in environments where cultural differences are unwelcome, a point emphasised by feminist psychology that advocates for recognition and empowerment of diverse experiences in traditionally male and Eurocentric frameworks (Carastathis, 2014). These experiences necessitate the importance of the recognition and celebration of diversity in a genuine way to minimise segregation and feelings of isolation. A positive example of this was shared in West et al. (2017) where one mother expressed her pride in allowing her parents in accompanying her to an event that celebrated cultural diversity at her child's school as she felt it was important for her child to be recognised and valued in a meaningful manner.

Linked to discrimination, mothers within several included studies reported feelings of social pressure to ensure that their children were performing well academically. Mothers in Jacobs (2023) study placed value in ensuring that their children performed well academically with the aim of increasing their social capital, believing that this would help them in the future to become more successful. Similarly, this theme was found in Vu et al. (2021) where mothers asserted that their family's social status would improve if their children performed well at school, viewing this as an opportunity for social redemption. In Tsz-lok Lee's (2023) study, one mother described her experience of supporting her children to perform well academically as a 'struggle' as she felt at fault for her child's academic shortcomings and felt pressurised to

disprove societal norms which place blame on parents when progress is hindered at school (p. 554). Similarly, a mother in Standing's (1999) study described her experiences of guilt when she had not read to her child at home as she felt at fault when her child was not thriving in an academic sense. This was exacerbated by school assumptions that lone mothers should be readily available at their beck and call, thinking that they do not have other demands to attend to throughout the day. This theme was also found in the study by West et al. (2017) as the mothers discussed instances where they felt judged i.e. when they have arrived late to the school to collect their child or appear to be finding it hard to manage parenting responsibilities.

2.7.2 - The impact of authority and expertise on parental involvement

Four studies contained experiences of lone mothers who found themselves navigating a complex web of authority and expertise within professional and educational systems through striking a balance between advocating for their child's needs and contending with the authority of educators and medical professionals (Standing, 1999; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). Lone mothers who had children with SEN in Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study expressed that they felt a pressure to allow other professionals to take the lead role in managing interventions for their children and to withdraw their opinions on the matter. This pressure has been linked to feelings of disempowerment through experiences of being told that they are inexperienced (Standing, 1999) or through being placated within conversations when they have tried to make their voices heard (McHatton & Correa, 2005). Mothers in McHatton and Correa's (2005) study discussed their feelings of dismissal when they attempted to share their concerns with professionals about their child's development. They also spoke about the lack of consideration of making information accessible when receiving paperwork from professionals as the mothers did not speak English as their first language. Disempowerment also occurred when mothers received consistent messages about their child's difficulties. For mothers to feel acceptance within their children's schools, they often became involved in classroom-based activities as a way to meet school expectations of them which felt easier than challenging school practices and perceptions (Standing, 1999).

Although there was a consistent message across four of the studies that mothers' experiences of authority often caused feelings of disempowerment, still they were encouraged to partake in school-based activities. Tsz-lok Lee (2023) found that one mother was reluctant to seek further explanation and clarity when she was informed about her child's challenging behaviour at school as she did not want to question school authority so that she could avoid confrontation. She wanted to maintain the boundary between her role as a help-seeker and the

school's professional authority, regardless of the school's unsatisfactory responses. Across the studies, schools were viewed as '*powerful*' (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023, p. 557) having the capacity to '*limit*' the expression of parents (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020, p. 15). This dynamic can prevent access to services, magnify mothers' feelings of helplessness and reduce opportunities to cultivate collaborative relationships. Standing (1999) found that some lone mothers were less likely to participate in collaborative settings such as parent groups or occupy parental governor roles due to feeling as though they were the '*wrong sort*' of parents or feeling that they would be critiqued for their views and unwelcomed (p. 68).

2.7.3 - Becoming an advocate

Seven studies highlighted how advocacy can feel like a battle when there are numerous bureaucratic hurdles and systemic biases to overcome (West et al. 2017; Standing, 1999; Lavian et al., 2024; Bradley & Goldstein, 2022; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). Despite these challenges, many parents persist and commit to pursuing better outcomes for their children. Lone mothers in Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study likened this to a '*fight*' to gain access to services for their children (p. 12). Most of the mothers reported difficulty with obtaining diagnoses for their children and attributed this to racial prejudice as their children's behaviours were often misunderstood which resulted in misdiagnosis, delayed diagnosis and an overall negative experience. Furthermore, one mother reported a struggle to communicate her aspirations for her child freely as these were disregarded by the professionals involved with her child and recalled hearing the statement '*good luck with that*' when discussing her best hopes for her child (p. 12). In line with this point, some mothers in Standing's (1999) study were told that their expectations for their children were too high which resulted in them withdrawing from school. Although they explained that there are opportunities to advocate for their children and express their disappointment with procedures through participating in school governance roles, they described this as requiring additional strength due to the challenges that it comes with e.g. feeling silenced.

In McHatton and Correa's (2005) study, several accounts of *silencing* were discussed. One circumstance included a mother feeling that she was prevented from being assertive when professionals spoke to her in an unwarranted manner due to a language barrier. She interpreted some remarks as '*crude*' and felt that she could not respond effectively to these comments due to the language barrier (p. 138). Another mother in the study discussed her experience of feeling incapable of advocating for her child with hydrocephaly when other children spoke about their physical appearance in a derogatory way. These experiences highlight how intersectionality

plays a critical role in the advocacy struggles faced by lone mothers, as factors such as race, language, and disability status multiply their difficulties in accessing support and being heard.

The studies shared highlight the notion that advocacy for lone mothers can feel difficult and disheartening at times. Bradley and Goldstein (2022) also found that isolation can be experienced as the mothers in the study felt a strong duty to support their child, though it often required significant personal sacrifices. It also required strength to continue to engage in difficult conversations and make their voices heard. All participants shared the view that schools need to engage in better collaborative processes with parents as the majority of participants shared their frustrations of their views being unaccounted for in decision-making processes. Their opinions often centred around training to upskill staff to learn evidence-based methods of interacting with children with SEN appropriately and providing resources to support their children's regulation at school. Viewing these findings through the FST framework (Hill, 1949) suggests that lone mothers experiences of stress while navigating school systems can be heightened due to balancing their own familial responsibilities and feeling that their advocacy efforts are being dismissed or obstructed. This strain can be exacerbated or alleviated by the quality of relationships between schools and parents. For example, Tsz-lok Lee (2023) reported that lone mothers felt comforted when they had a high level of trust in their relationships with teaching staff and the school culture. Similarly, Morgan and Stahmer (2020) found that mothers felt empowered to speak out when they felt respected. One mother shared that it was likely for her to receive respect from class teachers in comparison to other professionals. Although the participants did not share their reasons for why they thought happened, in a similar study, Lavian et al. (2024) found that it was important for mothers to share a common language to feel connected to the educational staff in their child's setting. This was so that they could feel a sense of shared responsibility and understanding of their child's needs. All mothers within this study spoke about the fear of the future when they would no longer be able to advocate for their children as they felt that the role of an advocate mostly fell upon their shoulders. One mother shared, *'I'm not ready to go until I know that there is someone for him'* (p. 332). This showcases the extent of the anxieties that lone mothers can feel when thinking about the future.

2.7.4 - Support networks

All studies reflected that support networks are crucial elements in building community and overcoming barriers. These networks provide emotional sustenance, practical assistance, and a sense of solidarity, helping parents feel less isolated and more empowered (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). By connecting with other families, professionals, and community resources,

parents can share experiences, gain valuable insights, and advocate more effectively for their children's needs (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). These findings align with FST (Hill, 1949), which showcases the importance of external resources in reducing the stress and burden placed on families, especially lone-parent households. Social supports help parents to manage stressors while enhancing their well-being and ability to advocate for their children.

Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study found that lone mothers valued connecting with other mothers who were raising children with ASD and shared the same culture as them. This connection was considered an important step in their advocacy journeys as they were able to gain hope through finding out what supports worked for others and adopt these methods for themselves. Echoing this point, the mothers in McHatton and Correa's (2005) study found comfort in meeting other mothers of Mexican descent as they were less likely to feel 'othered' when spoken to (p. 136). This points to the importance of intersectionality, as shared cultural and lived experiences help create more supportive networks that counter the effects of systemic biases. By participating in culturally familiar support groups, these mothers were able to find a sense of belonging that was essential for their emotional well-being.

All studies included within this review perceived community support networks as vital for enhancing children's education in various ways. Chia et al. (2011) found that mothers valued the receipt of financial aid and counselling as this enhanced their opportunities to participate in their children's schooling. It also enabled them to increase in knowledge and access schemes to afford assistive resources. Studies also revealed that parents drew strength from having a religious faith as it gave them a sense of meaning and purpose (Chia et al., 2011; Lavian et al., 2024). Both Vu et al. (2021) and Tsz-lok Lee (2023) found that personal development was also gained through accessing community-based services and social networks as mothers gained valuable insights from others on how to navigate difficult financial and familial situations while learning practical skills such as surfing the internet.

With regards to familial support networks, three studies found that mothers drew strength from their love for their children (Lavian et al., 2024; Chia et al., 2011; Jacobs, 2023). This strength was reciprocated by adolescents in Jacob's (2023) study, as they spoke highly about the strong bonds they had with their mothers and how open communication fostered a strong support network for them.

Chia et al. (2011) identified that mothers in their study drew practical support from family members to support them with schooling involvement. For example, when grandparents could provide childcare and help out around the house, some mothers were able to work longer

shifts which helped to increase the household income and other mothers were able to solely focus on helping their children with homework instead of completing other household duties. However, some studies revealed that mothers opposed the idea that they should complete homework with their children as they did not perceive home as a place for engaging in formal learning arguing that school should provide all the support necessary for their children to thrive academically (Standing, 1999; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). Therefore, some studies held schools accountable for not providing a well-rounded curriculum. For example, the women in Standing's (1999) study who were raising Black and mixed heritage children did not feel that schools were providing enough education into cultural history and drew support from Black Saturday schools to supplement their education.

Despite the limitations of the curriculum, the studies consistently highlighted schools as the most prevalent source of support. A consistent finding was that mothers were likely to engage with school-based supports when they felt respected and listened to (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; Lavian et al., 2024; West et al., 2017). Bruckman and Blanton (2003) found that mothers were more receptive to teachers who were intentional about collaborating with them as their actions felt genuine and supportive as they could discuss their ideas and share news. This was likened to becoming '*allies*' (p. 148). In agreement with this, West et al. (2017) emphasised the importance of having regular contact between home and school as mothers perceived this as teachers showing an interest in their child's whole livelihood, not just school progress which helped to alleviate stress. Through these compassionate relationships, mothers reported experiences of unconditional acceptance and understanding especially in circumstances where they were late to collect their children from school or when they were late in paying fees. This flexibility enabled one mother in particular to complete a course with contributed to the completion of her degree showcasing the vast impact that supportive arrangements can have.

Another avenue of support that parents valued and requested more of was school networking events as this provided opportunities for mothers to network with smaller parent communities, engage in learning activities and gain access to additional resources e.g. information about different services (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022; West et al., 2017). Parent committee meetings were also mentioned as being supportive vehicles for sharing vulnerabilities about difficulties with parenting, receiving opportunities to select topics for discussion and recommending ideas to incorporate within the curriculum (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). As mentioned earlier, at times these forums are not accessed by lone mothers due to social stigmas, but also due to practical reasons as they are often held during working

hours which make them unattainable for many lone mothers who work (Chia et al., 2011; Standing, 1999).

2.7.5 - Parental knowledge and engagement

Ten studies reflected the impact of parental education and engagement on parental empowerment where two particularly highlighted the importance of understanding procedural practices and their children's academic requirements (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). This empowerment through knowledge transforms parents from passive recipients of information to proactive participants in their children's education, ultimately leading to personal growth. Standing (1999) told of how participants gained confidence through fulfilling a parent governor role as they were able to affect change within the school and ultimately benefit their children. Other women within the study were less concerned about affecting school change, but supporting their individual children and thus assumed roles such as classroom and school trip helpers. Women also assumed these roles as opportunities to get to know their children better and to observe teacher interactions to learn from them (Tsz-lok-Lee 2023; Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). Through engaging in these roles, feelings of competence increased and the women were more likely to engage in various activities because of this (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). This growth in personal development is important to note as aforementioned in earlier themes, lone mothers experienced feelings of incompetence due to the negative perceptions of others about their capabilities (Standing, 1999).

With regards to perspectives about home education, in Standing's (1999) study, some mothers felt the importance of being involved in their child's schooling both at home and at school, where they received guidance on how to complete home activities that linked into school topics; Other mothers did not want support from teachers on how to teach their children and some were reluctant to engage in home learning as this would spark confrontation with their children. Chia et al. (2011) found that some mothers felt unequipped to teach their children because of time constraints and their level of subject specific knowledge. These challenges can be further understood through FST (Hill, 1949), which suggests that external stressors, such as limited time and resources, can amplify family tension and negatively impact on parental self-efficacy. A lack of subject-specific knowledge may intensify feelings of ineptitude, causing mothers to rely more heavily on professionals to advocate for and teach their children. However, mothers within Jacob's (2023) study felt it was important to have open conversations about education with their children so that they had an increased awareness of their child's needs to become active participants in educational processes. Having an

awareness of their child's needs led mothers in Vu et al. (2021) to seek additional tuition for their children or utilise methods such as visiting bookstores to aid their children's learning.

A mother within Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study accredited her experiences as a teacher to her success with advocating for her child to be assessed by professionals and expressed a belief that a lack of knowledge about diagnostic labels can lead to an overreliance on professionals. However, other mothers valued professional input and attributed this to parenting success and becoming more knowledgeable about child development (West et al., 2017). Furthermore, the daily interaction with teachers promoted parental engagement and aided mothers to be forthcoming when asking questions relating to their child's education (West et al., 2017). Other studies found that when mothers did receive transparent information about the supports available for their children, this increased parental frustration and rumination on the barriers their children faced (Lavian et al., 2024; Bradley & Goldstein, 2022).

2.7.6 - The Life Adjustment

Seven studies present the reality of shifting familial ideologies, dealing with grief and ushering in acceptance of the new reality. The mothers in Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study likened their experience of their child's diagnosis of ASD as being in '*survival mode*', impacting their availability to be a strong advocate for them (p. 11). Similarly, in other studies, the mothers described feeling frustration, disappointment and an experience of isolation and mourning during the initial diagnosis period (McHatton & Correa, 2005; Lavian et al., 2024). For example, mothers mourned as they had pictured a different family life to the one that stood before them (Lavian et al., 2024). Others experienced grief due to an adjustment of a new family dynamic due to their partners leaving them upon learning about their child's diagnosis (McHatton & Correa, 2005). This notion of family change aligns with FST (Hill, 1949) which discusses how new challenges which disrupt established family structures require adjustments to roles, expectations, and routines.

The newfound diagnosis required a mindset adjustment for many mothers as they discussed having to accept and embrace the new struggles that were presented and gain strength to persevere in parenting alone (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022). However, this process was not an easy one, as mothers described experiencing periods of overwhelm and stress while learning to navigate their fears and worries (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022). The topic of physical exhaustion occurred throughout two of the studies where mothers described their struggle with being the sole provider for their children where they had to bear parental strains alone and forego personal necessities to ensure their children were taken care of (Chia et al., 2011;

Lavian, et al., 2024). This can be viewed through the lens of intersectionality, as mothers from marginalised groups, such as low-income, may experience compounded grief and stress due to societal biases and the lack of adequate support systems (Crenshaw, 1991).

An aspect of isolation and loneliness was also observed across two studies where mothers felt as though they could not depend on others to share their hardships and parental responsibilities (West et al., 2017; Lavian, et al., 2024). However, mothers in West et al, (2017) spoke of how their continuous relationships with staff at school provided some solace, comfort and a method for feeling connected to their child's school experiences and assured that things will be okay. The reality for many lone mothers is that work commitments impact on the amount of time they spend with their children at home due to working longer hours (West et al., 2017). A mother in Chia et al. (2011) spoke of how she wanted to hire some household help so that she could spend more time with her child, but she could not afford this. Similarly, mothers in Vu et al. (2021) experienced stress and financial burdens through having to work long hours to fund their children's educational expenses.

2.8 - SLR Limitations

This SLR was conducted to identify what was currently known about lone mothers' experiences with school systems. However, it is not without limitations due to several factors. While the use of a structured appraisal provided a systematic means of assessing the quality and relevance of studies included in this review, there is ongoing debate about the suitability of such frameworks for appraising qualitative research. Porter (2007) argues that applying rigid scoring or rating systems to qualitative studies risks oversimplifying the richness and contextual nuance that characterises this type of research. The human experience cannot be meaningfully reduced to fixed, objective categories. Therefore, it was important to ensure that important insights were not dismissed due to technical or formal shortcomings. In this review, the frameworks were applied interpretively, with attention given to the context and the value of each study's findings.

While the search terms were focused to maintain relevance to the research question, this narrow scope may have excluded studies that used broader or alternative terminology. Additionally, the use of the term 'school' implicitly limited the age range of the children considered, potentially overlooking experiences of lone mothers with children in early years (e.g. nursery or pre-school settings) or in post-16 education. This narrowing of search terms and may have reduced the diversity of findings and excluded valuable insights into lone mothers' experiences across the broader spectrum of the UK education system.

The review also considers global research with heterogenous data so it is difficult to make generalisations across populations. Furthermore, the majority of studies included in this review utilised a small participant sample which also limits the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the choice of methodology for some of the papers could have also limited the findings. For example, McHatton and Correa (2006) opted for a mixed methods design through using interviews that produced qualitative and quantitative data. This large question set could invoke fatigue and the Likert-scaled questions could limit the participants' ability to provide detailed responses. Additionally, when analysing this data, it could have led to an imbalance in interpreting one set of results over the other, with either quantitative findings overshadowing the qualitative nuances or vice versa. Methodological limitations were also seen in Standing (1999) and Bruckman and Blanton's (2003) study as they both did not specify their data analysis methods explicitly. This lack of transparency limits their credibility and trustworthiness as it is challenging for readers to gain clarity on how themes and conclusions were drawn.

Another limitation to this review is that it was not subject to inter-rater checks in screening, selection, appraising or synthesising and, while the researcher has endeavoured to be transparent at every stage, it is recognised that there may be elements of subjectivity. Lastly, the age and rigour of the included studies also impact the quality of this synthesis. For example, the findings about single mothers' involvement in schooling in older studies may not reflect current social or cultural norms, policies, or experiences.

2.9 - Implications for EP Practice

The SLR aimed to answer the following question:

What are the experiences of lone mothers when interacting with their child's school system?

The research suggests that lone mothers' experiences in educational systems are closely connected and impacted by wider systems in several ways. A key message throughout the research was that lone mothers value support networks in the form of family, friends, professional collaboration and community-based services (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; Jacobs, 2023; West et al., 2017; Standing, 1999). This support provided a means to gain respite, receive knowledge and advice, feel heard and grow in confidence (Standing, 1999; Bradley & Goldstein, 2022). However, another message that echoed through research concerning minoritised groups was the detrimental impact on lone mothers' feelings of belonging and competency due to oppressive societal views surrounding race and language acquisition (McHatton & Correa, 2006; Standing, 1999). These findings have important implications for EP practice, especially in

connection with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2023) standards. For example, EPs need to consider the impact of systemic racism and other forms of discrimination on parental engagement. These influences can affect lone mothers' sense of involvement in their child's education and contribute to feelings of overwhelm, particularly when a parent has sole responsibility for their child (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022). In line with HCPC Standard 5 (specifically 5.1 and 5.2, which emphasise the importance of understanding social, cultural, and systemic factors impacting service users), EPs should work to recognise and address these barriers to foster inclusive and supportive interactions with lone mothers in educational settings (HCPC, 2023).

This review also delved into the emotional and practical challenges of lone motherhood which centre around reorganising the family dynamic and exercising resilience (Lavian et al., 2024; Bradley & Goldstein, 2022). It also discussed the ways in which parents find support and develop coping strategies to manage their responsibilities and maintain a connection with their children's daily lives (Vu et al., 2021). The research to date has not only indicated the resilience of lone mothers and the areas of strength that support them to advocate for their children, but also the gaps and inefficiencies within educational systems that prevent them from accessing services and providing valuable insights through their contributions to bettering practice. Some studies suggest that if educational professionals became more aware of the struggles these families endure, it could open up conversations about how to support them practically (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; McHatton & Correa, 2005; West et al., 2017). For EPs, these findings are particularly relevant, as they highlight the importance of facilitating relationships and ensuring that parent voices are central to assessment processes and beyond. In practice, this could mean actively listening to the unique challenges and needs of lone mothers and working to bridge the gaps they experience in educational settings.

The review also highlighted the critical role of parental education and involvement in their children's learning and development through being informed and actively participating in educational processes. School transparency and parental engagement often lead to personal growth and empowerment (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003), whereas challenges were likely to occur when there was a lack of information and support (Bradley & Goldstein, 2022). This accentuates the need for effective communication and collaboration between parents and educational professionals.

EPs can play a critical role in fostering family and community partnerships, promoting collaboration among families, schools, and communities to build robust support networks. This

aligns with the HCPC Standard 1 (especially 1.1 and 1.2, which discuss the importance of person-centred care) by ensuring that parents' voices are not only heard but are central in decision-making processes regarding their children's educational journeys (HCPC, 2023). In doing so, EPs can help create positive experiences, increase parents' knowledge, and provide effective support that empowers them to be active partners in their children's education.

Four studies addressed the struggles lone mothers face in maintaining their voice and autonomy, feeling pressurised to defer to experts and conform to standards where authoritative figures and institutions are not questioned or challenged (Standing, 1999; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer; 2020). Out of the eleven studies, only three discussed the experiences of lone mothers parenting a child with SEND needs (Lavian et al., 2024; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). This indicates a need to explore the experiences of navigating processes relating to SEND. Further exploration into this could add additional insight into the complexities of lone motherhood.

2.10 - Rationale and unique contribution to the existing body of research

Across the research, it is evident that the experiences of lone mothers are shaped by intersecting systems of power and privilege, highlighting the role of intersectionality in understanding how multiple factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, and parental status, interact to influence how individuals are perceived and treated (Crenshaw, 1989; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). While existing studies have explored the general experiences of lone mothers navigating school systems, much of this research focuses on those who are not raising children with SEND. This limited scope leaves a critical gap in understanding how intersectionality further impacts the experiences of lone mothers raising children with SEND, particularly within institutional processes.

Only three papers explicitly discuss lone mothers raising children with SEND (McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer, 2020; Lavian et al., 2024). This research highlights issues such as professional dismissal of mothers' expertise (McHatton & Correa, 2005), the pressure on mothers to silence their voices in decision-making processes (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020), and the emotional toll of ruminating on the adequacy of school-based support for their children (Lavian et al., 2024). Despite these valuable contributions, there is a distinct gap in the literature: little is known about how lone mothers specifically experience SEND-related processes within education, such as the EHCNA.

The EHCNA process is multilayered, involving numerous assessments, extensive paperwork, and interactions with a variety of professionals (Ahad et al., 2022). For lone mothers, these demands may be compounded by systemic biases, emotional stress, and a lack of accessible support (Levine, 2009). This study aims to address this gap by exploring the nuanced experiences of lone mothers engaging with the EHCNA process, shedding light on their challenges, perceptions, and strategies for navigating this critical procedure.

By amplifying the voices of lone mothers, this study seeks to contribute a unique perspective to the existing body of knowledge, offering insights that are particularly relevant for educational professionals such as SENCos and EPs. These professionals are uniquely positioned to provide guidance and support during the EHCNA process and this research has the potential to inform practices that promote equity, empowerment and meaningful engagement for lone mothers and their children with SEND. To achieve these aims, the study will be guided by the following overarching research question:

How do lone mothers interpret their experiences of the Educational Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process?

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 – Introduction

In this chapter, my ontological and epistemological positionality as a researcher will be outlined. I will then share the research design and provide an overview of research methods that were considered for this research. Following this, I will provide a rationale for the chosen methodology for this current research study through outlining theoretical underpinnings and addressing limitations. Following this, participant recruitment methods and procedural data collection and analysis methods will be outlined prior to discussing quality assurance and ethical considerations.

An overview of key features within the current study are outlined below in Table 3.1

Table 3.1 – Current study methodology and participant overview

Research component	Chosen method
Ontology and Epistemology	Ontology: Critical realism
	Epistemology: Feminist
Methodology	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Theoretical underpinnings	Phenomenology
	Hermeneutics
	Idiography
Data collection method	Semi-structured interviews
Participant overview	Four lone mothers who have participated throughout the EHCNA process within the last 2 years

3.2 – Paradigms, Ontology and Epistemology

One's understanding of the world and the nature of reality is characterised by beliefs or principles that can be defined through paradigms and ontological positions (Khatri, 2020). Ontology is concerned with the nature of 'being' which is what exists and how that existence can be understood (Bittle, 2022). These ontological assumptions influence the kind of research questions asked and the ways in which knowledge is pursued (Khatri, 2020). Epistemology, in contrast, refers to the theory of knowledge and the methods through which we come to understand reality (Mertens, 2007). These methods can be understood through the overarching

paradigms which encapsulate the shared ideology of an outlook of the world (Kuhn, 1970; Anand, Larson & Mahoney, 2020).

Paradigms can be positioned along a continuum, with realism at one end and relativism at the other (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Realism assumes the existence of an objective reality independent of our perceptions, while relativism posits that reality is socially constructed and shaped by context and individual experience. The critical realist paradigm, occupies a position between these extremes (Bhaskar, 1978; Baškarada & Koronios, 2018). Critical realism asserts that while a reality exists independently of human perception, our access to and understanding of it are mediated by social, cultural and personal contexts (Bhaskar, 1978; Fletcher, 2017).

A central principle of critical realism is its layered ontology, which differentiates between three levels of reality:

- The empirical: what is experienced or observed.
- The actual: what happens, whether or not it is observed.
- The real: the underlying mechanisms, structures, and causal powers that generate events (Bhaskar, 1978; Lawani, 2021).

This distinction allows researchers to explore not only what is seen and said, but also what structures or conditions may be enabling or constraining particular outcomes. However, in the context of this research, the primary interest lies at the empirical level which is the lived experiences of lone mothers engaging with the EHCNA process. The focus is on interpreting how these experiences are understood by the mothers, while remaining aware that these accounts are shaped by deeper systemic structures.

Aligned with this ontological positioning, this study adopts a feminist epistemological stance through exploring underlying mechanisms of inequality while remaining grounded in empirical data (Fletcher, 2017; Lawani, 2021). Feminist epistemology promotes a pluralistic approach to understanding knowledge, recognising that lived experience offers critical insight into structural and relational inequalities (Cohen et al., 2022). It is attentive not only to how knowledge is constructed but also to who is constructing it and whose voices are traditionally excluded or marginalised (Causevic, et al., 2020). This acknowledges that lone mothers are experts of their own experiences and that their perspectives are shaped by intersecting personal, social and structural factors. By drawing on a feminist epistemology, this research centres the agency of lone mothers while also critically examining how institutional power,

gendered expectations and systemic barriers influence their interactions within the EHCNA process.

3.3 – Research purpose

This study provides a unique opportunity to explore the intersections of gender, race and disability status, encouraging a deeper understanding of how these identities shape individual experiences. It will adopt an exploratory, emancipatory design through promoting inclusivity and social justice and seeking to amplify the voices of a marginalized group, in this case lone mothers. It will also inform practice within educational psychology and other educational professions when collaborating with lone mothers.

3.4 - Research design

The chosen methodology for a piece of research should align with the research question as well as its ontological and epistemological positions (Kuhn, 1970; Anand, Larson & Mahoney, 2020). There is little research which looks at the experiences of lone mothers, therefore, an exploratory design was utilised as this is useful for using flexible data gathering method to generate new insights (Al-Ababneh, 2020). As this research requires the exploration of experience which also includes the recall of memories, feelings, ideas and reflections, a qualitative methodology was selected to aid an in-depth collection and analysis of data through detailed personal recollections (Moriña, 2021). A quantitative methodology was rejected as this stance aligns closely with positivist ontology which risks reducing the inherently complex and variable nature of the human experience to potentially deterministic and reductionist terms.

3.5 – Selecting a Qualitative approach

When selecting a qualitative method for data collection which best captures participant experiences, it was important to think about depth and detail as this would provide rich data (Staller, 2021). Focus groups were considered, but rejected as the element of personal depth could be restricted due to participant domination or participants comfortability levels within group settings (Queirós, Faria, & Almeida, 2017). Interviews provided the opportunity for in-depth exploration into individual perspectives in a more confidential environment (Queirós, Faria, & Almeida, 2017). Through the use of open-ended questioning, this allows for flexible probing which could lead to the gathering of rich data (Queirós, Faria, & Almeida, 2017). Thus, as this research aims to understand detailed experiences of participants, semi-structured interviews were used.

3.6 – Considered methodologies

To determine the most suitable methodology for this research, I will explore several qualitative approaches, including Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), Grounded Theory (GT), Narrative Analysis (NA), and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Each of these methods offers unique strengths in capturing and interpreting lived experiences. Following this evaluation, I will justify the selection of the most appropriate methodology for this study while also acknowledging its limitations.

3.6.1 -Reflexive thematic analysis

RTA is a qualitative method which is used to analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within data through systematic coding, culminating in the production of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A key element of RTA is the reiterative process of exercising reflexivity where researchers must critically reflect on their personal assumptions and how their theoretical positionality and values impact on the outcomes drawn. This does not indicate that researchers should strive for objectivity through bracketing subjective interpretations, rather RTA necessitates that researchers comment on how their reflections shape the analysis process. This can be referred to as a quality assurance mechanism as it provides a transparent explanation for the conclusions drawn (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

RTA is particularly concerned with identifying themes across datasets to provide insight into the broader phenomenon, whereas the research question aims to gain a deeper understanding of how each individual experiences a specific phenomenon, the EHCNA process. Therefore, RTA was rejected as it is used to identify emerging patterns or themes without necessarily paying attention to the subjective experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.6.2 - Narrative analysis

NA was considered as it is a qualitative research method which explores and interprets the narratives or stories people tell about their experiences (De Fina, 2015). It centralises the narrative as the vehicle for gaining understanding of how participants create meaning within a particular context. Throughout the data collection process, narrative approaches can make use of primary and secondary data meaning that data can be gained through the use of interviews, monologues and written stories (e.g. diary entries and letters) (Quinn & Clare, 2008). Throughout data analysis, NA is concerned about how patterns occur throughout a story to gain an understanding of the participant's perspective. In doing so, it places focus on how the story is structured. NA can generate a rich understanding of an experience through attaining meaning through the interpretation of narratives (De Fina, 2015). However, it was not chosen for this

current study, as NA primarily emphasises the structure, form, and storytelling elements of narratives. While this can offer valuable insights, the current study is more concerned with exploring how lone mothers interpret and make sense of their experiences within specific social and institutional contexts.

3.6.3 -Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative method which differs from the aforementioned methods as it enables the researcher to create new theories based on its data collection and analysis procedures (Charmaz, 2015). Charmaz (2015) further explains that it follows an iterative process known as theoretical sampling where the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and analysis and from this derives a theory. This method is often used when there is no existing theory which explains a phenomenon or if the data for an existing theory is incomplete (E.g. due to using a different participant sample). It utilises methods such as interviews, focus groups or observations to collate data and then applies a systematic coding process to create a theory which is grounded in data (Charmaz, 2015).

This method was not chosen for the current research study as grounded theory aims to develop broader theoretical frameworks that explain social phenomenon, whereas the research focus aims to take an idiographic approach. Through investigating the lived experiences of individuals, it aims to emphasise the subjective meanings they attribute to these nuanced experiences.

3.6.4 – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is concerned with conducting a thorough investigation into how participants construe their personal lived experiences (Smith et al., 2021). It follows a systematic process which enables participants to not only retell an experience, but also reflect on that experience. Due to its primary focus in understanding participants unique constructions of an event, it emphasizes depth of analysis rather than breadth, requiring a relatively small sample size (3-6). This exploratory focus enables the collection of detailed accounts typically through semi-structured interviews. A systematic multi-step analysis procedure is then used to draw out emerging themes which then create overarching themes. Once individual cases have been analysed, patterns across datasets can be explored to create overarching themes, whilst still maintaining a primary focus on individual experiences (Smith et al., 2021). IPA particularly focusses on how to maintain fidelity to the language used by participants to detail their experience. To do so, it draws on a range of theoretical underpinnings (phenomenology,

hermeneutics and idiography) to identify and interpret what is of significance to each individual when they retell an experience (Smith et al., 2021).

3.6.4.1 – Phenomenology

Phenomenology is well-suited to the current study as it focuses on how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021). This process requires participants to be able to not only recall the elements of a situation but also reflect on how the situation was experienced (Smith et al., 2021). Husserl (1982) a key philosopher in the development of phenomenological inquiry, described experiences as subjective and interpretable through using description to find the '*essence*' of an experience (Smith et al., 2021, p. 14). This descriptive phenomenology would aid in providing a description about the experience of a phenomenon without the influence of researcher bias and assumptions. To be able to interact with a phenomenon without making implications based on personal judgments, Husserl (1982) suggested that '*epoche*' (the bracketing of one's own ideas) is necessary. This is where the researcher acknowledges their own ideologies about the phenomenon and so that they do not influence the analysis process. Through this action, Husserl (1982) believed that the underlying structures of an experience can be uncovered to produce meaning. Contrary to this, Heiddeger (1962), another key philosopher in the creation of IPA, argued that it is not possible to completely bracket one's own ideas as they are closely interlinked with and often determined by experiences.

Unlike descriptive phenomenology, Heiddeger (1962) valued hermeneutic phenomenology which aims to interpret a lived experience through positing that understanding is gained through interpretation which is influenced by context and researcher ideology. This way, researcher subjectivity is embraced and seen as integral throughout the analysis process through engaging with the data and interpreting this through their own lens. This current research aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology through aiming to exercise researcher reflexivity through acknowledging preconceived ideas about the phenomenon and noting ideas and assumptions that occur through interactions with participants.

3.6.4.2 – Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, a theory of interpretation, is also well-suited to the study as it is concerned with how language is used as an expression of experience (Smith et al., 2021). IPA utilises a double hermeneutic where the participant is trying to make sense of their experience (first order understanding), while the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participants' explanation of their experience (second order understanding). Husserl's (1982) view places hermeneutics as a secondary concern as he placed emphasis on uncovering the essential

structures of a phenomena, whereas Heidegger's (1962) approach involves the interpretation of historical, cultural and linguistic contexts that inform understanding of 'being' in the world. This current study aligns with Heidegger's approach through the use of feminist epistemology which posits that knowledge production and one's world view is shaped by context (Longino, 2017). Smith et al. (2021) describe this as an iterative process where the researcher moves back and forth throughout the data analysis to pay greater attention to reflexivity, rather than following a strictly linear approach. The goal is to achieve a deeper understanding of both the individual's experience and the meaning the researcher derives from it (Smith et al., 2021).

3.6.4.3 – Idiography

Idiography supports the aim of the study as it provides a commitment to analysing individual details in depth through systematic structures to reveal what meaning has been made from experiencing phenomena in particular contexts (Smith et al., 2021). This approach which is concerned at an individual level contrasts most psychology which is nomothetic in nature through making claims at a group or population level. Although, IPA is idiographic in nature, it does not completely avoid making overarching links. IPA provides the unique opportunity to interpret singular data and then tentatively draw links between data sets through acknowledging that the implications drawn are relevant for that specific participant group within that particular context (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

3.6.4.4 – IPA Rationale

The current study aims to understand how lone mothers experience the EHCNA process with the aim of looking beyond descriptive analysis and move towards a deeper understanding of their experience within their specific context. IPA appeals to the current study as it enables the exploration and interpretation of individual lived experiences. It also recognises the researcher's active role in interpreting participants' accounts, which is essential for understanding both the events that occurred and the participants' interpretations of those events. Through the lens of feminist epistemology, this study aims to highlight the systemic dynamics shaping these lived experiences, with the intention of generating insights that can inform and improve practice in facilitating the EHCNA process.

This interpretative focus aligns with research positioned within an empirical, critical realist paradigm. From this perspective, participants lived experiences are viewed as valuable sources of data that can shed light on the social mechanisms and structures underpinning those experiences. Lawani (2021) explains that critical realism acknowledges a hermeneutic dimension in social research, whereby the analysis of subjective experience contributes to understanding aspects of an objective reality. Knowledge is then constructed through careful

interpretation of how individuals make sense of their experiences where the goal is not only to document what participants say, but to explore the social mechanisms that make those experiences possible (Wynn & Williams, 2012). In this sense, IPA and critical realism are compatible as both emphasise in-depth interpretive work, with IPA focusing on the individual's sense-making process and critical realism explaining how events and experiences are shaped by deeper structures.

3.7 – Participants

3.7.1 – Selection of participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study. Ethical approval was granted from the university's ethics board to invite lone mothers of CYP who have gone through the EHCNA process within the last two years to participate within the study (Appendix 3). This time frame was chosen to take into account the effects of the socio-political context during that time frame and to aid participants in recounting a recent experience. Within this research, the term 'lone mother' refers to a mother who is not cohabiting while raising dependent children without receiving additional support from a husband or partner (Skew, 2009). The sole requirements for participants in the study were that they identify as lone mothers and have engaged in the EHCNA process.

3.7.2 – Participant recruitment

It was a requirement for the participants to have had no input from the other parent/carer throughout the EHCNA process. Participants were recruited through emailing the research poster to primary, secondary, special and mainstream school SENCOs within my placement LA. The SENCos identified whether they had any parents who met the participant specifications and forwarded my research poster onto them. Parents then raised their interest through emailing me, expressing their wish to participate within my study. To be transparent with participants, they were informed that I was a TEP within the LA. However, communication with participants was conducted through my university email to reinforce that this research was not commissioned by the LA but rather conducted as part of my studies (See appendix 6).

Parents who decided to make contact with myself were sent the information sheet, consent form and asked if they had any questions. If they were happy to proceed with their participation, they returned the signed consent form to myself. During the recruitment phase of this research, a lone grandparent and a lone father expressed a keen interest in participating. However, they were not included in the study due to the pre-established criteria focusing solely on the experiences of lone mothers. This decision, although necessary for maintaining a

focused and consistent sample, prompted personal reflection on the broader spectrum of caregiving experiences that remain underexplored and highlighted the need for future research to consider diverse family structures. Additionally, three lone mothers initially expressed interest but later chose not to participate. Their reasons included: having limited spare time to participate, experiencing overwhelming demands of their current circumstances, not being able to recount their experience due to language barriers throughout the EHCNA, feelings of mistrust in my role as a professional and the emotional difficulty of revisiting a distressing process.

In total, four lone mothers whose children attended four different schools were recruited to participate in this study. A summary of participant characteristics can be viewed within Table 3.7.2. This number of participants is consistent with IPA methodology as it is not primarily concerned with breadth of experience, but rather depth of experience and thus suggests the recruitment of a smaller sample size (Smith et al., 2021). Miller, Jessop, Mauthner and Birch (2012) explain that the recruitment of 3-6 participants is ideal for enabling a thorough analysis of individual cases and experiences when using IPA. Further to this point, the recruitment of a small participant sample enables that dedication of more time to each participant's experience, allowing for a rich and detailed analysis (Smith et al., 2021). To gain rich data, all four participants participated in semi-structured interviews with myself which lasted between 40 minutes to 1 hour.

Reflexive statement

The participant recruitment phase was significant in shaping my reflexivity as a researcher. The interactions I had with the parents who decided not to participate highlighted the emotional toll often carried by lone mothers and demonstrated the importance of sensitive approaches in research. Furthermore, it made me reflect on my own positioning as both a professional and a researcher, and how this dual identity may have unintentionally acted as a barrier for some individuals, especially where trust in systems had previously been fractured. This experience reinforced the need to centre compassion, transparency and flexibility when engaging with the lone mothers participating in my research.

Table 3.7.2 – A table to provide an overview of participant characteristics within the current study

Participant number & Pseudonym for parents and children	Parent ethnicity	Participant Occupation	Parent age	Children's age	Type of EHCNA
1. Anne/Charlie/ Maverick	White British	Stay at home parent	32	9	Parent-led
2. Ayanna/Kayden/Jared	Black British (Caribbean)	Assistant headteacher	34	10/16	Parent-led
3. Tori/Ruby/Lesley	White British	Stay at home parent	44	15/17	School led
4. Natalie/Gordon	White British	Operations Manager	40	8	School led

3.8 – Data collection

3.8.1 – Semi-structured interviews

Once participants returned their consent forms, a time was arranged to meet. To offer flexible meeting options, participants could choose whether to meet in person or online via Microsoft Teams. All participants opted for meeting via Microsoft Teams.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the medium for data collection as it aligns with IPA methodology through providing a flexible structure to gain depth of insight through exploring topics raised through participants responses (Smith et al., 2021). Adhering to IPA guidance, a series of open-ended questions were developed which focussed on enabling participants to provide in-depth answers about their individual experiences (Smith et al., 2021). The main interview questions were phrased in a way that enabled participants to express their authentic views without being influenced by researcher biases (e.g. research questions utilised phrases such as '*can you tell me about*'…) (Smith et al., 2021). Prompts were added to these questions to support participants to provide extra detail if required (Appendix 4). Each interview was recorded using a Dictaphone rather than the record function on Microsoft Teams to reduce the potential risk of an online data breach. Upon the completion of the interview, the audio files were transferred into a password protected folder on the researcher's laptop.

> ***Reflexive Statement***
>
> *During the interview development process, I thought about how I wanted to conduct the interviews. Although the predetermined questions provided structure, I did not want to stick to the interview schedule rigidly. I wanted to be able to ask questions out of sequence and remain open to including additional questions depending on what the participants raised within the interview. This was so that I could allow the participants to guide the discussion, become attuned to what they deem as important and pursue those avenues further.*

3.8.2 – Online Interviewing

Online interviews can be an effective and convenient method for data collection as they allow participants to choose a suitable time and location which is convenient or safe for them (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2022). This can be especially important for individuals with time constraints or mobility issues. Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman (2022) explains that conducting interviews online could be viewed as providing participants with increased autonomy to end their participation especially when discussing topics which could invoke an emotional response. This is due to the fact that participants are able to click a button to end the conversation which could be viewed as easier than excusing themselves from an in-person meeting. However, a limitation of using video-conferencing software is that participants could record information without the hosts knowledge. To combat this, it is important to discuss the importance of data security and privacy-related factors prior to beginning research-related discussions.

3.9 – Quality evaluation of qualitative research

Qualitative research often faces criticism for its perceived lack of scientific rigor, including inadequate justification of the chosen methods, insufficient transparency in the analytical processes, and findings that may come across as merely a compilation of personal opinions influenced by researcher bias (Noble & Smith, 2015). Within the ongoing debate into the validity of the quality assurance measures for qualitative research, Noble and Smith (2015) argue that the methodological and philosophical positioning is fundamentally different from quantitative methods which calls for an alternative framework for establishing rigour and trustworthiness. As this current research utilises IPA methodology, Smith et al. (2021) recommends the acknowledgment of researcher reflexivity and the use of the four element quality criteria (sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance) provided by Yardley (2000).

3.9.1 – Sensitivity to context

To apply this principle, I intentionally designed my interview schedule to include open-ended questions (i.e. Can you tell me about your role within this process?) and offered a flexible structure to provide a relevant guide but also a space for participants to express their thoughts freely. Prior to starting each interview, I engaged in no longer than ten minutes of problem free talk so that they could feel more comfortable with recounting their personal experience with me. This time before the interview also enabled me to understand their personal and social contexts better. For example, prior to the interview, Ayanna shared with me that she was an assistant headteacher.

Sensitivity was also shown by offering participants flexibility in terms of the interview time and location. Through being flexible in this capacity, this aided the development of trust and also enabled participants to feel supported. Within my subsequent interview with Tori, I learned that she had a physical disability which made it difficult for her to access unfamiliar locations as this took extra planning time and often left her feeling weary. I was also able to use my knowledge of the EHCNA process as a TEP to aid my understanding of what the participants were saying.

Through becoming acquainted with prior literature into experiences of lone mothers and the philosophical underpinnings of IPA, I was able to use this awareness to support my understanding of factors that could potentially arise in conversation and reflect on how these apply to each participant's particular contexts. To demonstrate sensitivity within the IPA analysis procedures, I remained grounded in the data as promoted by (Smith et al., 2021) by providing verbatim statements to support my identification of themes.

3.9.2 – Commitment to rigour

Commitment to rigour was demonstrated through following the IPA data collection and analysis procedures thoroughly, ensuring that particular attention was given to becoming immersed in each dataset to ensure that an idiographic approach is taken. To support my understanding of each participants narrative, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed so that I could use both mediums to continually develop my understanding of each participant's experience. Excerpts of raw data and analysed data are provided to support my interpretation.

Another method used to support my interpretation of each participant's experience and increase my awareness of my own perspectives, was to keep a reflexive journal throughout the process (Appendix 7).

3.9.3 – Transparency and coherence

Earlier within this chapter, I have provided reasonings for adopting IPA methodology for this research study. Central to this choice were the research questions and the consideration of which methodologies would most effectively address them. To promote transparency, I have provided detailed information on the study design, data collection, sampling, and data analysis processes. Additionally, raw data has been made available to allow for alternative analyses and interpretations.

3.9.4 – Impact and importance

This study on lone mothers' experiences with the EHCNA process is designed to make a practical contribution to practitioners within the educational sector. By sharing findings with educational stakeholders, the study aims to offer insights into how systems can be meaningfully reformed. It is hoped that the participants will feel a sense of empowerment through contributing to this research, helping other lone mothers feel represented in discussions on the EHCNA process.

3.9.5   - Reflexivity

As a researcher, maintaining transparency regarding one's own positionality and potential biases is crucial for conducting a study into lived experiences. Reflexivity, the process of self-reflection on how one's background, experiences, or assumptions might influence the research process was an ongoing component throughout the study. Lone mothers may experience the EHCNA process differently from my perspective, and as such, maintaining an open, reflective stance helps mitigate potential bias and promotes an ethical, respectful interpretation of the participant's accounts. I understand that the interpretation of the data collected within this research stem from my own views and standpoint as both an academic researcher and practitioner. However, it was important to document how my ideas and beliefs were influencing my analysis and interpretation of the data.

As such, this study did not adopt bracketing as a methodological aim. While Husserlian phenomenology advocates for the suspension of the researcher's assumptions to reveal the *essence* of a phenomenon (Husserl, 1982), Heidegger (1962) argued that such detachment is not possible, as our understanding is always already influenced by our historical and social situatedness. From this interpretive standpoint, researcher subjectivity is not viewed as a bias to be eliminated, but rather as an essential lens through which meaning is co-constructed (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021). Therefore, a hermeneutic approach was chosen, where

reflexivity was used not to remove personal perspectives, but to critically engage with and make visible throughout the analytic process.

Aligned with a hermeneutic position, I engaged in the completion of reflexive journalling (Appendix 7). Through engaging with questions inspired by Finlay's (2002) work in reflexive practice, I was able to ensure that reflexivity was an ongoing process, encouraging me to examine my own influence on the interpretation of findings. Some of the questions used to support my reflection included:

- What are my preconceptions about the research topic?
- How might my personal background influence the research?
- What power dynamics are at play in my interaction with participants?
- How do I react to participants' stories?
- How does my involvement with the study affect the data?

To further support a reflexive approach, I engaged in supervision with my academic tutor and peers to reflect on my interactions with participants. I also introduce the use of reflexive boxes from throughout the explanation of the method to reflect my thought process during this time.

3.10 - Ethical considerations

In conducting research into the experiences of lone mothers navigating the EHCNA process, there are several key ethical considerations that must be carefully addressed to ensure the study's integrity and the welfare of the participants. Approval was granted by the University of Nottingham ethics committee on the 15th April 2024 for this study to take place (Appendix 3). I also adhered to a range of ethical codes of practice, including the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) and the Heath and Care Professions Council (2018). Further considerations are outlined below.

3.10.1 – Power Dynamics

As a trainee EP, I recognised my own personal role in the EHCNA process and understood that participants may have perceived me as similar to the individuals they interacted with throughout their experience. To mitigate any perceived power imbalances, I avoided placing pressure on participants to discuss experiences outside of their comfort zone. Through the use of open-ended questions, I aimed to facilitate a safe space and promote a respectful approach allowing participants to share freely without judgment or pressure.

3.10.2 - Informed consent

As outlined earlier, the first contact with participants was made by school SENCOs through the dissemination of the research poster (Appendix 5). This information highlighted the purpose of the study and provided my email contact information for participants to use if they wanted to participate. When participants made contact with me via email, they were provided with further information including the information sheet and consent form (Appendix 6). Participants then had the opportunity to ask further questions and decide whether they wanted to proceed with the study. All consent forms were signed and returned at least 24 hours before the commencement of the interview and all participants were made aware of their rights at the start of the interview.

3.10.3 - Right to withdraw

Throughout the study, participants were continually made aware of their right to withdraw their participation without having to provide a reason for doing so. This was specifically outlined within the information sheet, consent form, debrief sheet and it was also verbally shared at the beginning and end of each interview. If participants made the decision to end their participation, their interview audio files and transcripts would be deleted immediately and the contents would not be included in the analysis of collected data. In any instances where participants wanted to omit parts of their transcript, they also had the right to request this until the point of their words being analysed.

3.10.4 – Data protection and confidentiality

Throughout the data collection process, confidentiality was maintained through only speaking with each participant about their own personal experiences. This information was not discussed with any other person. Throughout the analysis process, where the audio data was transcribed, all identifying characteristics (names and locations) received a pseudonym to protect the participant's identity. One participant (Anne) chose the pseudonym that they would like to be referred to which is reflected within this research. Participants understood that their interviews would be recorded using an audio device and saved into password protected folders. They were also aware that these audio files would be transcribed and deleted when the research was complete.

3.10.5 - Care for participants

Throughout the research process, I remained aware that, although the risk of psychological harm or discomfort was minimal, data collection could still invoke anxiety or other negative emotions for participants. To address this, I prioritised building rapport with

participants both before and during the interviews to enable them to feel more comfortable with sharing any discomfort that they might have experienced. This included explaining the purpose of the study in accessible terms, offering reassurance around confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation, and giving participants the opportunity to ask questions or clarify concerns prior to the interview. During the interviews, I remained attentive to participants' verbal and non-verbal cues, offering regular check-ins and reminding them that they could pause, skip questions, or stop the interview at any point without needing to give a reason. In cases where discomfort became apparent, I was prepared to stop the interview immediately. At the end of each interview, I referred to the debrief sheet which specified support services that could be contacted if they deemed it necessary.

To further support participants with feeling heard and understood after the interviews, I provided them with the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings after data analysis. To do so, I asked the participants if they would like to be contacted to discuss my interpretation of their experience. I also encouraged participants to make contact if they had any concerns or questions. Anne was the only participant who requested to meet again. After her interview, we set a date to meet in four weeks' time via Teams. I shared my interpretation of her data through discussing my emergent themes and she was able to confirm that I understood her experience.

3.11 – Data analysis

3.11.1 - Transcription

After the completion of each interview, I transcribed the interview conversation through playing the audio files and typing the words into a Microsoft Word document. This process including the removal of any information which related to the participants, their children or the systems they were involved with. Instead, pseudonyms were given to all individuals, locations and establishments. This adheres to the ethical guidelines established for this study. This process also marked the beginning of the IPA data analysis process which requires the researcher to engage with the content and become immersed in the data (Smith et al., 2021).

3.11.2 – Reading and re-reading

To continue the process of becoming immersed in the data, the interview transcripts were repeatedly read to gain a deep understanding of the participant's narratives. Through becoming familiar with the data, subtle nuances were revealed which enhanced my understanding of how participants ascribed meaning to their experiences. As IPA is concerned with experiential aspects of the data, it places emphasis on not only what participants have said but also how they convey their message (e.g. considering emotion intensity and pauses) (Smith et al., 2021).

Reflexive Statement

Throughout this step, I kept a reflective journal to track my initial thoughts, assumptions and reactions to the data. An example of this can be found in appendix 7. This aligns with Heidegger's emphasis on having an understanding of one's own preconceptions. Through being explicit in identifying these views, I was able to become increasingly aware of how my own assumptions played a role in interpreting the data.

To maintain openness to the participants' perspectives, I listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts and paid attention to the participants' tonality and how they expressed themselves throughout the interview. This enabled me to connect more deeply with their stories and helped to draw out areas of importance.

3.11.3 – Initial noting

This step involves reading the interview transcript line by line and making structured notes focussing on three categories: description, language and concepts (Smith et al., 2021). Descriptive notes focussed on the content of the narrative and how the participants described elements of their experience. Linguistic notes identify interesting language that the participants use throughout the research (e.g. repetition and emphatic phrases). Conceptual comments have an interpretative element to them as they rely on the researcher to reflect on what the

participants might mean and draw connections to social or psychological concepts (Smith et al., 2021).

> **_Reflexive Statement_**
>
> _During this stage, I colour coded my notes to represent the three areas of analysis: description (red), language (blue) and concepts (green) (Appendix 8). If a colour was missing on the page of a transcript, I ensured to revisit the page to re-immerse myself in what the participant was trying to convey. This often resulted in me adding notes which also considered their mood and how they are emotionally situated within their experiences. This enabled me to reflect on how individual sections of the transcript contributed to my understanding of their whole experience._
>
> _I applied a feminist lens through paying attention to language that revealed systemic inequalities, gendered expectations of caregiving, and emotional labour. I questioned how societal norms and institutional structures influenced their narratives, ensuring that my coding reflected not just what was said but also the broader contexts in which these experiences were embedded._

3.11.4 – The development of experiential statements

The creation of initial notes allows for natural identification of emergent themes which are summarised by short statements known as experiential statements (Smith et al., 2021). This part of the analysis process is where the researcher primarily works with their notes to synthesise their interpretation of the participants experience. To ensure that the themes are grounded in the data, the researcher consistently moves back and forth between their notes and the participant's original words. This ensures that the analysis remains connected to the participant's lived experiences.

> **Reflexive Statement**
>
> *As I began to create experiential statements, I continually asked myself, 'What is the participant revealing about their world through this experience?' This enabled me to reflect on whether my statements captured their lived meaning of their experience, which highlights how they understood that specific time frame in their lives. This process involved revisiting the data and editing my statements to ensure that fidelity to their voice was maintained.*
>
> *Again, to apply a feminist lens I critically examined the intersection of gender, motherhood, and institutional power. I also took note of individual struggles and reflected on what they meant for that particular family.*

3.11.5 – Making connections between themes

After the creation of experiential statements, they are then used as a way to further explore connections between the data through clustering similar statements together (Smith et al., 2021). These clusters of similar statements formed superordinate themes. The clusters were then again collated together in terms of similarity to create master themes. This enables the identification of overarching themes which provide a cohesive understanding of the participant's experience (Appendix 9).

> **Reflexive Statement**
>
> *Throughout this stage, I reflected on how the participants experiences were situated in a broader context through situating these challenges within the wider socio-political landscape. I applied an intersectionality lens through considering whether their other identities (i.e. ethnicity, disability status) impacted on their experience. I reflected on how women's voices have historically been marginalised in research and policy discussions and ensured that the themes highlighted their strength rather than just their challenges.*

3.11.6 – Recognising patterns across experiences

Prior to recognising patterns across participants, their transcripts are analysed individually to ensure that an idiographic approach is applied to the research (Smith et al., 2021). Understanding each participant's experience is fundamental to the research. Once all transcripts have been analysed, then shared themes can be explored across datasets (Smith et al., 2021). This often requires a transition towards a more conceptual or theoretical understanding of the data that remains grounded in the experiences shared. The identified themes form a representation of commonalities and nuances within the participant's experiences which offer a rich interpretative insight into the investigated phenomenon (Smith et al., 2021).

> **Reflexive Statement**
>
> *This process was difficult for me to merge themes together as I understood that although the themes were similar, each participant uniquely engaged with that theme in their own particular context. Therefore, I reflected on how I could demonstrate the nuances of these experiences through how I labelled my themes.*

Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 – Introduction

This chapter will provide an interpretative analysis of the interviews conducted to answer the research question: *How do lone mothers interpret their experiences of the EHCNA process?* In accordance with IPA guidance (Smith et al., 2022), the findings are structured around master themes and superordinate themes that emerged throughout data analysis, offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, strengths, and meanings these mothers ascribed to their experiences. Superordinate themes refer to the overarching concepts that emerge from participants' accounts and master themes refer to the final, refined set of key themes that represent the core findings of the analysis (Smith et al., 2022).

To adhere to Yardley's (2000) quality assurance principles, I will present a narrative account in a transparent, systematic manner. For transparency, examples of annotated interview transcripts (initial notings and emergent themes) can be viewed within appendix 8. Additionally, raw data extracts from each interview have been organised into tables, categorised by superordinate and master themes, which can be viewed in appendix 9. Prior to presenting the findings, a brief overview of each participant will be provided to maintain an idiographic approach through offering detail into their individual circumstances and their presentation throughout the interview.

4.1.1 – Overview of participants

4.1.1.1 - Anne

Anne is a stay-at-home parent and has two sons who will be referred to by the pseudonyms Charlie and Maverick. Charlie was in Y5 and attended a mainstream primary when Anne started the parent-led EHCNA for him. Shortly after the EHCNA process began, Charlie was permanently suspended from school and began attending a pupil referral unit (PRU). He received an autism spectrum condition (ASC) diagnosis shortly after he began attending the PRU. Throughout the interview, Anne voiced her frustrations about her battle for her son's needs to be recognised and understood. She desperately wanted her son's provision to be consistent and protected, driving her desire to acquire an EHCP. Anne spoke passionately as she recounted her experiences, often placing emphasis on negative phrases that had been said to her throughout her advocacy journey. She also spoke avidly about the support she received and how this led to her feeling empowered to support others.

4.1.1.2 – Ayanna

Ayanna is a deputy head teacher at a specialist provision and has two children. Her oldest son, Jared, was 16 years old her youngest son, Kayden, was 10 years old at the time of the EHCNA. Kayden has a diagnosis of ASC and Ayanna applied for a parent-led EHCNA for him while he attended a mainstream provision when he was in Y6. Throughout the assessment process, Kayden similarly became permanently suspended from school which resulted in Ayanna home educating him. Ayanna advocated for the school suspension decision to be overturned, which materialised. However, Ayanna did not allow Kayden to return to the school. Her sole reason for enduring the appeal process was to reveal the inadequacy of the school provision and the unfairness of their decision. Ayanna continued to home educate Kayden until he was old enough to attend a mainstream secondary provision. Ayanna is the only mother included within this study who is still undergoing the appeal process following a 'no to issue' for an EHCP. However, she was still included within this study due to undergoing both stage 1 and stage 2 of the EHCNA.

Having experience working within the educational system in the capacity of teacher in mainstream school and assistant headteacher in a specialist provision supported Ayanna throughout her advocacy journey as she frequently read EHCPs and understood the purpose of them. Ayanna strongly spoke about power imbalances which she believes disadvantaged her EHCNA process. She often used her hands to demonstrate emphasis when speaking about the difficulties of being a lone mother and when voicing her ideas of how the process could be improved. Although Ayanna appeared frustrated throughout the discussion, she also chuckled from time to time which seemed to support her with recounting her experience.

4.1.1.3 – Tori

Tori is a stay-at-home mother and has two daughters Ruby and Lesley. Ruby was 15 years old at the time the school-led EHCNA began. She has a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), developmental language disorder and is on the neurodevelopmental pathway for an ASC assessment. Tori was enthusiastic to engage in a discussion with me as she fondly spoke about her positive experience of the EHCNA. Her bubbly personality enabled her to provide a detailed recount of her lived experience without much prompting from myself. Tori was approached by the school SENCO at Tori's school to undergo an EHCNA. Having been through the EHCNA process before for Lesley, Tori felt apprehensive about applying for an EHCNA for Ruby as she did not manage to acquire one for Lesley despite her difficulties with ASC, attention deficit disorder (ADD), anxiety, depression and

conduct disorder. However, Tori felt able to proceed with the EHCNA for Ruby as she would be supported by the school this time round. Throughout the interview, Tori spoke about the importance of support for both the child and parent throughout the EHCNA process. She also emphasised a need to be listened to and understood, valuing these supportive traits in the professionals she worked with.

4.1.1.4 - Natalie

Natalie is an operations manager and has one son called Gordon. Gordon has a diagnosis of ADHD and was in Y4 when the school-led EHCNA began. Natalie appeared upset at first when she recounted the difficulties of Gordon receiving continual suspensions. She explained that this experience led to feelings of desperation and worry as she did not know what was '*wrong*' with her son. For Natalie, going through the EHCNA seemed to quell her worries concerning her sons need for support. Early within our discussion, Natalie introduced the concept of collaboration throughout the EHCNA as she consistently used '*we*' terminology. Although Natalie felt validated in her views that her son required additional school support, she also discussed the difficulties of being positioned to advocate for her son throughout the EHCNA as she believed she was not best placed to make decisions regarding his education. Natalie appeared most confident when she discussed her ideas of how to improve the EHCNA process. She spoke passionately about how to streamline the process and how to create a shared understanding, ensuring that all information is accessible to parents.

4.2 – An overview of Master and Superordinate Themes

A total of five master themes emerged from the analysis of all the collated data with two themes being shared by all participants. All other themes were shared by at least two or more participants. This analysis process supported the identification of experiences that were pertinent to each individual while also identifying higher order concepts to draw connections between datasets. By following the guidance of Smith et al. (2022), a master theme was established when at least half of the participants shared a common association. Table 4.2 illustrates the occurrence of each master theme across each participant's responses. Table 4.2.1 provides a summary of the superordinate themes and master themes that emerged from the analysis of all participants datasets.

Table 4.2 – A table displaying the distribution of master themes across each participant's response to the research question

Master Theme	Anne	Ayanna	Tori	Natalie
Parental support	✓		✓	✓
I'm not in control here	✓	✓	✓	✓
A power imbalance	✓	✓		✓
Empowerment	✓	✓		
Shaping a child-centred process for the future	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 4.2.1 – A table providing an overview of superordinate themes within each master theme

Master Theme	Superordinate Theme
Parental support	- Being held throughout the EHCNA process - Parental networks - Frequent and transparent communication - Taking time to get it right
I'm not in control here	- I'm not a professional - Undesirable feelings - Negative impact on the wider family - Operating from a place of disadvantage
A power imbalance	- Lack of resources - Feeling unsupported - Discriminated against and treated unfairly
Empowerment	- Making my voice heard - Supported through advocacy - Empowerment towards others
Shaping a child-centred process for the future	- Operating in my child's best interest - The importance of improving the process

In line with guidance from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022), these master themes are not intended to fragment participants' experiences, but rather to reflect interconnected dimensions of a shared phenomenon, akin to branches stemming from the same tree. To

support transparency and aid interpretative depth, illustrative data excerpts are provided with corresponding page and line numbers. Furthermore, in keeping with IPA's commitment to evidencing convergence and divergence across cases, each theme is substantiated with data from multiple participants.

4.3 – Detailed presentation of Master Themes and Superordinate themes

4.3.1 – Master theme one: Parental support

Parental support emerged as a prominent theme through the identification of multiple systems which supported the mothers throughout their experiences. It highlighted the factors that facilitated parental engagement in the EHCNA process, which enabled them to feel heard, understood, and valued. Table 4.3.1 showcases the superordinate themes that apply to each mother's data within this master theme.

Table 4.3.1 – A table detailing the emergence of superordinate themes within each dataset under the master theme: Parental support

Superordinate Themes:	Anne	Tori	Ayanna	Natalie
Parental networks	✓	✓		✓
Being held throughout the EHCNA process	✓	✓		
Frequent and transparent communication	✓	✓		✓
Taking time to get it right	✓	✓		

Parental Networks. Three out of four mothers made references to a network of individuals involved in helping them throughout the EHCNA process. Some mothers reflected on the presence of one system while others discussed their helpful interactions with a range of support systems including: family, friends, school staff, work colleagues and external agencies:

'I have got friends with kids on the autistic spectrum. And she's also autistic herself, so she's very, she's like my book of knowledge' (Anne, 11, 206-207).

'I had so many meetings at the school as well in the Head Teachers Office. And my work were really supportive with that' (Natalie, 16, 337-338).

'I did have a rep from SENDIASS helping out, and she was so helpful. Her name was Dana. She. She was absolutely brilliant. She would ring me up every time something was due' (Natalie, 2, 34-36).

This indicated that the support the mothers received was multi-faceted. It was important for them to increase in knowledge, feel understood and be kept in the loop throughout the process. Alongside this, shared feelings of community and collaboration emerged from the data indicating that it was important for parents to not feel alone as they underwent this assessment process:

> *'I'd like to call it a team actually. A fantastic team that came together to support me and Tori through the EHCP assessment process' (Tori, 6, 144-146).*

> *'I feel really sorry for parents that now have to go through that without the help of SENDIASS, if they're not up and running now. Yeah, they were really good' (Natalie, 12, 246-248).*

> *'And my friends like, have you asked them this? Or just reminding me of things I could ask' (Anne, 26, 504)*

I interpreted that Natalie experienced a relief from the pressure of the process as she received a lot of support through Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) as she commented, *'They'd done most of it'* *(Natalie, 3, 56)*. Whereas Tori's terminology, *'I had a fantastic team behind me' (10, 228)*, implied that she was placed at the forefront of the process.

Being held throughout the process. The theme of being held was shared between two out of four mothers, suggesting that support was not automatically linked to consistent feelings of being held as noted by Natalie's experience:

> *'Initially with SENDIASS, they were amazing. but when they when obviously they said that they weren't involved anymore, that was that was when it was challenging. And I just didn't know what was going on and felt like I was left to fend for myself with it' (Natalie, 11, 235-238)*

Natalie's account reflects a switch from a passive to an active response. I interpreted her phrase '*fend*' as a desperate need to protect or defend herself. This unexpected change seemed to activate a stress response.

In relation to the reliability of the support received, two mothers reflected on their connection with professionals as they progressed throughout the EHCNA:

> *'Just to feel like someone's on our side' (Anne, 39, 771).*

> *'If you're with a bunch of people that are putting an EHCP but you don't get to build a little bit of a relationship with them yourself, there's that barrier there isn't there? You have to feel understood' (Tori,10, 234-236)*

I interpreted the metaphorical comments '*our side*' and '*barrier*' as a shift from a sense of separation to a united effort. The excerpts shared highlight the crucial role of support systems in shaping lone mother experiences of the EHCNA process. The mothers also found strength in professionals and peer communities through engaging in open communication.

Frequent and transparent communication. The importance of transparent communication appeared in my discussions with Anne, Tori and Natalie:

'We're all in one linked email' (Anne, 32,617)

'Erm he did inform me that there was a bit of a backlog but they would let me know as soon as they've got any findings of how this was gonna go. So to be honest it was very smooth, very straightforward' (Tori, 8, 184-185)

'She just kept in touch with me regularly' (Natalie, 6, 119)

Having transparent conversations provided some assurance that they were not navigating the EHCNA process alone. Regular updates and open communication appeared to foster a sense of trust between parents and professionals.

Another key factor in building trust that enabled transparent conversation was fostering a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere during meetings:

'I thought, oh, they're going to be really serious but they was like really laid back and there was, they just spoke to you like how you speak to your friend, really like really chilled atmosphere type thing' (Anne, 34, 664-665)

'Then we had the educational psychologist come out to the home, I had a good chat with him' (Tori, 5, 114)

As mentioned earlier, Tori had a physical disability which created another layer of challenge for her to attend in-person meetings. Therefore, her statement reflects the importance of having autonomy regarding where meetings would occur. It also highlights the importance of having an informal conversation with professionals.

Similarly, Anne discussed the importance of location when receiving news regarding the progress of the EHCNA. She reflected on how she did not retain information given to her when she received an initial '*no to assess*' outcome. Her comment, '*If I sat down, I probably would have understood it more*' (Anne, 24, 474) reflects the importance of checking if the timing was suitable to share important information as this could impact how the information is received.

Taking time to get it right. Two parents commented on their frequent interactions with the EP.:

Then I had Paul (pseudonym) come, who was the educational psychologist who came and I had a meeting with him twice. (Tori, 8, 183)

'So, after that then, an educational psychologist had to go into the school. Which I had phone calls with her about three times' (Anne, 36, 699-700)

Tori particularly valued this input as she commented, *'It gets you to know your child more' (10, 230-231).* Similarly, Anne attributed thorough information gathering to the production of a well-rounded assessment of her child, stating, *'So the help that he needs that she's put on there is quite good. Her report was very in depth' (38, 746).* These comments highlight the perceived effectiveness of the EPs role in providing detailed insights and recommendations related to their children's needs.

These accounts illustrate how clear communication, a supportive atmosphere and thorough assessments can foster positive parental engagement in the EHCNA process. These experiences indicated that when parents felt heard, the process became less isolating. However, as characterised by Natalie's experience, when this support breaks down, a deeper sense of disempowerment can emerge which leads into the next theme: *'I'm not in control here.'*

4.3.2 – Master Theme Two: I'm not in control here

Master theme two explores the inconsistency of support and the lack of control that all mothers experienced throughout the EHCNA process to some extent. This loss of agency manifested through uncertainty about their roles, stress regarding wider family life and the emotional implications of being misunderstood. Table 4.3.2 showcases the superordinate themes that apply to each mother's data within this master theme.

Table 4.3.2 – A table detailing the emergence of superordinate themes within each dataset under the master theme: I'm not in control here

Superordinate Themes:	Anne	Tori	Ayanna	Natalie
I'm not a professional	✓			✓
I don't get it		✓	✓	✓
Undesirable feelings	✓	✓	✓	✓
Negative impact on the wider family	✓	✓	✓	

I'm not a professional. For Anne and Natalie, there was significant uncertainty about their roles and contributions to the EHCNA process. Referring to working alongside professionals, Anne stated, *'I haven't had to really work with them' (43, 839).* Referring to the EHCNA, Natalie shared, *'I didn't even know what that was at the time. I'd never heard of it'* (1, 9). I interpreted these comments as feelings of detachment both from the offset and throughout the process which could have potentially hindered their ability to engage confidently.

Although both parents had certain expectations of the process, their experiences fell short of these expectations. Natalie stated, '*I was expecting to like have a say like, you know, make some big decisions and I didn't'* (Natalie, 7, 152-154). This disconnect led to a reliance on the expertise and views of professionals. This was similarly reflected in Anne's statement, *'I'll put my trust in them, thinking, well, they know what they're doing. Like this is all new to me'* (9, 176-177). I interpreted this as Anne taking a step back instead of feeling immersed in the process.

Furthermore, both mothers indicated that they felt inadequate in representing their child. Anne stated, *'I don't think I portrayed Charlie as best as I could. But she was going to see him.'* (36, 704). In this instance, '*she'* referred to the EP and I interpreted this as Anne believing that the EP would gain a better understanding than she could provide.

Natalie shared similar sentiments, expressing a willingness to defer to professionals:

'I was happy to take a back seat' (8, 164).

'I'm not the professional, I don't know' (14, 286).

At times, Natalie even questioned her presence in the process, stating, *'I didn't really need to be in that meeting'* (8, 158). These reflections illustrate how uncertainty and a lack of confidence in their role led these mothers to relinquish agency, deferring to professionals to guide the process. These dynamics portrayed the emotional impact of feeling sidelined and emphasised the importance of welcoming parents into conversations concerning their child's future.

Additionally, both parents expressed confusion when asked to talk about their role within the EHCNA process:

'I actually didn't say much during that meeting' (Natalie, 7, 130).

'I've just had to basically just be a part of like a meeting or something, whatever' (Anne, 43, 840-841).

These comments reflected tokenistic involvement, where parents felt their contributions were minimal or undervalued. This raised important questions about how professionals can facilitate truly parent-led meetings that honour the intended purpose of empowering parents as active participants in the process.

I don't get it. Three mothers expressed confusion regarding the procedural elements of the EHCNA:

'My knowledge could be better' (Tori, 7, 157).

'*I didn't understand what was going on in the background'* (Natalie, 5, 108).

'I was walking into it blind' (Ayanna, 16, 334).

This lack of procedural clarity left parents relying heavily on professionals to guide the process, as they entered the EHCNA with far less information. Natalie described it as '*a complex process'* (2, 40) and further admitted, *'I didn't understand where we were in the process'* (8, 166). Similarly, Ayanna stated, *'It was the unknown'* (Ayanna, 15, 316).

While Natalie believed she had a role in the process, as reflected in her earlier comment, '*I was expecting to like have a say'* (7, 152), her interactions with school staff appeared to influence her comfort with not fully understanding her role. She recalled being reassured by a teacher, who said, *'You know, don't worry that you don't understand the process. It is very complex'* (6, 113–114). Although likely intended to ease her concerns, this statement seemed to reinforce the notion that parents did not need to acquire a full understanding of the process. This contributed to Natalie's feeling of passivity and a sense of being sidelined, as she noted, '*Everyone else had like all this understanding, and yeah, I just didn't have that as well'* (6, 111). She also commented that, '*Everyone else was kind of guiding it'* (5, 107). Her repeated use of the phrase '*everyone else'* suggests a sense of isolation and exclusion, further illustrating the emotional challenges of navigating the EHCNA. Natalie also struggled to recall the roles of the other individuals involved throughout the EHCNA which likely contributed to her feeling uninformed and disconnected:

'I think she was a behavioural psychologist or something' (Natalie, 10, 199).

Linking to this, Tori shared the impact a lack of understanding has on parental experiences:

'It's important that the parent also feels supported, because you can feel quite closed off. If that makes sense' (Tori, 11, 247).

Undesirable feelings. All parents spoke about the difficulties of trusting professionals to act in the best interest of their child as they were often let down:

'You didn't put these things in place' (Ayanna, 8, 154)

'Ruby had been let down by the education system' (Tori, 1, 9)

'His school wasn't very forthcoming' (Anne, 1, 6-7)

These reflections indicate a breakdown in trust, stemming from unmet expectations and a feeling of being disregarded, which provide insight into the challenges parents face in advocating for their child's needs.

Natalie's account reflects the distress she experienced when she was no longer supported by SENDIASS, '*I was just in tears*' (3, 50), as she, '*had no clue what to do next*' (3, 48). This distress led her to seek advice from the SENDIASS call service. Her phrase, '*And I actually rang*' (3, 48) illustrates that this was something she would not typically do. However, despite this attempt for additional input she expressed, '*I never heard anything from them ever again*' (3, 53).

In relation to their experiences with the EP, Anne and Ayanna similarly felt a sense of defeat as the assessment outcomes did not seem to help their circumstances:

'And 'cause the SENCO had an educational psychologist in to see him. She'd recommended stuff, but it was all stuff that we're already doing with him' (Anne, 3, 46-47)

'I don't think you could see a picture in one lesson' (Ayanna, 5, 104-105)

Ayanna particularly expected the EP assessment to provide a comprehensive overview of her son's strengths and areas of need, but the outcome of the assessment seemed to add to feelings of disappointment as Ayanna stated, '*It was a little bit pointless*' (4, 81). She felt that her child was being misunderstood again as the assessment only took place in the context of a Science lesson, a lesson where she knew her son would thrive due to practical elements.

The mothers also commented on the pressures felt to keep up with process and step into a role that they felt unequipped for:

'They were sort of. Trying to they were. I felt like pressure to name a school on it when I didn't know what was best for him and kept saying to the local authority, I'm not the professional. I don't know which school is going to be best for him. But they just didn't help me with it. They didn't help.' (Natalie, 13, 284-286)

'I just feel like if he got an EHCP and they did apply for him to move, that'd be like another transition. And then, Y7's gonna be another transition, so' (Anne, 30, 577-578)

As the EHCNA is a time-bound process, this means that the mothers had to quickly make critical decisions. Anne also discussed the pressure she felt when naming a school for Charlie, '*they was trying to push him into a normal mainstream school*' (40, 787). These accounts allude to the potential disruptions and challenges that their children might face as a consequence of being pressured to make a rushed decision with limited support.

Negative impact on the family. Tori, Anne and Ayanna reflected on the strain of being sole caregivers managing their child's needs at home while also engaging in a complex time-consuming process which required a lot of problem solving to engage effectively.

'It was awful because with me as well I have a disability so having to constantly go to different schools, different meetings and then having to deal with Tori everyday anyway' (Tori, 2, 36-37)

'I think that took a lot of a part of my life kind of thing. Like do you know, especially having to deal with the child as well and their needs and stuff because as much as the staff team find it hard to deal with the kids for six hours a day, they've got a team. Do you know what I mean? Doing it at home, there's not really a team at home' (Ayanna, 26, 568-571)

They also commented on the problem solving that was required to ensure their attendance at EHCNA related meetings.

'But before that that we kept coming back for dates. And because I've got one, I had one child in nursery. And the one at the other school, it's quite hard to go between on certain days' (Anne, 5, 95-97)

Due to a lack of systemic support, Ayanna undertook privatised assessments for Kayden throughout the EHCNA:

'I think it was an OT that I was talking to for her to do an assessment for Kayden in a children's centre and stuff away from school. So, she's doing it 1:1 and stuff like that. So, school doesn't have their influence and stuff like that. I want to do it independently, but is it fair that parents have to pay?' (29, 629-632)

I interpreted that Ayanna's mistrust of school professionals reflected a lack of confidence in their objectivity, leading her to seek independent assessments as a way of ensuring fairness in the EHCNA process. Her use of the term *'influence,'* indicates a belief that the school's perspective might be biased or not fully aligned with her child's needs. Furthermore, her question, '*But is it fair that parents have to pay?*' highlights the financial and emotional burden placed on parents when they feel unsupported or mistrustful of the system. These accounts reflect the need for strong rapport and collaborative relationships, as when these are absent, mothers may feel marginalised and forced to advocate from a position of disadvantage, a dynamic explored further in the next theme: '*a power imbalance*'.

4.3.3 – Master Theme Three: A power imbalance

This theme discusses how systemic barriers and poor relationships can create power imbalances and distrust. Power was discussed in a variety of ways including: positioning, marginalisation, prejudice and a lack of access to services. Table 4.3.3 showcases the superordinate themes that apply to each mother's data within this master theme.

Table 4.3.3 – A table detailing the emergence of superordinate themes within each dataset under the master theme: A power imbalance

Superordinate Themes:	Anne	Tori	Ayanna	Natalie
Lack of resources	✓		✓	✓
Feeling unsupported	✓		✓	✓
Discriminated against and treated unfairly	✓		✓	

Lack of resources. Two mothers expressed their desire to obtain an EHCP for their children to ensure consistent support, with reference to a lack of funding within schools:

'There was limited support that the school could give him without an EHCP' (Ayanna, 1, 14)

'I wanted the resources within the school to be able to be there. I mean, there's not a lot of funding out there now, especially for schools' (Anne, 21-22)

Although the EHCNA process was considered to be a means of protection, Anne reflected on the difficulties of trying to engage in this process:

'You have to go through so many hoops to just get an assessment' (Anne, 9, 163)

This statement reflects the extensive effort required to engage in this process. I interpreted Anne's terminology '*so many hoops*', as a systemic barrier as it questions whether certain steps are necessary to obtain necessary support. Anne's experience of the EHCNA process was characterised by feelings of conflict, judgment and exhaustion, suggesting that she was engaged in a '*battle*' rather than a collaborative effort to secure support for her child. Throughout her account, Anne frequently used terminology related to winning and losing (e.g. '*we won them over*', 35, 691), likening the process to a marathon or a fight. Anne's experience suggests that she saw securing an EHCP as something that had to be won, rather than an accessible entitlement. Furthermore, Anne's commentary, '*we've been pushing for him to get help*' (7, 121) suggests a battle against systemic barriers.

Natalie faced a similar challenge around accessibility towards the end of the process when she was asked to name a school on Gordon's EHCP:

> '*If the local authority were to have given me a mere list of schools in the local area that specialised in children with ADHD. But they told me that there weren't any anyway. It would have helped. If they'd have just given me a list*' (14, 290-292).

I interpreted Natelie's phrase '*mere list*' as the bare minimum that the LA could have provided to support her. Her comment further suggests that the EHCNA process can lack accessibility and practical support, leaving parents feeling unsupported and uninformed when making critical decisions about their child's education.

Further to this point, Anne required support from the SENCo post-meetings to interpret key messages (e.g. '*she explained when I got off the phone that it was really positive*' p. 34, 671). While this was supportive, Annes experience demonstrates how knowledge is a valuable resource as the inaccessible language of the EHCNA framework placed her in a dependent position.

Feeling unsupported. Linked with a lack of resources, Ayanna commented that the process of acquiring an EHCP was challenging as, '*the school wasn't supportive, so it was a bit, yeah, difficult*' (17, 372). Other mothers experienced a lack of support from others in the system as they progressed throughout the EHCNA. Natalie often felt overshadowed within meetings (e.g. '*they would ask me for a little bit of input every now and again*' 7, 135) which could have contributed to her feeling as though she needed a representative to advocate on her behalf. This reliance on others to navigate the process suggests that she did not feel confident or

empowered to voice her own concerns, highlighting an imbalance in power. Additionally, the temporary nature of the support she received further emphasised this imbalance.

Natalie further commented on the lack of support she received when asked to choose a school for Gordon stating, *'I just felt like they wanted me to choose it so that they could place them and their work was done'* (Natalie, 368). This suggests a relinquishment of responsibility and a reluctancy to collaborate with her during this critical time. Similarly, Anne recounted her experience of when she initially received a 'no to assessment outcome' stating, *'It was like, you've not got it, I'll see you later sort of thing' (Anne, 855)*. These excerpts suggest increased feelings of dismissal especially towards the latter end of the EHCNA.

Discriminated against and treated unfairly. Two mothers discussed how they experienced blame from educational professionals as they embarked on their advocacy journeys:

'Even gone as far as blaming my parenting on his disabilities, saying like, there's nothing wrong with him. It's the way you deal with him' (Anne, 27, 520-521)

'And now I just felt like it was kind of like me. I was the problem or the family home environment was the problem and it it's not' (Ayanna, 3, 52-53)

Anne's statement reflects the assumption that her child's difficulties were the result of her parenting rather than genuine needs, undermining her confidence and credibility as an advocate for her child. Similarly, Ayanna's comment illustrates the burden of being held responsible for challenges that were outside of her control, leading to feelings of unfairness and frustration. These experiences highlight how blaming attitudes from professionals can erode trust and make parents feel unsupported, exacerbating the difficulties they face in navigating the EHCNA process.

Both parents reflected on their experiences of feeling positioned within interactions with professionals, often perceiving an imbalance of power. Ayanna expressed a sense of conflict rather than collaboration, stating, *'He's trying to get one up on me'* (Ayanna, 13, 270), suggesting she felt undermined or challenged rather than supported. Similarly, Anne voiced concerns about professionals asserting authority in ways that made her feel judged or disempowered. She shared her apprehensions before a mediation meeting: *'I didn't want to be sat in my house feeling like someone was either looking down at me or judging me or whatever'* (Anne, 5, 90-91). I interpreted the phrase '*looking down*' as being regarded as inferior and devalued.

Ayanna further reflected on the intersection of her professional role and personal experiences, stating, *'Then you've got me as a mum and I'm an assistant head teacher. And then I think there's an underlying prejudice that, you know, I'm a Black woman in this role and I'm challenging the head teacher'* (Ayanna, 13, 263-265).

Despite holding a senior leadership role herself, I interpreted that Ayanna felt marginalised, indicating that professional status did not shield her from racial and gender bias. This tension between perceived authority and structural inequity is crucial meaning that her expertise might be undermined or resisted because of who she is, not what she knows.

These accounts illustrate the challenges of advocacy as it requires resilience and perseverance. The next theme discusses how the mothers experienced empowerment throughout the EHCNA.

4.3.4 - Master Theme Four: Empowerment

Building on the importance of collaboration and support in the EHCNA process, this theme explores the concept of empowerment, as two mothers reflected on their personal experiences with advocacy. These reflections highlighted both receiving advocacy support from others and stepping into the role of advocates for their children and other parents. Table 4.3.4 showcases the superordinate themes that apply to each mother's data within this master theme.

Table 4.3.4 – A table detailing the emergence of superordinate themes within each dataset under the master theme: Empowerment

Superordinate Themes:	Anne	Tori	Ayanna	Natalie
Making my voice heard	✓		✓	
Empowerment towards others	✓			
Supported through advocacy	✓			

Making my voice heard. Two mothers expressed the difficulties of maintaining their advocate stance throughout the duration of the process as their engagement required a dedication of time to make contact with relevant parties and prepare for meetings:

> *'Then having to work and stuff like then having to send, like, thousands and thousands of emails to all these people. It gets a lot' (Ayanna, 14, 303-304).*

> *'When I went into mediation, I had written down about two pages of points of*
> *in case I've forgotten everything or anything' (Anne, 13, 252-253).*

For Ayanna, the reality of being a single parent meant that there was lots of problem solving involved throughout the EHCNA process as she had to remain up to date with communicating with the relevant parties while working a full-time job. Overall, Ayanna described her advocacy journey as a '*constant battle*' (226) providing insight into the continual effort that needed to be asserted to ensure that her voice was heard and changes were made.

As I reflected on the use of terminology that indicated a struggle, it became apparent as to why the mothers discussed feelings of nervousness when meeting professionals. For example, Anne commented, '*She looks like she's gonna bite me head off' (516)*. Ayanna also shared a similar worry pertaining to mediation, '*it was a little bit daunting*' (162), suggesting a sense of vulnerability in these interactions.

Despite feelings of apprehension, both mothers demonstrated pro-activity to make steps towards gaining answers without waiting to be contacted:

> *'Obviously me being me because I'm not going to take that kind of thing. I*
> *challenged it. It went to appeal and I challenged it' (Ayanna, 9, 198-191)*

> *'I rang up to see where his report was because I still haven't received his draft*
> *at the moment' (Anne, 40, 781)*

Ayanna's statement reflects her refusal to accept decisions or outcomes she perceives as unjust, showing her willingness to challenge and appeal them. Similarly, Anne's action of following up on missing documentation demonstrates her vigilance and persistence in ensuring the process stays on track. Both responses highlight the assertive roles these mothers took to navigate the system and secure the best outcomes for their children.

Supported through advocacy. Anne was the only parent who talked consistently about systemic advocacy playing a large role in her experience of the EHCNA. She was supported by a wide network (e.g. '*my friends, my mum, the school, the youth centre. Everyone that was involved really*' 25, 494). Anne reflected on the encouragement she received from a friend, stating, '*She basically said do it, and I just, I just went to school the one day and said, can I put in a permanent EHCP*' (Anne, 11, 220–222). This seemed to be an important step in Anne's advocacy journey as her previous attempts to voice her concerns about Charlie's needs were not heard.

Anne also acknowledged the practical assistance she received at the beginning of the process, saying, '*The one family support worker helped me fill out the initial lot*' (Anne, 12, 224). Frequently throughout the conversation, Anne reflected on the missing knowledge gaps that she had and how others stepped in to fill them, especially when she received a '*no to assess*' decision at her first mediation meeting. Anne recalled that the school SENCO stepped in as an advocate through saying, '*I ain't taking a decline. We're gonna do the next step now*' (Anne, 8, 151). Anne attributed this collective support as the key reason she was able to complete the EHCNA process, admitting, '*I could have just literally let it go*' (Anne, 46, 902).

The challenges of advocating for a child as a lone parent became evident during my conversation with Anne. While navigating the complexities of completing the EHCNA, she was also studying to become a family support worker, a role focused on providing assistance to families. Balancing her personal struggles with the demands of this role proved increasingly difficult. Anne expressed a sense of validation when a colleague acknowledged her struggles, stating, '*How is she supposed to support other people if she ain't getting any support herself?*' *(*Anne, 26, 507–508). This experience sheds light on the broader stressors that lone mothers can face in the midst of navigating the EHCNA process. While Anne faced her own difficulties, her receipt of support enabled her to encourage other mothers to advocate for their children as she noted, *'It's made me feel a bit more like I'm getting people to have their voice rather than just be like sitting at the back like I used to' (Anne, 45, 881)*. This highlights the default position that parents often take in the statutory process and transformative power that advocacy can have.

4.3.5 – Master Theme Five: Shaping a child centred process for the future

All mothers felt it was important that their children were fully understood throughout the EHCNA. To make sound decisions, it was important that all parties involved in the EHCNA were operating with a child-centred focus. Table 4.3.5 showcases the superordinate themes that apply to each participant's data within this master theme.

Table 4.3.5 – A table detailing the emergence of superordinate themes within each dataset under the master theme: Shaping a child-centred process for the future

Superordinate Themes:	Anne	Tori	Ayanna	Natalie
Operating in my child's best interest	✓	✓		
The importance of improving the process			✓	✓

Operating in my child's best interest. Tori and Anne shared their experiences of working with professionals throughout the EHCNA, explaining how they understood their children's needs:

> *'Erm then obviously you have to have meetings. Erm various people i.e. Educational Psychologists. If she's got additional needs like with Ruby she has DLD and then there's a speech and language therapist to come in. They're all looking at different parts that make Ruby, Ruby.' (Tori, 7, 165-166).*

Tori's comment emphasizes that she valued a multidisciplinary approach which provided a holistic effort to understand and address different aspects of Ruby's development. It also demonstrated an understanding that professionals contribute unique insights to create a comprehensive picture of Ruby's strengths and challenges. Anne's experience reveals a similar sentiment:

> *'If he went into a mainstream school, even, she (referring to the SENCo) said to the mediator, he would not last a week. He would not make it a week, and he'd be distressing. 'Cause he'd be sent from another school back probably to where that he is now' (Anne, 4, 64-66)*

For Anne, hearing the SENCo share this comment provided validation as she was not the only person advocating for Charlie. She added, *'someone's looking at Charlie' best interests, someone's trying to gain him the best that they can for him'* (39, 771).

The importance of improving the process. Discussions around how to improve the EHCNA occurred within my conversations with Natalie and Ayanna. Both mothers discussed a desire to know more about the EHCNA so that they could feel more empowered to engage with the process.

> *'I think it would help if the process was like simplified down a lot and maybe just one person dealing with it like as in one person communicating with the parent' (Natalie, 11, 234)*

> *'I just think that more support and more information on how we actually do get EHCP' (Ayanna, 21, 450-451)*

Natalie's comment indicates a desire for a more streamlined process with a single point of contact to improve communication and reduce confusion. I interpreted Ayanna's use of the word '*actually*' as a perceived gap between the knowledge held by professionals and the lack of accessible information available to parents, reinforcing her sense that obtaining an EHCP feels almost impossible without clearer guidance and support. Both parents felt that they had gaps in their knowledge that were difficult to fill independently. Ayanna discussed the implications of going through the EHCNA and receiving a '*no to issue*' decision:

'So, although they might not be able to meet the threshold of an EHCP, put some recommendation in place or put some funding towards that child saying you know what he can't have an EHCP, but he can have this rather than just leaving it' (27, 581-584)

Ayanna emphasised the importance of receiving information about alternative support pathways. During our conversation, she discussed her recent awareness of SEND Support Provision Plans, plans issued by the LA that outline needs, outcomes and provisions, with the option to apply for additional funding. Reflecting on this, Ayanna stated, *'If I knew about that, I would have advocated for that'* (7, 150-151). Ayanna's experience highlights the need for a more accessible and transparent system that goes beyond determining the outcome of an EHCP and helps parents to understand and access alternative support pathways.

4.4 - Summary of IPA Findings

The following five interrelated themes were identified through an interpretative phenomenological analysis of lone mothers' experiences of the EHCNA process: '*Parental Support', 'A Power Imbalance', 'I'm Not in Control Here', 'Empowerment', and 'Shaping a Child-Centred Process for the Future'*. The analysis revealed areas of commonality across participant's experiences such as: emotional support, open communication and collaborative relationships with professionals. These elements were seen as contributing to more inclusive and positive experiences. At the same time, notable differences emerged, such as feelings of marginalisation, confusion, or mistrust when support was lacking or when parents felt excluded from decision-making. These findings highlight the complex nature of lone mothers' encounters with the EHCNA process. The following discussion will explore these themes in relation to existing psychological theory and relevant literature.

Chapter 5

Discussion of findings

5.1 – Chapter Overview

This chapter considers how the findings of the study answer the research question:

'How do lone mothers interpret their experiences of the EHCNA process?'

This study is grounded in a feminist epistemological stance, which recognises that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by individual, relational, and structural contexts (Causevic et al., 2020; Carastathis, 2014; Rowlingson & McKay, 2005; Rich, 2021). This chapter will make links between the IPA findings and the articles referenced within earlier chapters, while introducing a limited selection of new literature identified as particularly relevant during the data analysis process. Following cross-case analysis, five master themes were identified as an interpretation of the mothers' experiences of the EHCNA including: *'Parental support', 'I'm not in control here', 'A power imbalance', 'Empowerment'* and *'Shaping a child-centred process for the future'*. The discussion critically evaluates key aspects of each master theme in relation to psychological and sociological theories. Due to the idiographic nature of the study (Smith et al., 2022), individual differences will be acknowledged through the application of intersectionality, feminist frameworks, and FST. Furthermore, this chapter considers methodological limitations, implications for policy and practice within education-based professions and potential avenues for future research.

5.2 - Links between current research key findings and findings within the SLR

An SLR was conducted in Chapter 2 which produced a series of themes pertinent to the understanding of lone mothers' experiences navigating educational processes within their children's schools. Although the empirical research draws on data from lone mothers within a UK context and the SLR incorporates findings from international literature, there is a striking similarity in the key ideas and concerns expressed. This thematic alignment across diverse participant groups and geographic contexts suggests the presence of shared challenges and systemic patterns, which will be explored in turn. Table 5.2 outlines the comparisons found between the themes identified in the current study and those identified in the literature review.

Master Theme:	SLR Theme:	Shared Characteristics:
Parental support	Support networks	- Practical assistance - Forming genuine relationships - Emotional support - Transparent communication - Bi-directional learning - Mutual understanding
I'm not in control here	The impact of authority and expertise on parental involvement	- Deferring to professionals - Feeling disconnected and unequipped to engage - Wider family difficulties
A power imbalance	Lone mother experiences of discrimination	- Lack of resources - Consistently voicing concerns - Feeling unsupported - The impact of bias - Experiences of marginalisation
Empowerment	Becoming an advocate	- A fight to be understood - Difficulties of foregoing processes alone - Parental knowledge supports advocacy stance - Parents professional roles within education supports their ability to participate in discussions - Supporting others on their advocacy journey
Shaping a child-centred process for the future	Parental knowledge and engagement	- Forming allies - The importance of information sharing

5.2.1 – Parental support

The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) regularly refers to the importance of collaborating with parents/carers and CYP to ensure that their views are placed at the heart of the EHCNA. This not only respects their wishes, but it particularly aims to support parents to become well-versed in what the process entails. This partnership has been identified as a key facilitator in the production of positive parental experiences of the EHCNA (Ahad et al., 2022; Cochrane & Soni, 2020). It appears that this factor acts as a cornerstone of the process as without this support, studies report dissatisfactory experiences that reinforce feelings of hopelessness (Starkie, 2024; Cochrane & Soni, 2020). Similar findings emerged within the following superordinate

themes, *'parental networks', 'being held throughout the process', 'frequent and transparent communication' and 'taking time to get it right'*.

Parental networks. Support systems emerged as a crucial factor in shaping the mothers' experiences of the EHCNA. This support emerged through a range of systems including: school professionals, external agency professionals, friends, family, the internet and the community. I interpreted that genuine relationships were regarded as a vital resource within each support network, as the mothers reflected on the isolating nature of lone parenthood and the emotional impact it had on their lives. Cumming (2014) discusses the importance of the acquisition and maintenance of relationships for marginalised groups such as lone mothers as they contribute to the successful navigation of social and systemic structures. This was seen within the current study as the mothers desired to actively participate in the EHCNA but required support to do so effectively. For this to happen, the mothers' responses indicated that they needed to be understood and professionals needed to be reliable and transparent. This is consistent with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which suggests that motivation is shaped by the extent to which individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with the present findings highlighting the importance of relatedness in fostering trust and enabling collaborative involvement.

To support parental motivation to engage with educational processes, prior research suggests that the onus should be placed on professionals to be intentional in learning about individual experiences and providing genuine assistance as this has shown to have a positive impact (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003; West et al., 2017). In agreement, Tsz-lok Lee (2023) adds that lone parents have been known to benefit from a multi-system supportive approach through interacting with professionals, friends and parents in similar positions and accessing community resources. Although these comparative studies originate from different national contexts, their insights remain conceptually transferable. They provide a valuable comparative lens that enhances the understanding of the mechanisms that support mothers experiencing systemic barriers and emotional challenges.

Being held throughout the process. To feel included within the process, it was important for the mothers to not only gain a mutual understanding of the process but to feel understood by the professionals involved. Two mothers discussed how unity and collaboration promoted feelings of support. In particular, Tori did not use the term *'professionals'* when talking about her interactions with others involved in the process, particularly the EP. This suggested that her interactions were more personable and led to her feeling understood. She frequently

used the word '*team*' which seemed to contribute to her finding the process less intimidating and more accessible. Noland and Moreland (2014) discuss that EPs are typically considerate of their use of interpersonal skills, physical positioning and adherence to '*the particular, personal and contextual*' (referencing Belenky & Stanton, 2000 p. 87, 92) when consulting with service users. This manifested in the EPs consideration of her physical disability as they accommodated her by conducting home visits.

Similarly, having a network of professionals to liaise with fostered a positive experience for Anne and Tori as the demeanour of the professionals produced an inviting relaxed atmosphere to discuss their children's strengths and needs. This approach enabled them to feel reassured, knowing that each person involved wanted to ensure that they were understood and well-informed throughout the process. This aligns with prior literature which discusses that a warm collaborative approach reduces feelings of stress and contributes to a positive experience of the EHCNA (Noland & Moreland, 2014; Jones & Atkinson, 2021).

Frequent and transparent communication. Throughout the mothers' accounts, I interpreted that a key part of inclusion was transparent, regular communication which facilitated open dialogue where bi-directional learning could take place. This was particularly important as the mothers needed to feel respected and that their opinions were regarded as a form of expertise. I interpreted this as particularly pertinent for the mothers due to the negative sociological discourse surrounding lone motherhood and prevailing assumptions about who is regarded as a credible source of knowledge (Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022).

Prior studies highlight the effect of empowering parents to share their views, noting that this can have a transformative impact, leading to parents to becoming proactive participants in decisions regarding their children's education (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). This was evident in Anne's experience, where ongoing questioning from the SENCo allowed her to share detailed insights into her son's strengths and needs.

While positive experiences were reported, not all mothers experienced consistent communication throughout the EHCNA, which corresponded to experiencing a more difficult process. This was seen in Natalie's experience where the withdrawal of support from the SENDIASS service left her feeling unable to advocate for her child due to a lack of understanding of the process. This experience echoes the importance of the messages produced by the NNPCF (2019) including: *co-production, listening to parents* and *ensuring the right people, knowledge, and skills* are in place. These messages highlight the importance of building trust, ensuring that parents are well-informed and supported throughout educational

processes and reducing family-related stress surrounding schooling. This aligns with the following statement from the CoP (2015):

> *'Local authorities must ensure that children, young people and parents are provided with the information, advice and support necessary to enable them to participate in discussions and decisions about their support. This should include time to prepare for discussions and meetings' (p. 21).*

This statement suggests that an understanding of the EHCNA should be gained prior to the initial meeting with professionals. However, the mothers' experiences suggested that they did not know how to prepare for their initial meetings about the EHCNA. Three mothers explained that the professionals completed most of the process on their behalf. Anne and Tori felt invited within their conversations with professionals, while Natalie expected to say more than she did within her meeting but did not feel confident or best placed to do so resulting in her feeling unneeded. These findings are consistent with prior parental research about the EHCNA, as Ahad et al. (2022) found that when parents were empowered by professionals to voice their perspectives, they frequently reported positive experiences. Conversely, Sales and Vincent (2018) found that a lack of parental confidence to advocate on behalf of their children prevented some families from fully engaging in the process which heightened the likelihood of producing inconsistent outcomes for CYP. These challenges were also evident under the previous Statements of SEN system (Rogers, 2007), raising important questions about the extent to which the most recent SEND reforms have meaningfully addressed longstanding issues within the statutory assessment process.

Taking time to get it right. To reduce the likelihood of inaccurately misrepresenting a CYPs needs, the mothers reported specific actions that were taken to mitigate this risk. Two mothers had multiple conversations with the EP and clarifying questions were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the children. This demonstrated a genuine attempt to include experiential knowledge within the process (Smith, 1987). Anne particularly noted that collaborative conversations occurred between educational settings about the suitability of provision for Charlie. This is in line with The SEND CoP (DfE, DoH, 2015) as it advocates for, *'collaboration between institutions to support those with SEN'* (P. 71).

In concurrence with the experience of the mothers in the current study, Bruckman and Blanton (2003) found that mothers responded more positively to teachers who actively sought collaboration, as their efforts appeared genuine and supportive, allowing space for sharing ideas. Similarly, West et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of maintaining regular

communication between home and school. Mothers perceived this consistent interaction as a sign that teachers were genuinely interested in their child's overall well-being. Therefore, the findings of the present study echo similar findings that clear communication and a supportive atmosphere can foster positive parental engagement and contribute to comprehensive assessments that accurately reflect a CYPs needs.

5.2.2 – I'm not in control here

The EHCNA is a fast-paced time-bound process and all four mothers experienced the impact of this as they discussed how a lack of control impacted their ability to understand and engage well within the process while effectively managing wider family commitments. These demands resulted in some mothers feeling that the process was '*done to*' them and not '*done with*' as intended. This echoed similar findings from general parental literature which looked into their experiences of the EHCNA (Starkie, 2024; Ahad et al., 2022; Sales & Vincent, 2018). The current findings highlight the importance of parents understanding their role within the process and being encouraged to engage in conversations once this knowledge has been acquired. This will be explored through the following superordinate themes: '*I'm not a professional*', '*Undesirable feelings*', '*Negative impact on the wider family*' and '*Operating from a place of disadvantage*'.

I'm not a professional. This theme was discussed across three accounts but strongly reflected in Natallie's account. It demonstrated a sense of powerlessness and confusion throughout the EHCNA process, particularly concerning what the process entailed, who was involved and what the parental role entailed. This point echoes prior research which acknowledged that parents with better knowledge of the EHCNA often reported better experiences (Bentley, 2017; Redwood, 2015). A lack of knowledge presents a fundamental barrier to engagement as this contributed to the mothers' disengagement in the process.

Although not directly related to the EHCNA, disengagement was also seen in Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study as mothers often felt pressured to relinquish their role in managing interventions, allowing professionals to take the lead while withdrawing their own input. Although there was not an overt conversation held between Natalie and professionals stating she was inexperienced as featured in Standing's (1999) study, I interpreted that the sheer number of people involved in the process reinforced the idea that she was not a professional or in control of the situation. While SEND reforms attempted to reduce the frequency of interactions with multiple professionals through the principle that parents should only have to share their stories once through collaborative multi-professional meetings (DfE & DoH, 2015),

Natalie's experience challenges the notion that multi-professional meetings automatically support parental engagement. Although a multi-agency approach was intended to inspire confidence, the number of professionals liaising with Natalie produced the opposite effect.

Undesirable feelings. All mothers experienced barriers which impacted on their emotions as they progressed throughout the EHCNA. Two mothers experienced historical rejections of an EHCP which reinforced their sense of helplessness and the perceived lack of control over the decisions affecting their children. All mothers had historical experiences of engaging in discussions concerning their child's needs which resulted in frustration for some due to the long-term impact of being silenced by professionals and the subsequent delay of suitable provision for their children. This aligns with prior research where lone mothers had tried to share their views and raise their concerns about their child's development, which resulted in dismissal and further reinforced their marginalisation in decision-making processes (McHatton & Correa, 2005; Standing, 1999). These feelings of powerlessness align with standpoint feminism, arguing that institutional processes often exclude the knowledge of marginalised groups (Smith ,1987). The experiences of the mothers in the current study highlight the need for professionals to clarify alternative methods of support as some of the mothers struggled to recall the support that their children received outside of the EHCNA.

Negative impact on the wider family. As lone parents, navigating parental responsibilities singlehandedly, the mothers noted the overwhelming challenges they faced prior to and throughout the EHCNA. Some mothers also referenced the emotional impact on their children's mental health and sense of belonging as they were expected to engage within systems that seemed dedicated to misunderstanding their needs while awaiting the outcome of the EHCNA. Although there are nationwide delays in producing high-quality EHCPs within expected timeframes (House of Commons, 2019), the experiences of these mothers reinforce existing research calling for essential training to better support SEND needs within mainstream schools (Ahad et al., 2022; Sales & Vincent, 2018; House of Commons, 2019).

As seen in Tori, Anne and Ayanna's experiences, the emotional toll of balancing personal challenges, raising multiple children and keeping up with the demands of the EHCNA was highlighted. Although the mothers expressed a desire to engage in the EHCNA, with time being a limited resource, it is understandable why it is easier to rely on professionals to guide the process. This sense of powerlessness reflects Smith's (1987) concept of ruling relations, where systems function in ways that fail to account for lived experiences and prioritise institutional knowledge. Due to this, disempowerment and frustration was experienced by mothers making

time to attend meetings which felt like a procedural requirement rather than a meaningful opportunity for collaboration. Thus, indicating how some of these pressures can be mitigated by offering flexible meeting arrangements and empathising with parents when rapport building such as seen within Tori and Anne's experiences.

Operating from a place of disadvantage. Frustration was experienced by the majority of the mothers as they had a strong inclination regarding the type of support their children needed to progress well at school but limited power to action this without the EHCNA. Therefore, it was viewed by some as a gated process where professionals held the knowledge and the power for change. This viewpoint was strongly voiced in prior studies which gained service user experiences of the EHCNA (Ahad et al., 2022; Eccleston, 2016). While the mothers did not hold power to change their children's circumstances, this did not stop them from being reminded of their child's difficulties by school professionals. Anne particularly experienced mental health difficulties due to the constant reminders of her child's challenging behaviour compounded by her inability to do anything to support. This experience links with prior research findings which report that systemic barriers can contribute to mental health challenges such as stress and anxiety (Caragata & Liegghio, 2013).

Systemic barriers also included a lack of awareness about mediation and other available support options following a *'no to assess or issue'* decision. These knowledge gaps seemed to produce feelings of defeat which spanned into other areas of the mothers' livelihood (e.g. career and mental health) as seen by Anne. Frustrations were also shared about the failure to accurately capture or address their children's needs through assessment. There appeared to be a disconnect between professional decisions and the children's lived realities. This misalignment between parental understanding and the professionals' decisions reinforced a sense that their voices were not being heard, leaving them with little influence over the outcome.

The SEND CoP (2015) outlines the importance for professionals to create an atmosphere to support parents/carers with providing their views through stating:

'Local authorities, early years providers and schools should enable parents to share their knowledge about their child and give them confidence that their views and contributions are valued and will be acted upon' (p. 21)

Although there is a clear specification in this legislation that parental voice will be valued and utilised in action planning, there is a consistent message in UK based literature and more global

literature which posits that parents face difficulties with making their voices heard and even challenging decisions that have been made (Standing, 1999, Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; Lamb, 2019). When parental insights are routinely overlooked or decisions are made without them, participation risks becoming merely symbolic. To move beyond tokenism, systems must not only seek parental input but also demonstrate a commitment to acting on it. Without this, many parents, particularly those already navigating disadvantage, are left feeling unheard and disempowered. This raises important questions about where power lies in the process which will be further explored in the following section.

5.2.3 – A power imbalance

Many types of power were referenced within the experiences of lone mothers including: legislative power, institutional power and systemic power. Within these experiences, the mothers expressed a need to voice their concerns consistently amidst the difficulties of feeling unsupported and unfairly treated. In feminist research, Rich (2021) discusses the necessity for women to continue to ask questions to gain enlightenment if they are to advance within society. However, this need to continually advocate to gain enlightenment can also be applied within the context of the EHCNA. This was seen in the accounts given by Anne, Ayanna and Natalie in particular.

Lack of resources. Consistent with previous research, many mothers in this study believed that securing an EHCP was the only reliable route to obtaining sustained and appropriate support for their children (Lamb, 2019; Keville, Mills & Ludlow, 2023; Eccleston, 2016; Cochrane, 2016). There was a prevailing perception that without formal documentation, schools lacked both the funding and the obligation to provide the necessary adaptations. This belief intensified the pressure on parents to pursue the EHCNA, despite encountering procedural barriers such as repeated delays, unclear communication and rejected applications.

Some mothers believed that their children's diagnoses should automatically result in the acquisition of an EHCP. Interestingly, this view echoes findings prior to the latest SEND reforms where parents viewed Statements of SEN as essential for holding schools accountable to meet the needs of their children (Broomhead, 2013; Runswick-Cole, 2007). As in prior studies, mothers in this research often likened the process to a battle, where they were forced to take on an advocate role to have their voices acknowledged and their children's needs legitimised (Rogers, 2007; Hess, et al., 2006). These consistent findings demonstrate how parental perceptions have remained largely unchanged since previous SEND reforms.

Despite being expected to navigate the system as informed advocates, many of the mothers described feeling isolated and unsupported throughout the EHCNA process. The emotional toll of having to continually justify their children's needs, often without clear guidance or consistent professional backing, contributed to a sense of being left to manage alone. This lack of support is explored further in the next section.

Feeling unsupported. A key recurrence within some of the mothers' experiences was a lack of support following professional input. Once professionals completed their administrative responsibilities, they withdrew, leaving them without ongoing guidance. This aligns with previous research suggesting that parental engagement is often treated as a procedural formality rather than a meaningful collaboration (Cooper, 2009; Sales & Vincent, 2018; NNPCF, 2019).

Another example of procedural formality was when mothers were asked to name a school on their children's EHCPs. This was regarded as a pressurising time as they made the decision alone while feeling unequipped. This pressure can be understood as a mechanism of institutional power, where from a historical perspective, messages stemming from institutions (i.e. Healthcare, education) were imposed on others with the expectation to comply rather than actively participate in shaping decisions (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). This dynamic reinforces feelings of exclusion and highlights how institutional processes can unintentionally marginalise parents. The mothers' experiences also reflect prior findings where parents felt less qualified than educational professionals to assess outcomes for their children (O'Farrell & Kinsella, 2018; Malkin, 2023). This was especially evident in Anne's case, as she believed the Educational Psychologist would have a better understanding of her child than she could convey herself. Parents are not alone with this view, as the perspective of EPs being construed as experts has also been known to be shared by SEND officers (Capper & Sloan, 2022) and SENCos (Cochrane, 2016). This not only affirms a hierarchical model where professional voices are elevated above those of parents, it also implies that these dynamics are not incidental but built into professional discourse and practice.

Discriminated against and treated unfairly. Some mothers experienced judgement throughout the EHCNA where the process acted as a form of surveillance, where their parenting was scrutinised rather than their child's needs being recognised. This relates to misrecognition (McGarry, 2024), as this stigma creates a barrier to access support through characterising parenting as sole issues. Relating to this, Anne and Ayanna experienced some adversarial interactions with the system, where professionals appeared cooperative but acted in ways that

undermined trust and collaboration. In a similar UK- based study which examined parental experiences of the EHCNA, Bentley (2017) found that parents felt judged and that there was a *'bad parental discourse'* (p. 132) which prevented them from accessing earlier supports. The theme of judgement is also viewed in global literature relating to lone mothers (West et al., 2017; Levine, 2009). Rich (2021) discusses the heavy social burden that mothers face to raise their children. When children are perceived as failing, this can create feelings of self-guilt which she terms *'powerless responsibility'*. This implies that language, tone and framing of discussions with parents should be carefully considered to avoid reinforcing feelings of blame.

In addition to social bias, other forms of bias were noted within the mothers' experiences. Racial and gender bias may have played a role, particularly in how Ayanna's professional expertise was received within the process. The intersection of Ayanna's roles as a mother, a Black woman and an assistant head teacher, placed her in a unique position to advocate for her child, yet she encountered resistance. Her experience aligns with research on racialised motherhood, which suggests that Black mothers are often positioned as difficult or aggressive when they challenge institutional decisions (Cooper, 2009). Ayanna's professional knowledge should have supported her to engage in collaborative conversations about the EHCNA, yet it appears to have heightened the resistance she faced. Ayanna was perceived not just as a concerned parent, but as someone disrupting institutional hierarchies. A further example of this delegitimisation of parental advocacy occurred when Ayanna described the reaction she received when speaking confidently within professional meetings. Her articulate and authoritative presence within these discussions was unexpected or even unwelcome, potentially due to racial and gendered biases about who is perceived as knowledgeable and who is expected to be compliant (Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022; Cooper, 2009).

In relation to this, Black mothers within Cooper's (2009) study discussed how they often experienced power imbalances that were fuelled by educational inequity, racial bias, and other identity factors. They experienced dismissive attitudes from educators which often led to exclusionary practices which was also reflected Ayanna's and Anne's experience. In both instances, educators attempted to shift focus from the school's environment to the mothers' home lives, despite indications that their children's struggles were rooted in social communication challenges. Such perceptions may stem from the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) where a child's challenges are attributed to parental shortcomings rather than systemic factors and from self-serving bias (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007), where institutions deflect responsibility to protect their own interests. This mirrors wider patterns of Black mothers and lone mothers being unfairly scrutinised within child-related decision-making processes

(Elliott & Reid, 2016), where their parenting is questioned rather than their concerns being taken seriously. On some occasions, Anne and Ayanna faced similar experiences despite different racial backgrounds but a shared status as lone mothers. This point exemplifies how an intersectional lens demonstrates how *'multiple oppressions'* does not necessarily equate to being *'multiply oppressed'* but rather highlights the complex and context-dependent ways in which identities intersect to shape experiences (Garry, 2011, p. 829).

For example, Ayanna referred to '*underlying prejudice'* and her perception of being '*looked at differently'* when advocating for her son, echoing findings from Morgan and Stahmer's (2020) study. They noted that Black mothers raising children with ASC reported having to be more outspoken when requesting services from professionals who did not share their cultural background or fully understand their experiences. These biases have been attributed to structural systems that perpetuate racial inequalities, leading to experiences where their voices are minimised or disregarded (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020). Standing's (1999) study also reinforces this point, highlighting that Black mothers who faced racism within educational systems often felt compelled to move their children to different schools. This provides insight into why Ayanna chose to keep Kayden out of school despite overturning the permanent suspension decision.

In relation to policy regarding discrimination, the CoP (2015) references *The Equality Act 2010* to outline the responsibilities of LAs and school settings to '*eliminate discrimination'* and '*promote equality of opportunity'* (p. 39). However, Ayanna's experience suggests a disjunction between policy intentions and real-world practice. The failure of the system to acknowledge her expertise reflects a broader issue of institutionalised power imbalances that undermine parental voice and agency. Furthermore, as there are many more women raising children as lone parents than male (ONS, 2023) this suggests the problem is heightened for women.

5.2.4 - Empowerment

When undergoing the EHCNA, two mothers described the power of advocacy and the impact that this had on their experience as lone mothers. For both mothers, having parental knowledge of the EHCNA supported their advocacy stance. Aligning with prior research, the default position of both mothers was a defensive one, where they felt as though they had to defend their views and fight to be heard and understood (Rogers, 2007; Hess, et al., 2006). The impact and implications of empowerment will now be explored through the following superordinate themes: '*Making my voice heard', 'Supported through advocacy', 'Empowerment towards others'.*

Making my voice heard. When it came to sharing parental views, the mothers valued having time to be heard and understood as this resulted in an empowering experience. Anne found solace in community-building where professionals supported her to provide her views. This enabled her to later engage in proactive action through contacting the SEND panel for updates on Charlie's EHCP. However, her experience also highlights systemic shortcomings which have also been reflected in prior research where statutory timeframes have not been kept (Ahad et al., 2020; House of Commons, 2019).

Meanwhile, Ayanna utilised her professional knowledge of the educational system to support her when sharing her views. Ayanna's journey reflects a more adversarial process where empowerment was achieved through persistent effort rather than collaboration. Her sense of empowerment emerged from her willingness to continually challenge the system. Her determination was expressed through her assertive nature to defend how Kayden was perceived and treated within the educational system. These experiences compliment prior research which highlights that empowerment can be closely linked to one's access to information and familiarity with systems (House of Commons, 2019; Cochrane and Soni, 2020). This was particularly seen in Tsz-lok Lee's (2023) study where lone mothers attributed their ability to advocate for their children to their profession or external links (i.e. friends).

Despite the different approaches, the mothers demonstrated how empowerment can be a powerful tool for advocating on behalf of their children. With regard to parental empowerment in educational processes, Tsz-lok Lee (2023) emphasised the importance of parents being educated about the procedural elements they are expected to engage with. Aligning with SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it can be suggested that competence and relatedness are protective factors which support parents to provide their views proactively.

Supported through advocacy. Several studies identified in the SLR discuss how advocacy can feel like a constant struggle where there are various obstacles to face (McHatton & Correa, 2005; Bradley & Goldstein, 2022; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). While the aforementioned studies offer valuable insights into parental advocacy and the emotional labour associated with navigating educational systems, it is important to acknowledge that these studies are not UK-based. This raises questions about their transferability to the UK context, particularly in relation to educational policy, systemic structures and cultural attitudes toward race, disability, and parental involvement. Similar to Ayanna's experience, the mothers in Bradley & Goldstein's (2022) study discussed how loneliness further complicated their advocacy experience due to being a lone parent having to stay strong for their child. Further to this point, mothers in Morgan

and Stahmer's (2020) study addressed the impact of their child being misunderstood due to racial prejudice and how this blocked their opportunities to access educational support. Despite the geographical differences, the lived realities of parents facing systemic misunderstanding and exclusion appear to be globally relevant, particularly among racially minoritised and/or neurodivergent families.

The Child Safeguarding Review Panel (2025) conducted a thematic review of the impact of race, ethnicity and culture on multi-disciplinary practice where children experienced serious harm. Albeit not centrally focussed on education, it discussed the importance of advocacy and the detrimental impact of practitioners placing expectations on single parents to meet the needs of children with complex needs with minimal support. Relating to this, the report states the following:

> *'We also saw examples where practitioners placed expectations on sole parents to meet the needs of children with complex needs or significant disabilities with little support provided. Such observations may be reflective of wider racial biases and perceptions of the emotional resilience and caregiving behaviours of the 'strong Black woman' (Castelini & White, 2022; Collins, 1990, p. 43)'*

This statement highlights how racial bias and cultural stereotypes can shape practitioner expectations and interactions with parents, particularly single parents from minority ethnic backgrounds. The notion of the *'strong Black woman'* described by (Woods-Giscombé, 2010) may lead to assumptions that these parents possess greater resilience and are therefore more capable of managing with limited support. Such bias can misrepresent certain voices in society and perpetuate systemic inequities, leaving parents feeling unsupported and overwhelmed (McGarry, 2024). Addressing these issues requires practitioners to actively challenge bias and ensure that support systems are equitable and culturally responsive.

Empowerment towards others. Advocacy had a transformative impact on Anne, where a notable shift from passivity to active engagement was observed. Aligning with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Anne's interactions with educational professionals, enabled her to develop a stronger sense of competence, agency and determination, motivating her to support others. This growth was not limited to her experience navigating the EHCNA process, it also extended to challenging exclusionary practices in community-based groups. Anne explained that being supported by others gave her the confidence to engage in difficult conversations. This support became a catalyst for personal empowerment and for encouraging others to advocate for their own children. Her journey demonstrates how advocacy can function as both a personal and

collective force for change, especially within systems where parents often feel marginalised or unheard. This evolution in agency also resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social and cultural capital, which helps to explain how access to resources, knowledge and supportive networks can empower individuals to navigate and challenge dominant systems. In the context of Anne's experience, the accumulation of such capital enabled her to participate more assertively in decision-making processes. This leads into the next master theme, '*Shaping a child-centred process for the future',* where the experiences of the EHCNA helped the mothers to reflect on ways to improve the process.

5.2.5 - Shaping a child-centred process for the future

All the mothers in the current study emphasised the importance of keeping their children at the centre of the EHCNA process, providing concrete examples of what this should look like. In alignment with prior research, their narratives consistently highlighted key factors such as open communication, allyship, and genuine collaboration (Malkin, 2023; Capper & Sloan, 2022; Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). It was interpreted that the mothers experience of the EHCNA was influenced by the levels of support received. These findings are explored through the superordinate themes: '*Operating in my child's best interest' and 'The importance of improving the process'.*

Operating in my child's best interest. All mothers discussed the importance of a child-centred focus where parents are supported to share their views and concerns regarding their children. The mothers valued when professionals understood their children holistically instead of focussing solely on their educational needs. Some mothers spoke about how the EHNCA prompted them to become advocates as they wanted the best for their children. Similar findings were found in previous literatures where lone mothers became invested in their children's education and voiced their views (Chia et al., 2011; Jacobs, 2023). For the mothers in the current study, the underpinnings of their advocacy stance were due to receiving persistent messaging that a mainstream school was not suited to their children's needs. This prompted the mothers to complete additional research to find out about different types of provision through surfing the internet and contacting friends. However, due to the national context regarding limited spaces within alternative and specialist settings (House of Commons, 2019), Anne in particular felt pressured from the SEND panel to name a mainstream school on Charlie's EHCP, despite Charlie's history of being suspended from such settings. This questions the child-centred nature of the EHCNA and whether the national context overshadows the child's presentation. In relation to this, some of the insights shared pointed to a broader

concern about the inclusivity of mainstream schools and their capacity to support children with SEMH needs.

Through the experiences shared, it was interpreted that successful advocacy requires a system that actively listens to parents and acknowledges their understanding of their child's unique needs. This reinforces the need for a collaborative approach where parents are genuinely included as partners in decision-making, rather than feeling pressured to conform to predetermined pathways. The mothers valued having a multidisciplinary approach within the EHCNA process. An appreciation was shown towards the contributions of professionals which enhanced their understanding of the children's needs. Tori specifically mentioned that she saw value in working with both female and male professionals as she felt seen and heard as a parent fulfilling two roles. For children to gain the right support, the NNPCF (2019) produced a document highlighting the importance of having *the right people, right knowledge and right skills*. Similar to the House of Commons (2019) report, it called for improved continuing professional development (CPD) training around SEND so that staff feel confident and equipped to support CYP at school. This is especially important as Ayanna discussed that the impact of this could potentially result in children being supported without the need to enter into the EHCNA process.

The importance of improving the process. The mothers discussed the value of receiving continuous support from the preliminary stages of the EHCNA before any formal meetings with additional professionals to the period following decisions regarding assessment or issuance. I interpreted that if the mothers were more informed about the graduated response, then this would have supported them prior to the EHCNA. A central message emerged that there must be a clear and accessible pathway for addressing concerns, even if an EHCP is not issued. This was a message highlighted in the House of Commons Education Committee (2019) report:

'We need to do more to improve support for pupils without EHC plans and are exploring whether we need to clarify the expectations on schools over the SEN Support they provide to children who do not have EHC plans' (p. 13)

Based on the experiences of the mothers in this study, it is arguable that there is a clear need to clarify SEND support. Without clear guidance, there is a loss of accountability and support.

To support parents with accessing impartial advice and support regarding their children, there are services available such as SENDIASS (House of Commons, 2019). However, Natalie was the only mother who reported an experience with this service which raises questions about the referral pathway and accessibility of the service. Her experience of the service produced a discourse pertaining to the unreliable support structures throughout the EHCNA. Both Ayanna and Natalie's experiences in particular reflect findings from prior research which found that inadequate knowledge of available support hindered parents' ability to advocate effectively for their children (Eccleston, 2016; Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Sales & Vincent, 2018). However, prior literature also demonstrates that when mothers are able to connect with professionals, they are able to understand the supports available to their children and reflect on the implications of this support (Tsz-lok Lee, 2023; Cochrane & Soni, 2020). This suggests that support should be tailored towards establishing clearer pathways to access support services.

The mothers' experiences highlight a fundamental need for clear communication to support the co-construction of a child-centred process, where parents and practitioners work together to find effective solutions. This need becomes especially apparent in Natalie's case, as she entered the process with little understanding of what it entailed, mistakenly believing it would be a straightforward procedure with a guaranteed outcome. This raises questions around informed consent prior to entering the process and reflects systemic failures in providing parents with the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions.

Additionally, several mothers questioned why they were required to name a specific educational setting when they lacked sufficient information about what different schools could offer. Despite making efforts to arrange school visits, some found it difficult to access meaningful insights into the appropriateness of each setting. Their accounts reflected a belief that provision should follow need, not the other way around, yet they were expected to make pivotal decisions without a clear understanding of how their child's needs would be met in different environments. These experiences highlight the importance of secure, trusting relationships in facilitating the exchange of accessible and relevant information. Ahad et al. (2022), citing Pearson, Mitchell, and Rapti (2015), noted that SENCos themselves recognise the role of strong relationships and effective information sharing as key to positive parent-school interactions. However, they also acknowledged the systemic time constraints that hinder their ability to prioritise this relational work. This tension between the recognised value of relational practice and the systemic limitations that restrict it highlight the need for structural changes that prioritise informed, collaborative decision-making within the EHCNA process.

5.2.6 - The application of theoretical perspectives to the mothers' experiences

To better understand the factors shaping each mother's experience of the EHCNA process, three main perspectives were drawn upon including: feminist perspectives (Levine, 2009; Rich, 2021; Carastathis, 2014),) Family Stress Theory (Hill, 1949) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital became another key theoretical framework which supported the identification of factors which shaped participant's experiences. These frameworks collectively highlight how gendered expectations, systemic power imbalances, varying access to institutional knowledge and support influence lone mothers' navigation of the EHCNA process.

FST (Hill, 1949) provides a conceptual structure to take an idiographic, context-specific approach to how each mother experienced and managed stress. Figure 5.2.6 visually adapts the model, illustrating how stressors (A), resources (B), and perceptions (C) interact to influence outcomes (X) during the EHCNA process. The arrows indicate dynamic, reciprocal relationships where each factor can influence and be influenced by the others, meaning the interplay between (A), (B), and (C) can either alleviate or intensify stress (X).

Figure 5.2.6 – An adaptation of the ABC-X Model in relation to experiences of the EHCNA
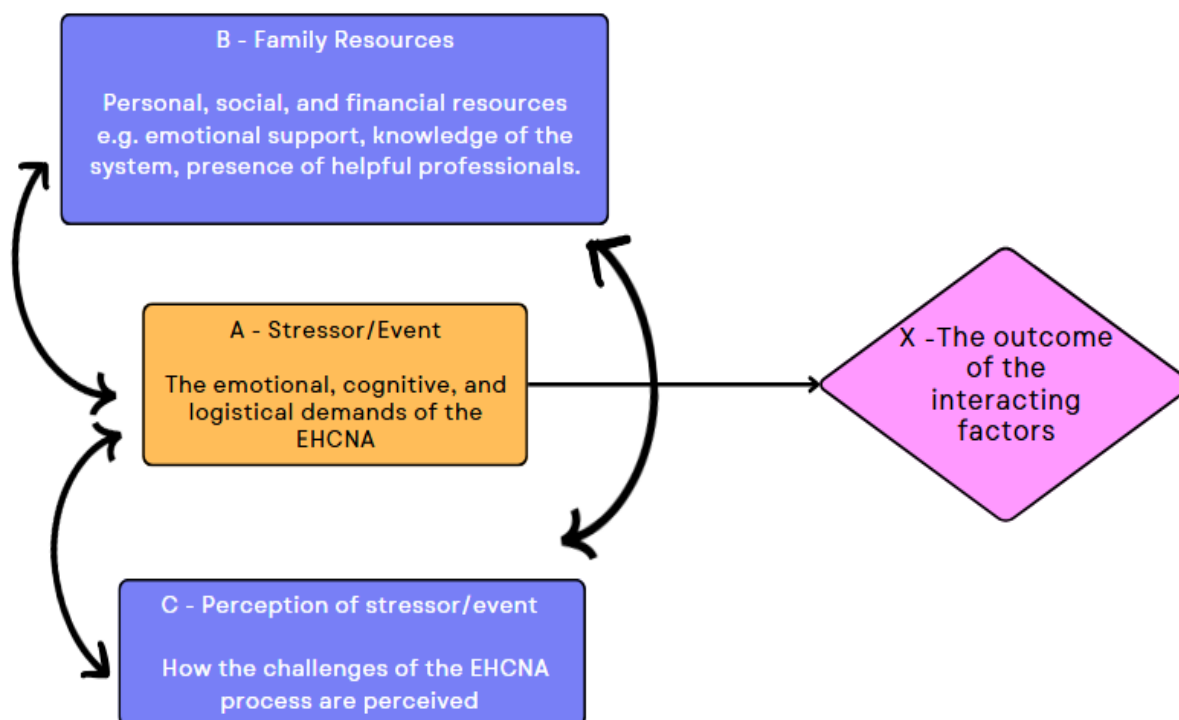
Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social (e.g. network of support) and cultural (e.g. knowledge, skills, language) capital can be applied here, where personal and interpersonal resources can contribute to achieving a positive outcome.

While each theory highlights different facets of marginalisation and resource access, they can be understood through the lens of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which provides a psychological framework for understanding how external and internal conditions affect an individual's ability to feel autonomous, competent and connected. Moreover, SDT enables the exploration of how social and institutional environments either enable or constrain parental agency. In this way, it bridges the insights of feminist, family stress and intersectional theory with an applied understanding of human motivation and wellbeing.

In the case of Anne (Figure 5.2.6a), the interaction between family resources (B) and her perception of the EHCNA (C) contributed to a more manageable navigation of the stressor (A). The quote in X within the figure reflects the Anne's summative emotional response, influenced by both supportive and constraining factors. Having access to informed and trusted individuals provided Anne with both emotional reassurance and practical advice, increasing her perceived competence and relatedness which are two key psychological needs in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These interactions not only enhanced her confidence but also reduced the isolating effects that parents often report during complex institutional procedures (Lavian et al., 2024; McHatton & Correa, 2005). Her growing familiarity with the language and structure of the EHCNA illustrates how cultural capital can be acquired through the sharing of knowledge from social relationships, enabling more autonomous engagement.

Figure 5.2.6a - Anne's experience in relation to the FST framework

B - Family Resources
- Lack of support with taking children to different schools
- Time pressures to confirm/attend meetings
- Established relationships with informed friends/professionals

A - Stressor/Event
The emotional, cognitive, and logistical demands of the EHCNA

C - Perception of stressor/event
- Increased confidence due to conversations with friends/professionals
- Feeling supported due to gaps in knowledge being filled
- Feeling that Charlie has been misunderstood
- Feeling that the process is unnecessarily long

X - 'It's draining. And I've had the better side of it, not the worst' 651, 33

Similar to Anne, when viewing Tori's experience through the lens of the FST framework (Hill, 1949) (Figure 5.2.6b), it showcases the crucial role of professional interactions in shaping a positive perception of the process and enhancing her ability to navigate it successfully. The emotional, cognitive and logistical demands of the EHCNA were mitigated through consistent, respectful communication with professionals who fostered a sense of inclusion and trust. These positive relationships reflect Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, as Tori was able to access interpersonal support that made the process feel more manageable.

Tori's identity as a disabled lone mother raising two neurodiverse children presents a unique combination of factors which impacted how she encountered the EHCNA. While her physical disability introduced practical challenges, such as accessibility to meetings, the respectful and inclusive behaviour of professionals helped to reduce the compounding effects of these structural barriers. Unlike other participants who experienced institutional exclusion, Tori's narrative suggests that her needs were accounted for in a way that fostered empowerment rather than marginalisation. The quote in (X) reflects a sense of alignment between institutional expectations and personal needs, demonstrating how responsive and relational professional practice can help meet parental needs and mitigate systemic disadvantages.

Linked to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), through affirming professional relationships, Tori's basic psychological needs for relatedness (feeling understood and included) and competence (feeling capable and knowledgeable about the process) were met. This helped her to increase in agency and feel less overwhelmed. Moreover, Tori's cultural capital was evident in her understanding of the multidisciplinary approach within the EHCNA. Her awareness of the roles of different professionals indicated a level of cultural competence that enabled her to engage more effectively with the process. This familiarity with the procedural aspects of the EHCNA contributed to her ability to advocate for Ruby's specific needs, particularly in relation to ensuring that her emotional and educational needs were properly addressed.

Figure 5.2.6b – Tori's experience in relation to the FST framework
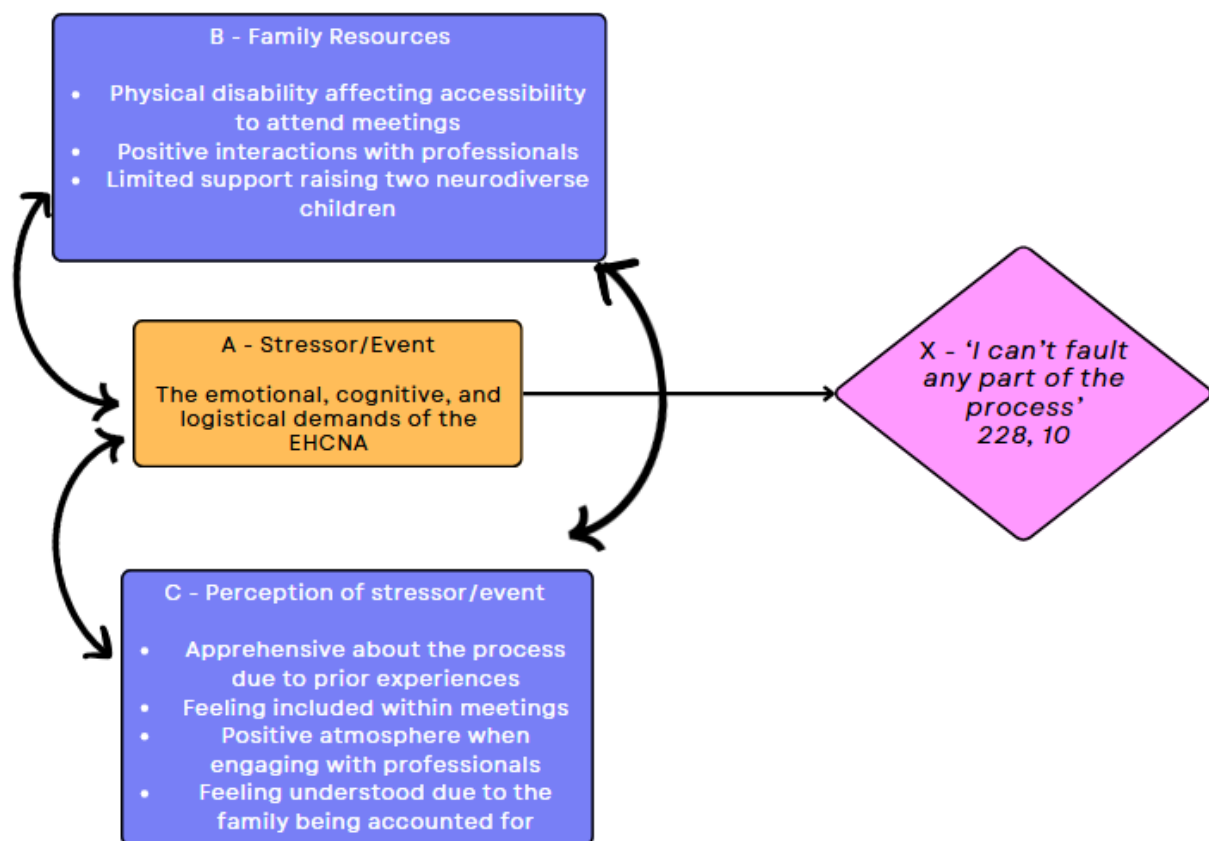
When viewing Ayanna's experience through the lens of the FST framework (Hill, 1949) (Figure 5.2.6c), the perception of the stressor/event is a prominent area which appears to have contributed to a stressful navigation of the EHCNA. Ayanna reflected on the parental stigmatisation that she encountered which diminished her agency through implying that her parenting was the sole root of Kayden's behavioural presentation. This experience was also heightened by the structural challenges of navigating the process without institutional backing,

as her clear distinction in viewpoint led to feelings of isolation throughout the process. Moreover, as a lone mother, this intensified feelings of not only seclusion but exhaustion to continue the advocacy journey.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, Ayanna's account highlights the gendered assumptions embedded in institutional responses to mothers. Feminist scholars have long highlighted how systems often hold women accountable for their children's perceived deviance (Levine, 2009; Rich, 2021). Ayanna's experience exemplifies this dynamic, where dominant discourses positioned her as deficient rather than as a knowledgeable agent. Her marginalisation reflects structural silencing, where the authority to define her child's needs was implicitly reserved for professionals, undermining her contributions as a mother and expert in her child's life.

Intersectionality offers a critical lens to understand how Ayanna's experience was shaped by identity (i.e. gender, lone motherhood, and racialised assumptions) which led to disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989; Carastathis, 2014). These intersecting identities contributed to a context in which institutional processes did not simply fail to support her, they actively constrained her participation. Ayanna's experience highlights the importance of social and cultural capital in navigating the EHCNA process. Her experience aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) theory that limited social capital can exacerbate feelings of isolation and make institutional processes more challenging to navigate. As a parent with limited familial support, Ayanna's social capital was impacted by the lack of institutional support and the absence of strong networks that could advocate on her behalf. This relates to maldistribution (McGarry, 2024), as she felt she could not make equal contributions to the EHCNA. Without adequate social connections to draw upon for guidance or advocacy support, she had to rely heavily on her own determination and persistence to challenge decisions through appeals and mediation.

Viewed through the lens of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Ayanna's psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness were undermined. Her autonomy was constrained by institutional resistance, her competence questioned through parental blame and her relatedness fractured by a lack of collaborative or empathetic relationships. Yet, her sustained engagement in mediation and appeals speaks to a powerful form of resilience and self-determined motivation which was not a result of systemic support, but in spite of its absence.

Figure 5.2.6c – Ayanna's experience in relation to the FST framework

B - Family Resources

- Personal professional knowledge of the education system
- Lack of support from school
- Strong advocacy stance
- Family support to help with taking care of Kayden occasionally

A - Stressor/Event

The emotional, cognitive, and logistical demands of the EHCNA

X - 'It was an exhausting period'
305, 14

C - Perception of stressor/event

- Feeling uninformed about the process
- Feeling silenced
- Feeling that Kayden has been misunderstood
- Parental stimgatisation
- Racial undertones within conversations

When applying the FST framework (Hill, 1949) (Figure 5.2.6d), Natalie's experience portrays the importance of receiving external streams of support through the close locality of her child's school and the understanding of her work colleagues. This social capital enabled Natalie to attend meetings without difficulty, which she recognised as a valuable asset to engaging in the EHCNA. In terms of cultural capital, Natalie's initial lack of awareness about the EHCNA process demonstrates how limited knowledge can act as a barrier. She entered the process under the assumption that it was straightforward and would automatically result in support for her child. This lack of procedural knowledge left her feeling unprepared. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital as encompassing the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage with institutional structures, something Natalie was initially lacking. However, as she progressed through the process, her cultural capital gradually increased through her interactions with professionals and the practical experience she gained. This development highlights how cultural capital is not static but can be acquired and expanded over time. While Natalie's social capital facilitated her logistical engagement with the EHCNA, her evolving cultural capital allowed her to gradually build a clearer understanding of the process.

From a feminist standpoint, Natalie's case also highlights how institutional processes can obscure or downplay the emotional labour mothers perform in advocating for their children. While her experience may appear less adversarial than others, this is in part due to the presence of support structures, such as understanding work colleagues, that should not be assumed as universally available. Feminist research reminds us that women's ability to participate in complex systems like the EHCNA often hinges on whether their caregiving and working roles are institutionally accommodated, something that remains uneven across social contexts (Radcliffe et al., 2022).

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) offers a summary of Natalie's evolving experience. Initially, her sense of competence was undermined by her lack of understanding and her autonomy was constrained by her dependence on professional guidance. However, as her familiarity with the process increased, so too did her feelings of competence and agency. Her relatedness which was fostered by empathetic and supportive interactions also helped create an environment in which her confidence could grow. These three basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, relatedness) were gradually better met as the process progressed, enabling her to participate in a more autonomous way.

Figure 5.2.6d – Natalie's experience in relation to the FST framework
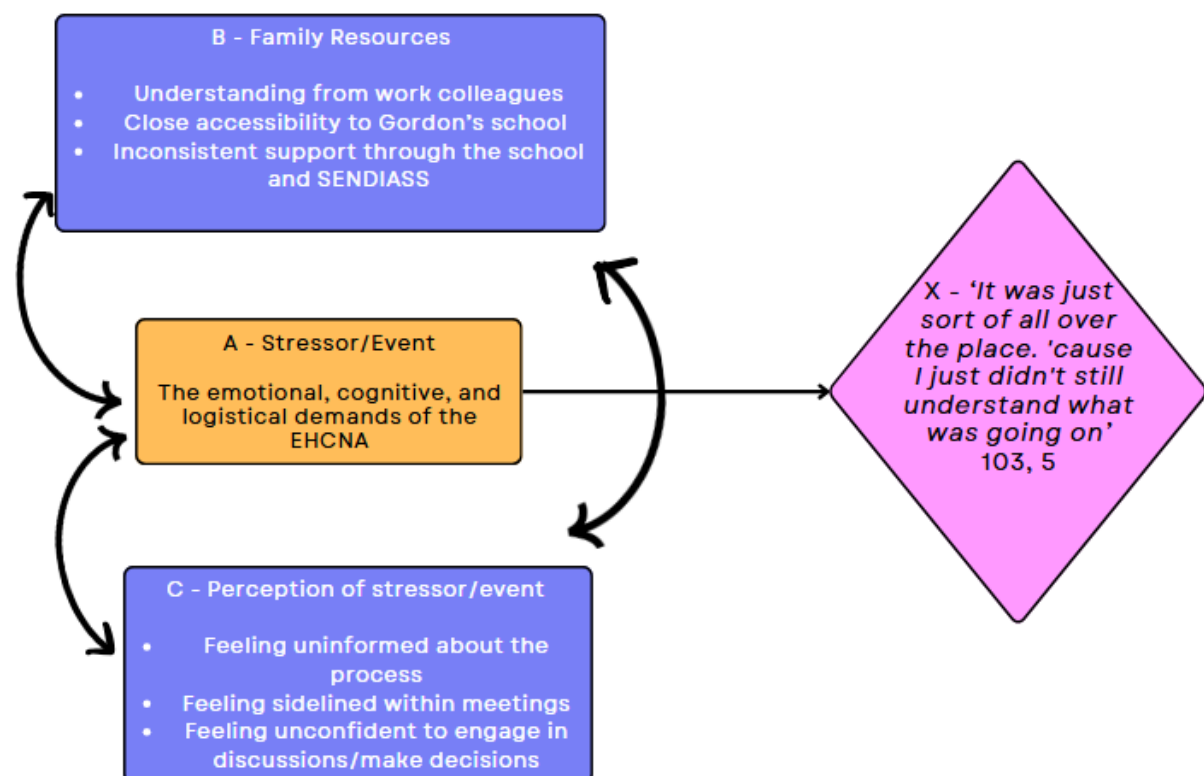
Taken together, these case examples highlight the complex, situated nature of parental experiences within the EHCNA process. FST provides a useful framework for understanding how the links between stressors, family resources and perceptions shapes parental capacity to engage. The integration of SDT supports insight into how the fulfilment of parental need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness affects their advocacy journeys. Furthermore, feminist perspectives draw attention to the gendered expectations placed on mothers. An intersectional lens reminds us that these experiences are not universal but are deeply shaped by overlapping systems of advantage and disadvantage (e.g. gender, race, disability, lone parenthood status) which mediate access to resources and influence how parents are perceived by professionals. While some participants, like Tori and Natalie were able to accumulate and draw on social and cultural capital to meet the process with confidence, others, like Ayanna faced systemic barriers that undermined their agency and heightened the emotional toll of the EHCNA. These findings suggest that the success of parental engagement cannot be attributed solely to individual characteristics or effort but must be understood within a broader socio-political and relational context that either enables or constrains meaningful participation.

5.2.7 – Methodological limitations

IPA's emphasis on lived experience and individual meaning-making provides rich insight into how participants interpret their roles and challenges. Its idiographic approach ensures that the voices of marginalised individuals are brought to the forefront. However, the method has been critiqued for its reliance on participants' linguistic ability to articulate their experiences, as the data is inherently shaped by what and how individuals are able to express their views (Tuffour, 2017). This raises concerns about the potential exclusion of participants who may struggle to verbalise complex emotions or experiences. Nevertheless, to avoid engaging only with articulate individuals would be to risk reinforcing epistemic injustice by privileging certain voices over others in research.

Another critique of IPA is that some studies fail to move beyond description to provide true interpretative depth (Tuffour, 2017). This concern highlights the importance of the researcher's phenomenological positioning and the need for reflexivity throughout the analytic process. Explicitly acknowledging one's positionality helps clarify the interpretative lens through which the data is viewed and situates the research within a transparent epistemological framework. I was able to do this through acknowledging how my positionality as a Black woman and my professional experience working with marginalised communities shaped the interpretative lens through which I viewed the data. I embraced a phenomenological attitude that sought to understand the mothers' accounts from within their own frames of reference

while maintaining awareness of my own interpretive stance. My position as an outsider to motherhood, but not to marginalisation, allowed me to approach the data with both empathy and critical curiosity, recognising when societal biases or systemic power imbalances may have influenced their experiences.

Another limitation to the study is that the small sample size typical of IPA restricts the generalisability of findings. While this is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment to depth over breadth (Smith et al., 2022), it does mean the findings must be understood as contextually situated rather than widely representative. The interpretative nature of IPA also opens up the potential for researcher bias, especially in studies where the researcher shares a dual role. In this study, my dual identity as both a professional and a researcher could have influenced the dynamic of the interviews, with conversations sometimes shifting into information-sharing rather than reflective dialogue. Furthermore, infrequent, unintentional affirming remarks (e.g. '*that sounds really helpful*') may have influenced responses or limited space for dissenting perspectives.

Moreover, recruitment limitations may have impacted the diversity of the sample. Potential participants from colleges, PVI (Private, Voluntary and Independent) nurseries, or post-16 settings were not included, due to restricted access to these institutions. This may have resulted in a partial view of lone mothers' experiences within the wider educational landscape.

An additional consideration relates to the framing of lone motherhood within the study. While being a lone mother was part of the inclusion criteria, participants were not explicitly asked to reflect on their lone motherhood status during the interviews. As a result, some participants spontaneously spoke about how being a lone mother shaped their experiences, while others did not reference it directly. This variability has implications for the depth and consistency with which the theme of lone motherhood was explored across the dataset. For those who chose to foreground this aspect of their identity, rich insights were shared into the relational, emotional and systemic challenges they faced. However, in cases where it was not discussed in detail, it is possible that key aspects of their experiences related to lone motherhood remained underexplored. This limitation reflects the tension between allowing participants to lead the narrative and ensuring sufficient depth in addressing the research focus. As such, while the findings offer valuable insight into the experiences of lone mothers, they may reflect broader parental experiences as well.

5.2.8 - Implications for practice within the education sector

The findings from the current study have significant implications for school-based professionals and EPs in relation to supporting lone mothers through the EHCNA process. The mothers' experiences suggest several areas of improvement that can enhance the accessibility, transparency, and equity of the process.

Implications for school-based professionals

Parents/carers enter the EHCNA process with varying levels of social and cultural capital, which can significantly influence their capacity to engage effectively with professionals. The frustration expressed by mothers concerning inadequate information provision throughout the EHCNA process highlights the need for school-based professionals to enhance communication practices. Developing a clear, step-by-step guide detailing the logistical requirements of the EHCNA process would empower parents, providing them with a sense of agency and the ability to track the progression of the process beyond their direct interactions with professionals. Furthermore, offering parents clear and accessible information about alternative support mechanisms and funding options outside of the EHCNA process is essential for reducing confusion and alleviating stress. Establishing well-defined communication pathways can ensure parents are aware of alternative provisions when an EHCP is not allocated.

Prior to the EHCNA, school-based professionals should explicitly outline how CYP's needs are addressed through a graduated response within the school's SEN budget. This approach would help parents build foundational knowledge of SEN processes, which they can later draw upon if they pursue the EHCNA process in the future. Should parents engage in the EHCNA, it is essential for school-based professionals to recognise the diverse circumstances of families. Schools should offer flexibility in the timing and location of meetings if necessary to accommodate parents' needs. Moreover, professionals should actively signpost parents to external sources of support, such as SENDIASS and local parent forums, which can provide guidance, advocacy and peer support. By implementing these measures, professionals can help foster a more accessible, transparent and supportive EHCNA process that is better attuned to the realities of family life.

This research demonstrated how unconscious bias can significantly influence how parents are perceived and treated within the EHCNA process, which then, affects their sense of agency and trust in professionals. To support equitable practice, it appears that ongoing mandatory training focused on education around power dynamics, bias and stigmatisation

within practice would be beneficial. Engaging in conscious reflection and open dialogue about these biases is crucial to dismantling harmful ideologies that adversely impact children and their families.

Implications for EPs

EPs can play a pivotal role in simplifying communication about the EHCNA process, clarifying expectations and ensuring parents feel adequately informed to make decisions on behalf of their children. This approach aligns with the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2021) code of conduct around competence and respect and the HCPC (2023) Standards (particularly 9.3), which emphasises the importance of clear and accessible communication. EPs should consider incorporating parents' perspectives as a foundational element of their assessments. Consulting with parents before formal assessments begin and actively integrating their insights can prevent tokenistic parental involvement while enhancing the accuracy and relevance of the assessment process. For example, learning from Ayanna's experience, observing children across multiple settings (e.g. structured classroom settings and unstructured break times) can provide a more comprehensive understanding of a CYPs needs.

Additionally, in alignment with the BPS (2021) code of conduct, it is essential for EPs to exercise integrity through remaining vigilant in challenging biases that may arise during professional conversations and assessments. Ensuring that discussions are respectful, inclusive and free from prejudice is critical to promote a genuinely child-centred approach. Some mothers who were approached for this study chose not to participate due to mistrust in professionals, feeling misunderstood, undervalued and disempowered. This mistrust suggests a need for active continuous work towards building relationships grounded in respect, empathy and genuine collaboration. By developing approaches that encourage power-sharing rather than tokenistic involvement, EPs can promote meaningful parental engagement in the EHCNA process. Cooper (2009) highlights how power-sharing is often left to school communities to negotiate, yet historically, educators have typically positioned parents as co-operative volunteers rather than equal powerholders. To address this imbalance, EPs must use their interpersonal skills to create inclusive environments where parents feel invited and supported to contribute to discussions.

5.2.9 - Future research

This study primarily focused on the experiences of lone mothers navigating the EHCNA process to provide deeper insights into the unique challenges and perspectives faced by this parental group. However, as the parental landscape evolves, it is important to consider other

underrepresented caregivers. For example, lone father households now account for 15% (477,000) of the 3.2 million lone-parent families in the UK which is an increase from 13% in 2012 (ONS, 2023). This rise highlights a shift in caregiving dynamics which could be a useful future topic to explore. Future research could also consider other underrepresented groups such as grandparents who are primary caregivers. These caregivers may face distinct challenges shaped by societal perceptions of caregiving roles and potentially limited access to supportive networks.

Future studies could explore how intersectional factors (i.e. cultural background, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) influence parental experiences of the EHCNA process. This includes examining variations in social and cultural capital across communities and how these affect engagement with professionals. Such research could also illuminate how structural and economic conditions shape parental empowerment, access to support and advocacy. Furthermore, culturally and linguistically diverse families may offer alternative perspectives on navigating the system.

The present study employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences from the unique perspective of four mothers. However, mixed-methods research designs could provide breadth of insight by combining qualitative findings with quantitative data. For example, surveys could be administered to a larger sample of parents to identify trends, while qualitative interviews could be used to explore the nuances of these experiences. These lines of inquiry would be particularly timely in the context of the SEND Review (DfE, 2023), which emphasises improving parental involvement, clarity and trust in the system. Evaluating whether the policy's ambitions are reflected in the lived realities of families, especially those facing structural disadvantage, will be essential. Future research could also adopt longitudinal approaches to capture how parental experiences evolve over time, especially in light of policy reform and shifting educational priorities. This can highlight whether experiences improve with familiarity, or if persistent challenges and frustrations remain. These directions would not only deepen understanding but also provide valuable evidence to shape more inclusive, parent-informed policy and practice within SEND systems.

5.3 - Unique contributions

This study provides an interpretative account of four lone mothers' experiences navigating the EHCNA process, exploring how they made sense of their experiences within the context of intersecting social identities. Using a feminist lens, the research examines how factors such as gender and race influenced their interactions with professionals and shaped

their overall perceptions of the process. The findings highlight the gap between the intended function of the EHCNA, as outlined in the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), and the lived realities of these mothers, particularly in terms of accessibility, transparency and meaningful parental engagement.

The literature review in chapter two found that three studies considered lone mothers parenting children with SEND. However, there were no studies that specifically looked at the experiences of lone mothers throughout the EHCNA process. Therefore, this current study was distinctive through exploring this area. A key contribution of this research is its recognition that parenthood is not a homogenous experience; rather, it is shaped by multiple social and structural factors that influence the ability to navigate statutory processes. By centring the voices of lone mothers, this study sheds light on the specific challenges they face, including parental stigmatisation, advocacy fatigue and institutional barriers that limit their agency within the EHCNA process. Furthermore, this research extends the discourse on intersectionality within educational policy, emphasising the need for a more nuanced and equitable approach to parental involvement that accounts for diverse lived experiences.

The use of IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2022) to explore the lived experiences of four mothers was particularly valuable in this context, as it allowed for an in-depth, idiographic exploration of each experience while also drawing out patterns across cases. The double hermeneutic process whereby participants make sense of their experiences and the researcher interprets this meaning, enabled a rich, layered understanding of how these mothers engaged with the EHCNA process. The idiographic nature of IPA ensured that each mother's unique perspective was honoured, while also allowing for a broader interpretative analysis that identified shared struggles, such as systemic bias, difficulties in accessing information and the emotional toll of navigating the process alone.

By using IPA, this study contributes to existing literature by demonstrating how an idiographic approach can illuminate the nuanced realities of marginalised parental groups within the SEND system. This methodological choice highlights the importance of qualitative, experience-based research in policy discussions, ensuring that the voices of those affected by statutory processes inform future practice and reform.

5.4 - Summary of findings

The Children and Families Act 2014 sought to reform support systems for CYP with SEND by replacing Statements of SEN with EHCPs. It aimed to strengthen parental involvement in decision-making, promote integrated support across education, health, and social care and

ensure greater accountability and transparency. It also provided mechanisms for parents to challenge decisions through mediation and appeals. However, consistent with prior literature, the findings of this study suggest that the intended outcomes have not been fully realised in practice (House of Commons, 2019; Ahad et al., 2022; Capper & Sloan, 2022).

Mothers in this study described substantial challenges navigating the EHCNA process, highlighting a disconnect between the policy's stated objectives and its implementation at the local level. Many began the EHCNA with limited understanding of the process, relying heavily on personal networks or professional allies to interpret procedures and advocate effectively. This reliance signals potential inequities, as those without prior knowledge, access to support, or social and cultural capital may face significant disadvantages (Eccleston, 2016; Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Sales & Vincent, 2018).

The mothers emphasised that feeling included, listened to and respected by professionals led to more positive, collaborative experiences. When practitioners acknowledged parental expertise and encouraged open, reciprocal communication, the process became more inclusive and empowering. These findings reinforce the importance of culturally responsive approaches that ensure meetings are accessible and respectful of diverse backgrounds, avoiding practices that perpetuate maldistribution (unequal access to resources), misrecognition (failing to value parental knowledge), or misrepresentation (speaking for or over marginalised voices) (McGarry, 2024).

A key theme across the mothers' accounts was the emotional burden of advocacy. Mothers frequently described the EHCNA process as adversarial, requiring them to persistently '*fight*' for their child's rights. Empowerment was experienced differently: for one, it emerged through collaborative relationships and community networks; for another, it was shaped by resistance and informed navigation of institutional systems. These variations highlight how empowerment can transform parents from passive recipients of services to active participants in shaping their child's educational journey, particularly when systems create space for their voices to be heard and valued.

By applying a feminist lens, this research highlighted the gendered dimensions of these experiences. Institutional and societal norms position women as default caregivers, yet often fail to support or acknowledge the expertise they bring to formal processes (Carroll & Yeadon-Lee, 2022). As seen within the current study, several mothers described feeling excluded, dismissed, or undervalued by professionals, even when they held intimate knowledge of their child's needs. These experiences reflect broader structural inequalities, where women's voices

have been silenced or sidelined in professional settings (McHatton & Correa, 2005; Morgan & Stahmer, 2020).

While this research echoes some findings from prior parental literature concerning the EHCNA (Eccleston, 2016; Malkin, 2023; Ahad et al., 2022; House of Commons, 2019), it also highlights the societal burden placed on women, particularly in single-parent households, which impacts their ability to assume another role while being expected to manage caregiving, advocacy and emotional labour with minimal institutional support. Family Stress Theory (Hill, 1949) conceptualised how personal and environmental factors shaped the mothers' experiences. The findings indicated that access to supportive networks significantly buffered stress, whereas a lack of support amplified emotional strain and complicated their ability to engage with the process. This accentuates the importance of adopting a family-centred approach when completing the EHCNA, one that considers each family's unique circumstances to enhance parental engagement and understanding in the process.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

There has been much discussion concerning the experiences of the parental population throughout the EHCNA process, which have revealed supportive factors and systemic inequities (Eccleston, 2016; Malkin, 2023; Ahad et al., 2022). Importantly, this research contributes to a growing body of work that argues for the necessity of examining subgroups within parenthood, rather than treating parents as a monolithic category. By acknowledging differences in gender, cultural identity and caregiving structure, a better understanding can be gained into the unique barriers and facilitators each group faces (Crenshaw, 1991; May, 2010).

The current research explored the experiences of lone mothers navigating the EHCNA process. There were various factors which aligned with prior research including: the value of parental support which offered flexibility, transparency and empowerment (Eccleston, 2016); references towards wider systemic barriers within the SEND system (House of Commons, 2019) and feeling a lack of control throughout the process (Malkin, 2023). It is also important to note the mothers' experiences also demonstrated resilience and determination, with empowerment often emerging through relational support and persistent advocacy. There were also some distinct findings which emerged including: the challenge of solo decision making, isolation, a lack of practical familial support, increased emotional load and the impact of bias. While these factors applied to the experiences of lone mothers, these factors could also apply to other parental groups. Therefore, highlighting the need to differentiate parental voice within literature to ensure that the needs of all families are truly heard and acted upon.

For *The Children's Act 2014* to meet its intended goals, a cultural and structural shift is needed. This shift must focus on improving transparency, communication and flexibility in the EHCNA process, while ensuring that parents are genuinely empowered and supported in advocating for their children. This includes fostering culturally responsive professional practices that actively recognise and value diverse parental contributions, ensuring that inclusive meeting arrangements do not reinforce existing inequalities. The process must uphold equity by addressing both the distribution of resources and the recognition of lived expertise. Only through these efforts can the EHCNA process truly reflect the inclusive vision laid out in *The Children and Families Act 2014*.

Concluding statement:

I approached this study with an awareness of the distance between my life and the realities of lone motherhood. Yet through listening to these mothers' stories, I not only gained insight into their resilience and the barriers they face, but I also reflected on some of my own ideologies. I am deeply grateful to the participants for sharing their experiences so openly as this study would not have been possible without their honesty and trust. Their voices have strengthened my resolve to continue advocating for more inclusive, equitable practices within education. Their involvement has enlightened my practice through discussing services, community groups and forums within the LA that they found helpful.

As I progress in my career as an Educational Psychologist, I remain committed to ensuring that all parental perspectives, especially those from marginalised groups, are not only heard but meaningfully acted upon.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Search strategy

Initial research question: What are the experiences of lone mothers when interacting with the school system?						
Advanced search methods were used across 5 databases that cover educational, developmental and psychological research.						
Search Terms:	ERIC	PsychInfo	British Education Index	Web of Science	Child development adolescent studies	Total:
("lone mothers" OR "single mothers") AND ("special educational needs" OR "SEND") AND "experiences"	0	0	0	1	0	1
("lone mothers" OR "single mothers") AND ("special educational needs" OR "SEND")	1	0	1	4	2	8
The research question was refined to identify a wider range of articles concerning the general experiences of lone mothers when interacting within school systems as most of the identified papers in the first search did not pertain to the experiences of lone mothers parenting children with SEND.						
Refined research question: What are the experiences of lone mothers when interacting with the school system?						
(Single mother* OR lone mother*) AND child* AND school*	160	0	7	263	178	608

The titles and abstracts within articles from the search (N = 608) were screened for the presence of the key terms 'lone mother*', 'single mother*' and 'school*'

→ 526 articles were excluded due to the exclusion of the search terminology within titles and abstracts

Duplicate journals (N = 6) were also removed

A total of 82 full text articles were examined against the inclusion criteria.

→ 72 papers were excluded due to not meeting the inclusion criteria.

1 paper was excluded as the full text was inaccessible.

At this point 9 papers were included within the review.

Another screening took place in October 2024 to identify whether new articles had been published. Stemming from this, 2 papers were added to the review. A total of 11 papers were included within the review.

Appendix 2 – List of excluded studies

	Paper reference:	Exclusion Criteria	Database
1.	Dyches, T. T., Christensen, R., Harper, J. M., Mandleco, B., & Roper, S. O. (2016). Respite care for single mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 46, 812-824.	2, 4	ERIC
2.	Harkness, S., Gregg, P., & Fernández-Salgado, M. (2020). The rise in single-mother families and children's cognitive development: evidence from three British birth cohorts. *Child development*, 91(5), 1762-1785.	2, 4	ERIC
3.	McGroder, S. M. (2000). Parenting among low-income, African American single mothers with preschool-age children: Patterns, predictors, and developmental correlates. *Child development,* 71(3), 752-771..	2,4	ERIC
4.	Bodenhorn, H. (2007). Single parenthood and childhood outcomes in the mid-nineteenth-century urban South. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 38(1), 33-64.	2, 4, 5	Child development and Adolescent studies
5.	Kinard, E. M., & Reinherz, H. (1986). Effects of marital disruption on children's school aptitude and achievement. *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* 285-293.	2, 4	ERIC
6.	Lew, B., Forgatch, M. R., Patterson, G. R., & Fetrow, R. A. (1993). Parenting practices of single mothers: Mediators of negative contextual factors. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 55, 371-415.	2, 4	Child development and Adolescent studies
7.	De Loenzien, M. (2016). Lone motherhood and its educational outcomes for children in Vietnam. *Marriage & Family Review,* 52(1-2), 162-195.	2, 4	Web of Science
8.	Blake Berryhill, M. (2018). Single mothers' home-based school involvement: a longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Family Studies*, 24(2), 187-202.	2, 4	Web of Science

9.	Raymo, J. M. (2016). Single motherhood and children's health and school performance in Japan. *Marriage & family review,* 52(1-2), 64-88.	2	Web of Science
10.	Morgan, E. H. (2019). " Alls My Life I Has to Fight": Single Black Mothers Using Cultural Capital in Schools. *AERA Online Paper Repository.*	Inaccessible paper.	ERIC
11.	Polakow, V. (1994). *Lives on the edge: Single mothers and their children in the other America*. University of Chicago Press.	2, 5	ERIC
12.	Robinson, K. (2016). *Capabilities eroded and childcare dilemmas: A phenomenological study of low-income single student mothers in higher education in the United States and Germany*. Eastern Michigan University.	2	ERIC
13.	Millar, J., & Ridge, T. (2009). Relationships of care: Working lone mothers, their children and employment sustainability. *Journal of Social Policy*, 38(1), 103-121.	2, 4	Child development and Adolescent studies
14.	Mbamba, C. R., Yeboaa, P. A., & Ndemole, I. K. (2023). Autistic children in the care of single mothers: opportunities and barriers to safeguarding the welfare of special needs children. *Vulnerable children and youth studies*, 18(1), 46-57.	2	Child development and Adolescent studies
15.	Standing, K. (1999). Lone mothers and 'parental'involvement: A contradiction in policy?. *Journal of Social Policy,* 28(3), 479-495.	2, 4	Child development and Adolescent studies
16.	Jimenez-Lagares, I., Morgado, B., & Gonzalez, M. (2009). Families of single, never-married mothers: Circumstances, experiences and children's psychological adjustment. *CULTURA Y EDUCACION*, 21(4), 403-415.	2	Web of Science
17.	Franz, M., & Lensche, H. (2003). Psychosocial distress and symptoms of single mothers and their children in a large community sample. *Zeitschrift fur Psychosomatische Medizin und Psychotherapie*, 49(2), 115-138.	2	Web of Science

18.	Radey, M., Langenderfer-Magruder, L., & Brown Speights, J. (2021). "I don't have much of a choice": Low-income single mothers' COVID-19 school and care decisions. *Family Relations*, 70(5), 1312-1326.	2	Web of Science
19.	Creighton, M. J., Park, H., & Teruel, G. M. (2009). The role of migration and single motherhood in upper secondary education in Mexico. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(5), 1325-1339.	2, 4	Web of Science
20.	Jacobs, C., & Daniels, D. (2020). Their capital has value, too: Exploring parental educational support in low-socioeconomic single-mother families. *Journal of Education*, (80), 160-175.	2,	Web of Science

Appendix 3 – Ethical Approval

The University of **Nottingham**

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1595R**

Thursday 25th April 2023

Dear Taniqua Woods & Yvonne Francis

Ethics Committee Review
Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study exploring the experiences of lone mothers throughout the Educational Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process'

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research, then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 4 – Interview Schedule

Introduction: *Initially, I'll ask participants for verbal confirmation that they're willingly volunteering for the study. I'll emphasize their freedom to opt out at any time without repercussions. I'll also reassure them that the recorded interviews will be securely stored and deleted after analysis. In this semi-structured interview, I'll use guiding questions designed to prompt detailed and expansive responses, encouraging participants to share their experiences thoroughly. While I'll keep my verbal input minimal, I'll occasionally probe for more details on intriguing points they mention.*

1. **Please can you start by telling me why you decided to engage in this process?**

    - Whose decision was it to begin with?

2. **Can you tell me about your role within this process?**

    - How would you rate your knowledge of the process?

    - What aided your understanding of the process?

    - Did you make any preparations before entering into any meetings?

3. **Can you tell me about any expectations you had going into the process? What were these based on?**

    - How did you feel going into the process?

    - What was your first impression going into the meeting?

    - How equipped did you feel to engage within this process? What do you think contributed to this?

    - How were you understood within the meeting?

4. **Can you talk me through the first meeting that you had? Who was involved? What did you do during that meeting? How did you feel during/after?**

    - What struck you? OR Did anything strike you?

    - What happened after the meeting?

    - How close was it to what you expected?

5. **Can you tell me about your experiences of working with different individuals within the EHC process?**

    *Avoid the term professional

6. **Thinking about your experiences of working with different individuals, what would you say is the difference between a positive EHCP process and a negative EHCP process?**

    - What things were helpful?

    - What things were challenging?

7. **What were your avenues of support throughout this process?**

Debrief: *Is there anything else that you would like to add? Do you want anything that you have said to be removed from the record? Are there any positive or uncomfortable feelings that have*

arisen based on our discussion today? I would like to meet with you when I have transcribed and analysed our conversation today to give you the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings that may occur. Are you happy for me to contact you to complete this next step? You are free to make contact with me before this time. My contact details can be found on the information sheet if needed.

Appendix 5 – Research Poster
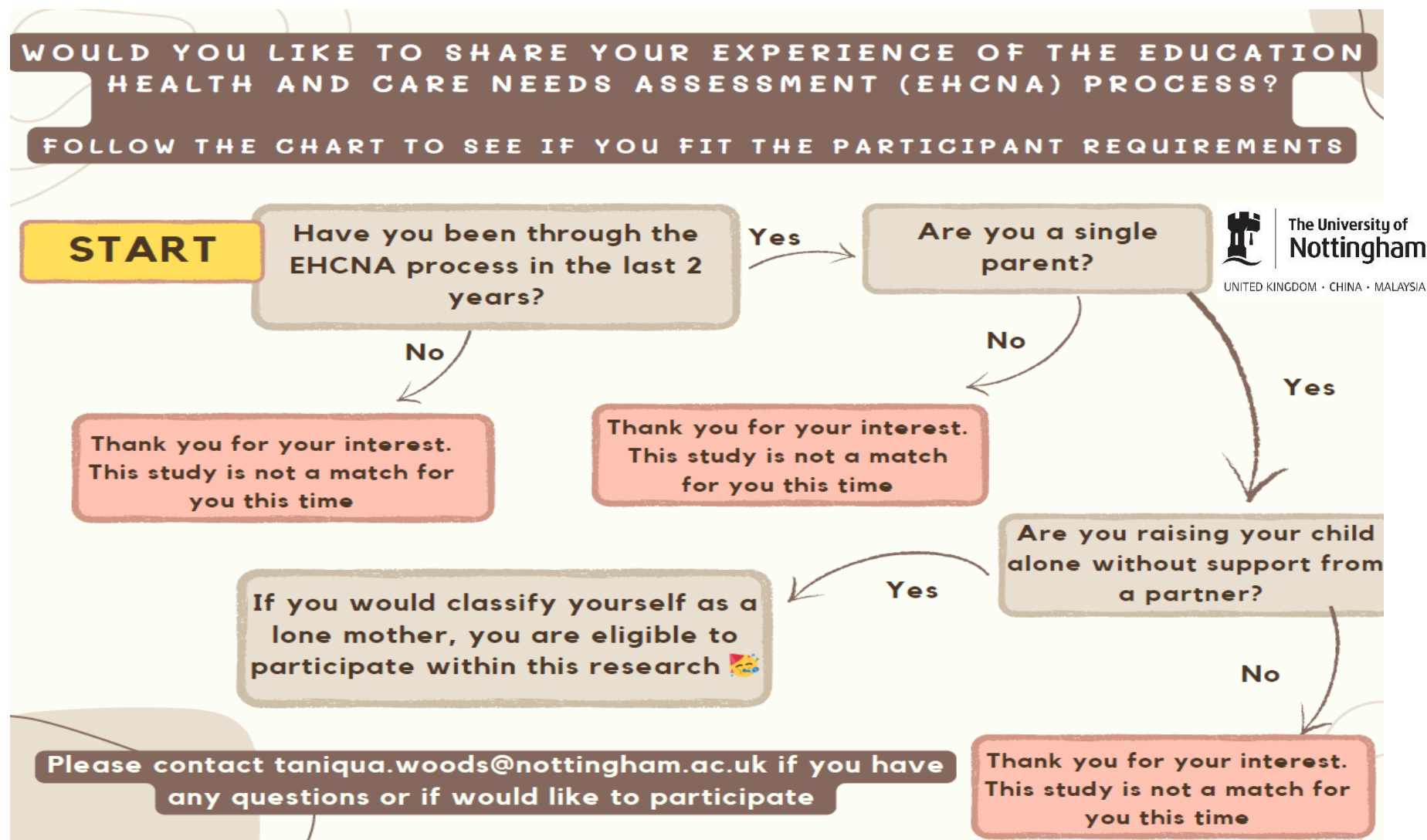
Appendix 6 – Information Sheet and consent form

Project Title: *An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study exploring the experiences of lone mothers throughout the Educational Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process*

Researcher: *Taniqua Woods*

Email: Taniqua.woods@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: *Yvonne Francis*

Email: *yvonne.francis@nottingham.ac.uk*

This is an invitation to take part in a research study on the experiences of lone mothers throughout the Education, Health and Care needs assessment process. This piece of research will be conducted by Taniqua Woods, a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), and will be supervised by Dr. Yvonne Francis, Educational Psychologist and University supervisor. Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

This research is interested in gaining your experiences of the education, health and care needs assessment process because it is important to hear about your thoughts and feelings throughout the process from your perspective. If you participate, you will be asked to engage in an interview with Taniqua in person or online (Zoom or Microsoft Teams). Throughout the interview, your voice will be recorded through using a password-protected microphone that only Taniqua has access to. These recordings will be stored in a password protected folder on Taniqua's laptop that only she has access to. Throughout the interview, you will be asked questions to help you recall your experiences throughout the education, health and care needs assessment process.

The whole interview procedure will last for approximately 45 minutes-1 hour.

The interview audio will be transcribed and anonymised so that you will not be identified within the write-up of the study. The original recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed so that you will not be identified. Any details that you share about the school or other professionals will also be anonymised to maintain confidentiality.

On your interview day, Taniqua will arrange a time to contact you by telephone after she has analysed your interview data so that you have the opportunity to check her interpretation of what you said within your interview.

Your rights as a participant:

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

If you choose to complete your interview online, I am obliged to make you aware that there is always a potential risk of intrusion by outside agents, for example through hacking, and therefore the possibility of being identified.

You have the right to withdraw your participation from the research at any time without explanation.

You have the right to request for your information not to be used in the write-up of the study up until the point of data analysis as all identifying information will have been changed.

You have the right to ask questions about the study before, during and after you have completed the interview.

Confidentiality will not be maintained if something is shared that suggests that you as a participant or others are at risk of harm.

 If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask the researcher Taniqua Woods before agreeing to participate. I can also be contacted after your participation at the above email address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Research Question: How do lone mothers interpret their experiences of the Educational Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process

This study is being carried out by Taniqua Woods, Trainee Educational Psychologist, as part of a Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Nottingham.

Participant Name	
Age	
Ethnicity	
When did you complete the EHCNA process?	

Please read and complete the participant consent form.

Please place a tick (✓) or a cross (X) in each box	
I have read and understood the project information sheet.	
Any questions I have had about this study have been answered satisfactorily.	
I confirm that I have undergone the EHCNA process within the past 2 years.	
I confirm that I was the only parent who participated within the EHCNA process.	
I understand that the interview will last approximately one hour.	
Right to withdraw: I confirm that I am participating within this study voluntary (without coercion). I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any point without explanation. I also understand that I can request for my interview information not to be used in the study after my interview has been completed up until the point of data analysis. I understand that my interview data will be destroyed If I decide to withdraw from the study during or after the interview.	
Confidentiality: I understand that my interview data will be anonymised to that my identity is protected. In the event that I share something that suggests that I or others are at risk of harm, I understand that Taniqua will seek guidance from her research supervisor and follow the necessary safeguarding procedures.	
Privacy: I understand that my voice will be recorded during the interview and that Taniqua may write some notes by hand. I understand that I will be given a pseudonym (fictitious name) when the voice recording is transcribed to conceal my identity and I agree to the use of anonymised quotes within the study. I understand that any details that may reveal my identity will not be included within the write up of the study. These factors include: my name, the name of the school and any professionals I may mention. I understand that basic details about me (i.e. ethnicity, age) will be summarised in the methodology section.	
Data storage: I understand that Taniqua will keep any notes and recordings in a locked folder on her laptop that only she has access to through using Wise Folder Hider Software to encrypt the data. I understand that these transcripts will be reviewed by an independent researcher, Taniqua's university supervisor and university assessors. I understand that Taniqua will destroy all original recordings and notes that include my name after she has transcribed the data using pseudonyms. In adherence to the Data Protection Act (2018), All electronic versions of anonymous documents will be stored on the University of Nottingham's secure network for a period of up to 25 years, and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes.	
Data usage: I understand that the results of this study: - Will be used for Taniqua's Doctoral Thesis - Will be shared with professionals from the Educational Psychology Service - Will be made available to other professionals working in children's services within Birmingham's Local Authority	

Participant Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher: Taniqua Woods

Email: Taniqua.woods@nottingham.ac.uk

University Supervisor
email: yvonne.francis@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 7 – Reflexive journal extract

13.9.24 – Ayanna's experience

- Ayanna's story highlighted how deep issues such as bias, prejudice and power impact schooling experiences, especially for children from ethnic minorities who have SEND needs.

- My own background influences how I interpret these stories. I resonate with this experience as my brother had a similar experience growing up. Therefore, when interpreting this experience I need to be mindful not to impose my own views or assumptions on Ayanna's experience.

- Ayanna's frustration and determination really stuck with me. I felt a mix of admiration and discomfort—admiration for her strength, discomfort because it highlighted that these types of inequalities are still prevalent in this world.

- My reactions could influence how I analyse the data. I need to stay aware of my emotions so they don't push me toward a biased interpretation.

- This conversation reminded me to question my own perspectives and ask more questions to gain additional clarity to make sure that I represent participants' voices as authentically as possible.

Appendix 8 – Annotated Transcript Examples for each participant

Appendix 8a - Annotated Transcript Example – Anne

Experiential statements	Original Transcript Excerpt	Initial notings
Intimidated by the Local Authority Support from school	**Anne:** When we went for the EHCP and then they declined us, we did mediation. We had to then wait for our mediator to get hold of the counsellors mediator. I was really nervous. I was thinking, Oh my God, I'm going to sit in front of the City Council and they're going to be looking down at me and they're going to. But it wasn't. It was their mediator working with our mediator. And then us. So I asked the school, can I come to you? **Taniqua:** Mmmm.	Could the period of waiting impact feelings of nervousness? Could Anne be nervous about feeling judged? Anne felt as though she would be positioned beneath the LA and viewed in a negative way Positioning – The LA holds the power Mediation experience Support from the school Judgment
Personal experience of mediation Open communication Difficulty attending meetings	**Anne:** 'Cause, I didn't want to be sat in my house feeling like someone was either looking down at me or judging me or whatever. Not that they would have, but just all the thoughts go running through your head when you do them sort of things and umm I went to school and did it with the SENCO. But they they was really nice. So their mediator decided that they was overturning it. It was to be overturned. There was too much evidence to basically look at over. Look like basically to dismiss it and say no again. Umm and then. But before that that we kept coming back for dates. And because I've got one, I had one child in nursery. And the one at the other school, it's quite hard to go between on certain days.	Repetition of the phrase 'looking down' – Was this preconception based on prior experiences? Anne tried to anticipate what the mediation meeting would be like and felt comfortable enough to seek school support throughout the process. Anne seemed surprised that the mediator was 'nice'. Interesting wording. Dismissed could equate to being disregarded and unheard. Family strain – Difficulty setting dates to attend meetings Anne's family circumstance meant that she had to be creative in problem solving to attend meetings

Appendix 8b – Annotated Transcript example - Ayanna

Experiential statements	Original Transcript Excerpt	Initial notings
	Taniqua: Can you tell me about your experience of the process?	
Isolation throughout the process	**Ayanna:** Yeah, yeah. It is a very lonely process. I'm not gonna lie. It is lonely because, you know, you are almost walking into the unknown. I think if the school do it and you don't have to get involved and stuff like that, it's probably a bit much more easier if you've got the support of the school, if you haven't got the support of the school. It's. Yeah, much more difficult. It was the the unknown. Do you know what I mean? You didn't really know what to expect. You just get a decision at the end of it by e-mail or letter. Just to say why? But again, it's very vague.	Feeling alone

Repetition of the word 'lonely' suggests a sense of bravery to enter into the process alone.

Ayanna felt uninformed, but still felt it necessary to undergo the process.

Ayanna seemed to think that a school-led EHCNA meant that parental involvement was less intensive

Lack of school support

Ayanna believed that she would have had an easier experience if she had the support of the school

The lack of information increased feelings of uncertainty.

The repetition of the phrase 'the unknown' indicated that a school led EHCNA would provide more support possibly through increased understanding of the process.

Ayanna seemed disappointed in the lack of reasoning provided in a 'no to issue' decision. |
Into the unknown		
School support makes a difference		
Lack of information sharing		

Appendix 8c – Annotated Transcript example - Tori

Experiential statements:	Original Transcript Excerpt:	Initial notings:
	Taniqua How did they show you that they understood what you were going through?	
Feeling heard and understood	**Tori** So when I just told them about. It was just having someone to listen and understand. I can 't remember what was said because we're going back a while now but when I would explain erm the way Ruby is and how certain friendships really get to her and how she deals with that after they just understood. They worked alongside her and they were just sympathetic. And the main thing was they just understood and listened	The word 'just' suggests that it had taken a while for Tori to feel heard and understood Tori was able to impart parental knowledge of her child's needs Collaborative. Done 'with' and not 'to' Repetition of 'just' 'listen' 'understand'. Key words to summarise what was helpful. It sounds like it was important for Tori to feel understood and heard
	Taniqua Yeah that makes sense and it makes a word of difference doesn't it?	
The sharing of knowledge	**Tori** Yes it does. And it's their knowledge as well if that makes sense.	Receiving knowledge from a variety of perspectives was helpful.
	Taniqua That's really lovely to hear actually. How did you feel like going into the process. I know that you said that you had prior experiences so can you tell me about how you felt going through the process again?	
Multi-agency collaboration Multi-agency support	**Tori** Ermm this time the process was different. And that's because I had. I'd like to call it a team actually. A fantastic team that came together to support me and Ruby through the EHCP assessment process.	Comparison to prior experience Team: collaboration. Repeated to show the strength of unity Importance of feeling supported alongside Ruby

Appendix 8d – Annotated Transcript example – Natalie

Experiential statements:	Original Transcript Excerpt:	Initial notings:
Relief through trusting professionals Finding it difficult to engage in the process	Natalie - Well, the fact that she said it was parent led, I **was expecting to like have a say** like, you know, make some big decisions and I didn't, I didn't really know what what I was deciding to be honest. So I'm kind of glad that it wasn't actually parent led to be honest because **they got on with** what they were talking about and I just trusted that they knew what they were doing and after the meeting, I just left them to it. And yeah, just thought I didn't really need to be in the meeting to be honest. Taniqua Fuller - Yeah, what I'm hearing is that it sounded more like they had a handle of things and how did it feel? You feeling like you had to almost take a back seat. Am I interpreting that correctly?	Natalie was expecting to be involved with some type of decision making. She misunderstood the intention of the EHCNA as her voice should have been central to the process, but this was not her experience. The wording 'kind of' suggests uncertainty in her feelings about the situation Natalie trusted the professionals involved. However, she felt as though her input was not needed. Was Natalie happy to take a step back or did she feel that she was not able to assert her voice within the conversation? Active listening – checking to see whether my interpretation of Natalie's experience was correct?
Unsure about the role of the parent Personal factors which hinder involvement Confusion about the process	Natalie - Yeah, erm it felt good, to be honest, because I I didn't. I didn't know what I was supposed to be contributing to it so I was happy to take a back seat because one I was ill anyway from the COVID jab and I just. I didn't understand where we were in the process or what, what was going on. So I was quite happy. I was quite relieved to be honest.	Parental knowledge – Natalie did not understand her contribution to the process Parental illness played a role with levels of engagement in the process. Feeling relief through not having the pressure to make big decisions Would Natalie's feelings change if she had a greater level of understanding?

Appendix 9 – A summary of Master Themes for each participant

Appendix 9a – Master Theme Summary – Anne

Master Theme: Parental support			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Being held throughout the process	Feeling understood	519	'I really understand how much you struggle'
		525	'But the school he's at now really understood'
		745	'Some of the outcomes that she's written for him is what I was hoping for'
	Feeling cared for	516-517	'She looks like she's gonna bite me head off. And we got in there and she was completely the opposite'
		58	'I see a hell of a lot of difference and care than I did in the old school'
		520	'You can tell he's really loved'
	I'm not alone	88	'So I asked the school, can I come to you?'
		773	'So it wasn't just me, it felt like I had other people.'
		771	'Just to feel like someone's on our side'
		494-495	'the main people obviously is one of my friends, my mum, the school, the youth centre. Everyone that was involved really'
Parental networks	School support	133	'They do everything they can for him'
		136	'Off their own back'
		139	'Their trying their best to get him everything'
		780	'They're trying to include him, not exclude him'
	Support from friends	207	'She's like my book of knowledge'
		504	'And my friends like have you asked them this or just reminding me of things I could ask'
Frequent and transparent communication	Relaxed atmosphere	659	'And it was pretty much, it was formal in a way but informal for me, if that makes sense.'

		664-665	'I thought, oh, they're going to be really serious but they was like really laid back and there was, they just spoke to you like how you speak to your friend, really like <u>really chilled atmosphere</u> type thing'
		685	'it was all <u>pretty much relaxed</u>, to be honest'
		474	'<u>If I sat down</u> I probably would have understood it more'
	Open communication	184	'She's absolutely brilliant, I can't fault her. She's been there anytime I needed. <u>Any questions</u>? She's been there.'
		617	'We're all in one <u>linked</u> email'
	Collaboration	173	'You've got the school as a professional <u>helping</u> you as well'
		259-260	'The SENCO helped me by saying, so what does he do when this happens? Like you know she was just sort of <u>breaking it down</u> so they had more understanding'
		221	'they just <u>pointed me towards</u>, because they've got two family support workers that work for the school as well.'
		802-803	'the Sen coach at the school that he's at now and the Sen coach at that school <u>work together</u>'
Taking time to get it right	Being thorough	101-102	''cause I remember the woman saying. We can't. We wouldn't be able to fit all that in in three weeks. <u>It'd be impractical. It would be a rushed job. We can't do that</u>'
		699-700	'So, after that then, an educational psychologist had to go into the school. Which I had phone calls with her about three times'

		746	'So the help that he needs that she's put on there is quite good. Her report was very in depth'
		748	'Her report was <u>very in depth</u>… if I remember correctly, his report is like 13 pages long'
		802-803	'the Sen coach at the school that he's at now and the Sen coach at that school work together'
		752-753	'the work she's put in there for the school and what helping is, is <u>quite extensive</u>'
		111	'Just as many professionals really on board as possible'
		228	'when the SENCO come to put the mediation pack together, there was a <u>hell of a lot of stuff more</u> on top'

Master Theme: Empowerment			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Supported through advocacy	Advocacy through family support services	224	'The one family support worker helped me fill out the initial lot'
	Advocacy through school	151	'She said I ain't taking a decline. We're gonna do the next step now'
	Advocacy through friends	220	'she basically said do it and I just. I just went to school the one day and said can I put in a permanent EHCP'
	Advocacy through work colleagues	507-508	'How is she supposed to support other people. If she ain't getting any support herself'
Empowerment towards others	Encouraging others to become advocates	856	'I have <u>helped</u> other parents.'
		861-862	'you need to like call and speak to the teacher and the deputy head to whatever and, you know, <u>express your concern</u>'
		878	'I said, so you need to just speak to the SENCO about him and <u>voice your concerns</u> and don't be afraid'

		881	'It's made me feel a bit more like I'm getting people to have their voice rather than just be like sitting at the back like I used to'
Making my voice heard	Parental advocacy	252-253	'When I went into mediation, I had written down about two pages of points of in case I've forgotten everything or anything'
		413	'And I just said to her like, I feel like you've just isolated my child'
		781	'I rang up to see where his report was because I still haven't received his draft at the moment'
		401	'So he doesn't go there. And then I said to her, I feel like you're just excluding my child out of this group'

Master Theme: I'm not in control here			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
I'm not a professional	They know, I don't	176-177	'I'll put my trust in them thinking. Well, they know what they're doing. Like this is all new to me'
		704	'I don't think I portrayed Charlie as best as I could. But she was going to see him'
	Pressure	798	'They was trying so desperately to get me to send him to a mainstream school'
	Tokenistic involvement	839	'I haven't had to really work with them'
		840-841	'I've just had to basically just be a part of like a meeting or something, whatever'
Undesirable feelings	Feeling isolated	6-7	'His school wasn't very forthcoming'
	Feeling defeated	148	'when they said to me, no, we can't have it all. OK I'll leave it.' – 148
		195	'I thought, oh, I will leave it'
		902	'I could have just literally let it go'

		850-852	'I was pretty shocked at the first process, because when they said no I sort of just took that as a no. I didn't really process the phone call properly'
		487-488	'How many parents have took the no and just accepted the no and not really understood what the next avenue was that you could go down for the EHCP'
		46-47	'And 'cause the SENCO had an educational psychologist in to see him. She'd recommended stuff, but it was all stuff that we're already doing with him'
	Feeling rejected	36-37	'She'd have actually applied for it in September, she wanted to give it that bit longer, but when we actually went with the paperwork, initially <u>they denied us</u>'
		124-126	'And then be told you've been declined by the ehcp unless it's all what grounds of you basing that on? He's just been diagnosed with autism, doesn't that go for the EHCP as well? She went. That won't make a difference'
		186-187	'It did feel like it <u>was a bit of a kick in the teeth</u> because I thought, but he's got diagnosis. He's like, it's not like he's on the pathway waiting. He's got them'
		362	When he last went to the first club, they haven't kicked him out, but we've had to sort of get a routine with his medication'
		381	'His scouts group recently have sort of not turned their back on him, but kind of like. Told him that he can't come unless you're with him'
	Worry	515	'She looked really scary'
		435-436	'Yeah, 'cause, I understand that it was for his safety as well and I <u>would be really worried about him</u> and I'd be wanting to ring every time, every

			minute of the day to make sure he's behaving'
		577-578	'I just feel like if he got an EHCP and they did apply for him to move, that'd be like another transition. And then, Y7's gonna be another transition, so'
		417	'I decided to pull him out because his behaviour at school was getting restrained, restrained, restrained and I thought, Oh my God, imagine if he's over there. I'm over here. You know it. I could never rest. I'd be constantly thinking. Is he OK? Is he OK? Is he OK? And then I thought, I'm not putting myself through it. I'm not putting him through it. So I pulled him out'
Negative wider impact on the family	Strain on the family	95-97	'But before that that we kept coming back for dates. And because I've got one, I had one child in nursery. And the one at the other school, it's quite hard to go between on certain days.'
		511	'How am I supposed to give adequate advice and support if I can't get supported myself?'
		726-728	'my other child, it was very, very hectic with him. Going to a new school, starting school, and meeting and greeting teachers. I didn't know when he was going to be at home or when he was going to be at school. And his birthday was that week as well. And it was all, everything was just so busy'
		758-759	'it'll be more stress on Charlie and myself sending him to a mainstream school than sending him to a school that already would understand him'
	Loss of friendships	70	'But just him being kicked out of this one has caused a lot of grief because like he had friends in his school'
	Unfair consequences	323-325	'I would have liked the EHCP to have bought him the ability to have a one to one 'cause he works better when he's got someone sat next to him, which, like I said, the school hasn't got the

			funding for that. They're using whatever they can scrape together that day'
	Negative impact on mental health	274-276	'So I had to get him to stop ringing me because it was really making me ill like it was making me. I could hear him screaming when he's being restrained. And I said to my mum, this is ruining my mental health like I might as well just have him at home'
	Self-blame	680	'that's not on them, that's on me sort of thing'
		705	'I was kind of like, oh, I don't really know. I know he's my child. I felt a bit bad because he's obviously my child'
		734-735	'I didn't want it to get to the point where I was holding up a process that needed to be sorted out ASAP'
		871	'I think it's me. I think it's me that's got the. I always thought it was Charlie's dad that it came from'

Master Theme: A power imbalance			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Lack of resources	Navigating a difficult process	114	'The process is quite hard'
	It feels like a fight	5	'We have been battling for diagnosis'
		121	'we've been pushing for to get him help'
		691	'we won them over'
		697	'the mediation meant that we won over the SEND panel looking at him'
		770	'we've been fighting another school, the other school for so long'
		827	it's been since July when we, when we won our first mediation'
	Jumping through hoops	163	'you have to go through so many hoops to just get an assessment'

		224-225	'obviously she's only a support worker, <u>she doesn't know much about special educational needs</u>. That's another reason I got a no'
		630-631	'So basically trying to go around the situation, not through the situation'
		237-238	'We hadn't built that much of a rapport up at school for him to get that. So all that information had to be <u>built up over them months'</u>
	Lack of funding	21-22	'I wanted the resources within the school to be able to be there. I mean, there's not a lot of funding out there now, especially for schools'
Feeling unsupported	Lack of empathy	855	'It was like, you've not got it, <u>I'll see you later</u> sort of thing'
		192-193	'she said, well, that doesn't matter now. When I told her he'd got his diagnosis in the morning, it <u>just felt like a disregard</u>, like in wording in the way she'd possibly worded it'
	Pressure	798	'They was trying so <u>desperately</u> to get me to send him to a mainstream school'
Discriminated against and treated unfairly	Positioning	85-87	'I thought I was really nervous. I was thinking, Oh my God, I'm going to sit in front of Birmingham City Council and they're going to be <u>looking down at me'</u>
		90-91	'I didn't want to be sat in my house feeling like someone was either <u>looking down at me or judging me</u> or whatever'
		537-538	'she had like a <u>vendetta</u> against me. She was nice to my face, but behind my back she was. There's a whole list of things she's done to me'
		552	'And everything, everything was like, oh, you come to my office. You come to me'

	Parental blame	520-521	'even gone as far as blaming my parenting on his disabilities, saying like, there's nothing wrong with him. It's the way you deal with him'

Master Theme: Shaping a child-centred process for the future			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Operating in my child's best interests	An EHCP brings security and protection	13-19	'The reason why I wanted to gain the EHCP was if he does have to go into a mainstream, I wanted some security and help for him. 'cause I understand that kids within educational healthcare plan, um, are more protected basically'
		54-55	'That's another reason why I got an EHCP as well was to try and gain him access to a special needs school. If he could get in one because obviously the provision, the staff are more trained'
		144-146	'the other children that are in his school that have got EHCPs, that's where them teachers are meant to be. But they're using the ones that have got like an hour or so spare to give to Charlie, but it's kinda hard like it's, it is difficult because he's not funded for it'
	Getting schooling right	64-66	'If you went into a mainstream school, even, she said to the mediator, he would not last a week. He would not make it a week, and he'd be distressing. 'cause he'd be sent from another school. Back probably back to where that he is now'
		278	'Not that I would want him at home 'cause. I want him to have his education and make friends and stuff'
		808	'how could he go from being on a one hour timetable to going to a mainstream school? It isn't going to work out for him at all'

		793-794	'what was the point of going for an EHCP if you're going to shove him where, you know, where I don't want him to be or where I don't think he's going to <u>fit in to gain the best education</u> he can get?'
		775	'being like, basically <u>to get him the best education he can</u> because he's already been failed for so long'
		753	'And I said to her, just out of your professional opinion, do you think that, because obviously I know it's down to me, but I wanted someone that's seen children like Charlie on a daily basis to give me their opinion'
		353	'But I feel like <u>he needs hands on learning'</u>
		321	'I would have liked the EHCP to have bought him. The the ability to have a one to one 'cause <u>he works better when he's got someone sat next to him'</u>
		302-303	'Are these the sort of things that I wanted them to help with? Yeah. Like someone with him sitting down and learning, he has to have a one teacher sit with him. Otherwise, he'll wander around the class'
		771	'someone's <u>looking at Charlie' best interests</u>, someone's trying to gain him the <u>best that they can</u> for him'

Appendix 9b – Master Theme Summary – Ayanna

Master Theme: Shaping a child-centred process for the future			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
The importance of improving the process	Information sharing	150-151	'If I knew about that, I would have advocated for that'
		450-451	'I just think that more support and more information on how we actually do get EHCP'
	Open communication	552	'It makes a big difference, just that line of communication'
		589	'it would help if parents are more aware of it and stuff'
	Provide alternatives	581-584	'So although they might not be able to meet the threshold of an EHCP, put some recommendation in place or put some funding towards that child saying you know what he can't have an EHCP, but he can have this rather than just leaving it'

Master Theme: Empowerment			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Making my voice heard	Parental advocacy	226	'Then I'm having to fight like it just seems like a constant battle'
		162-163	'it was a little bit daunting, but I think that the amount of evidence that I had like, it was really hard for the local authority to challenge'
		189-191	'Obviously me being me because I'm not going to take that kind of thing. I challenged it. It went to appeal and I challenged it'
		321	'I can counteract that'
		369	'Obviously I counteracted that'
		131	'I did appeal and it did go through mediation'

		202	'I'm asking them for information in the process of that'
		303-304	'then having to work and stuff like then having to send, like, thousands and thousands of emails to all these people. It gets a lot'
		532	'I emailed the SENCO and I told her about his needs and stuff like that'

Master Theme: *I'm not in control here*			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Undesirable feelings	Worry	175	'He's going to find it so difficult'
		499-501	'they just need to know that they're adding towards the children's trauma and it's going to have an impact on them later on in life'
	Disappointment	81	'It was a little bit pointless'
		104-105	'I don't think you could see a picture in one lesson'
	Frustration	31	'all about funding and it just made it difficult'
		128	'even still it still got turned down after you've got 150 pages of documents and evidence'
		154	'you didn't put these things in place'
		110	'That's not fair. I think it kind of puts the kids at a disadvantage'
		344	'Traditional teaching does not work for children with autism. It's a known fact. It's proven'
	Disheartened due to a lack of compassion	219-220	'He's not cared for'
	Feeling unheard and misunderstood	44-46	'And I do agree that family support in the home was needed. It didn't take away the need for help at school'

		64-65	'My son doesn't need to go to a PRU. He's autistic'
		140	'he's always had difficulties since reception. I asked for one to one in school'
		423	'Online learning did not work during covid for children with autism and ADHD. Online learning was not feasible for them. So why would you put the same kids in that same situation to do online learning?'
	Parental blame	41	'Now I feel like it's a me problem'
		52-53	'And now I just felt like it was kind of like me. I was the problem or the family home environment was the problem and it it's not'
I don't get it	Lack of understanding of the process	114	'I'm not an expert in that field. That's not my domain'
		316	'It was the unknown'
		334	'I was walking into it blind'
	Lack of control	166-167	'It was up in the air for me'
	Helplessness	311-312	'if you haven't got the support of the school. It's. Yeah, much more difficult'
		467-468	'the SENCOs kind of like at the bottom of the food chain aren't they when it comes to these things'
Negative impact on the family	Financial strain	639-640	'Having to pay just to meet our child's needs, we're put at a disadvantage which is not fair'
	Feeling alone	571	'There's not really a team at home'
	Exhaustion	577	'It's exhausting. It takes a lot'
	Mental health of the child	381	'At the time his mental health did deteriorate'

Master Theme: A power imbalance			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Discriminated against and treated unfairly	Injustice	88-90	'So he had an EP assessment and whatever else and the EP assessment they had. Again, I didn't necessarily agree with'
		250	'He shouldn't have to suffer'
		324-326	'How does a child of 10 years old get permanently excluded with a diagnosis of autism? Even the local authority says she's never heard of anything like this'
		614-616	'And why should the kids have to feel like they're part of the business? Because do you know what I mean? If it's all about money and stuff like that, like, it's almost like gambling with the children's lives and their happiness and their well-being'
		627-629	'I was talking to for her to do an assessment for Kayden in a children's centre and stuff away from school. So she's doing it 1:1 and stuff like that. So school doesn't have their influence and stuff like that. I want to do it independently, but is it fair that parents have to pay?'
	Prejudice	266-267	'And he's looking at me like. Because I'm in authority'
		263-265	'then you've got me as a mum and I'm an assistant head teacher. And then I think there's an underlying prejudice that, you know, I'm a black woman in this role. And I'm challenging the head teacher'
	Positioning	270	'He's trying to get one up on me'
Lack of resources	Lack of funding	26-27	'it's a funding issue now. So he had to go in the next batch of funding to get his EP assessment and then to get an assessment from the OT'
		493	'It all comes down to money at the detriment of the children'

	Limited organisational support	390-391	'resources at X are stretched or their services are closing down because they can't afford to fund them and stuff like that'
		413-414	'So there was limited support. So I did try and contact like honestly Google Googling everywhere like even just for him to go to like a centre or something so we can do something in the daytime just so he gets a little bit of routine and stuff like that'
		419	'It was very limited'
		397-398	'They haven't been in contact at all'
Feeling unsupported	Lack of school support	14	'There was limited support'
		49-50	'I think the need was more in school because there wasn't anything in the home that was too extreme'
		308	'Very lonely process'
		372	'the school wasn't supportive, so it was a bit, yeah, difficult'
		200-201	'the school was now sweating because they need to go and get evidence of what they have done and what they haven't done'

Appendix 9c – Master Theme Summary - Tori

Master Theme: Parental support			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Being held	Feeling heard	196	'There are people out there who will just <u>listen</u>'
	Feeling understood	136	'They just understood'
		134-135	'just having someone to <u>listen and understand</u>'
		129	'They <u>understood</u> both me and Tori'
		137	'the main thing was they just <u>understood and listened</u>'
		236	'you have to feel <u>understood</u>'
	Feeling included	250	'You don't feel alone'
		247	'Because you can feel quite closed off. If that makes sense'
Parental networks	Multi-agency support	144-146	'I'd like to call it a <u>team</u> actually. A <u>fantastic team</u> that came together to <u>support me and Tori</u> through the EHCP assessment process'
		192-193	'So it was just really nice because it was all smiles and they just <u>all come together to help out</u>. It was fantastic to be honest'
		228	'I had a <u>fantastic team</u> behind me'
Frequent and transparent communication	Transparency	184	'He did <u>inform</u> me'
	Information sharing	230-231	'It gets you to know your child more'
		140	'And it's their knowledge as well if that makes sense'
	Collaboration	144-145	'I'd like to call it a <u>team</u> actually. A <u>fantastic team</u> that came together to <u>support me and Tori</u> through the EHCP assessment process'

		104-106	'she just watched Tori do her things whilst I spoke to the teacher, went into some depth of Tori's precious education and how Tori was in younger years, at previous primary schools and you know so there was forms I filled in'
		114	'then we had the educational psychologist come out to the home, I <u>had a good chat</u> with him'
		245	'it's important that the parent also feels supported'
		192-193	'So it was just really nice because it was all smiles and they just <u>all come together to help out</u>. It was fantastic to be honest'
		228	'I had a <u>fantastic team</u> behind me'
		190	'i'm very sociable you see. I'll talk to anyone'
	Considering family circumstances	102-103	'They also took you know my problems into account with my disability'
		210-213	'breakdowns of my own personal relationships, then I just found out my mum's been diagnosed with lung cancer as well, so going through your own stuff, to have to be dealing with EHCP because of how fantastic they were it took that pressure off me whilst I was also going through my stuff if that makes sense'
	Building relationships	253	'that <u>good solid relationship</u> with the parent will filter through nicely'
		248-249	'But then when you're working with both male and female people to do the EHC process, you don't feel alone and you feel understood as a parent'
Taking time to get it right	Being thorough	183	'Then I had Paul come, who was the educational psychologist who came and I had a meeting with him twice'
		126	'Yeah I've had loads of input with Tori'

Master Theme: I'm not in control here			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
I don't get it	A difficult process	30	'EHCPs are very hard to get'
	Knowledge of EHCNA	157	'My knowledge could be better'
Negative impact on the family	Strain on the family	218	'My plate is tipping to be honest'
		36-37	'It was awful because with me as well I have a disability so having to constantly go to different schools, different meetings and then having to deal with Tori everyday anyway'
		40	'she had various hospital admissions for Erm taking overdoses then we had the self-harm. Dealing with Tori's mood which fluctuated. Ermm it was very stressful on the family anyway'
		159-160	'because of the other stuff that I have going on personally and then I've obviously got other children. I've had a lot going on'
	Exhaustion	41	'Having to go to so many schools was exhausting'
Undesirable feelings	Feeling let down	9	'Ruby had been let down by the education system'
		21	'Erm we tried various schools to try and settle her but it wasn't working'
	Feeling misunderstood	68	'I think her emotional needs were not met'

Master Theme: Shaping a child-centred process for the future			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Operating in the child's best interests	Getting schooling right	95	'Am I really looking out for the best interest of my child if I do that?'
		86-87	'I wanted somewhere more suitable for Ruby's educational needs but also her emotional state'
		15	'I knew that Ruby couldn't maintain as you say a normal setting'
		43-44	'And it just got to the point well am I gonna keep doing it when I know, even though it's not nice to admit, I know it's not gonna work. But I have to try'
		177	'Ermm more important do I want my child playing with sand, no. Do I want an education? Yes'
		171	'seeing what works for Ruby, how she handles things'
		8	'A lot with Tori is built on trust'
		165-166	Erm then obviously you have to have meetings. Erm various people i.e.. Educational psychologists. If she's got additional needs like with Ruby she has DLD and then there's a speech and language therapist to come in. They're all looking at different parts that make Ruby, Ruby.'

Appendix 9d – Master Theme Summary - Natalie

Master Theme: Parental support			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Parental networks	Support from friends	306	'giving me guidance every now and again and support'
	Support from work	338	'my work were really supportive with that'
		343-345	'I feel lucky in that in that way, but I feel sorry for parents who are actually, you know, out somewhere at work. Far away from the school. That can't always get there and stuff so'
		333-334	'Luckily, I work from home and I only live like a literally about a three minute walk from his school'
	External agency support	33-34	'I did have a rep from SENDIASS helping out, and she was so helpful. Her name was Dana. She. She was absolutely brilliant. She would ring me up every time something was due'
		56	'They'd done most of it'
		248	'Yeah, they were really good'
	Support from school	114-115	'And the teachers were really helpful. Actually the SENCO at the school. She was very good'
Frequent and transparent communication	Open communication	119	'She just kept in touch with me regularly'
	Included within the process	126-127	'she was helpful in other ways, but that was something specific that I can remember. The parent led meeting'
		144	'so I gave them you know an outline of what his strengths are and generally who he is at home'

Master Theme: Shaping a child centred process for the future			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
The importance of improving the process	Increasing understanding	290-292	'If the local authority. Were to have. Give me a mere list of schools in the local area that specialised in children with ADHD'
		251	'Just knowing what the process was'
	Streamlining the process	234	'If the process was simplified down'

Master Theme: I'm not in control here			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
I don't get it	Confusion about EP role	189	'I don't know who she was'
		210	'She was something behavioural'
		199	'I think she was a behavioural psychologist or something'
	A difficult process to understand	40	'A complex process'
		113-114	'I remember one of the teachers at the school saying to me. You know don't worry that you don't understand the process. It is very complex'
		64	'I still don't understand it fully, but I know I sort of basically what it is, so yeah.'
	Left in the dark	108	'I didn't understand what was going on in the background'
		107	'Everyone else was kind of guiding it'
		111	'Everyone else had like all this understanding and yeah, just didn't have that as well'
	I feel lost	166	'I didn't understand where we were in the process'
		268	'I was mortified because I was basically left to do this process on my own'
I'm not a professional	Expectations	154	'I was expecting to like make some big decisions and I didn't'

		84	'I probably thought it was just gonna be a quick application and then accepted'
	Understanding of EHCNA	91-92	'I'm applying for an EHCP and it will be accepted in a couple of weeks'
		9	'I didn't even know what that was at the time. I'd never heard of it'
	It's not my place to decide	157	'I just left them to it'
		161	'I didn't know what I was supposed to be contributing to it'
		286	'I'm not the professional, I don't know'
	Tokenistic involvement	158	'I didn't really need to be in that meeting'
		130	'I actually didn't say much during that meeting'
		164	'I was happy to take a back seat'
Undesirable feelings	Pressure	363	'Why were they pressuring me?'
		284	'I felt like pressure to name a school on it'
	Stress	21	'I was really stressed'
	Overwhelm	197-198	'There's quite a lot of people involved. It was overwhelming'
	Isolation	48-49	'I was just left to fend for myself'

Master Theme: A power imbalance			
Superordinate Themes:	**Emergent Themes:**	**Line numbers:**	**Key phrases:**
Feeling unsupported	Feeling uninformed	269	'I don't have a clue'
		104	'Everyone else seemed to understand it but I didn't'
	Feeling let down	277	'I just felt like no-one was helping me'

		54	'I <u>never heard anything</u> from them ever again'
		74	'She just <u>cut me off'</u>
		77	'Someone else has <u>cut me off</u> now and I don't know what's going on'
		354	'the schools wouldn't let me go to see them'
		318	'She was meant to turn up and she didn't'
		272-274	'So it was just really hard because and I'd ask the local authority to, like, help me to the school. And they were basically saying to me like, no'
	Misplaced support	181-183	'I could cope with him at home, It was <u>literally just at school</u> that he needed the help'
	The LA relinquished responsibility	368	'their work was done'
Lack of resources	Lack of tailored provision	292	'they told me there weren't any anyway'