

***Doctorate in Professional Educational,
Child, and Adolescent Psychology***

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**Doctorate in Professional Educational Child and Adolescent
Psychology**

Doctoral Thesis

**Exploring Children's and Education Professionals'
Views on Children's Involvement in the Education,
Health, and Care Process.**

Aditi Rao

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Declaration

I, Aditi Rao, hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Abstract

The introduction of the Children and Families Act, 2014 and the implementation of Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans led to a focus on children's participation. Previous research found that children prioritise their own participation (Kilkelly et al., 2005). Involving children in the EHC Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process creates plans that are more personalised and effective (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). At present, children's involvement is inconsistent and not fully embedded in practice (Adams et al., 2017).

The current study aimed to explore primary school-aged children's experiences of involvement in the EHCNA process from their own perspectives and the perspectives of Educational Psychologists (EPs) and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs). Five children, four EPs, and three SENCOs from schools in one London Local Authority (LA) were interviewed about their views on children's involvement, their experiences of being involved or involving children in the EHCNA process, and the facilitators or barriers to children's participation. The interviews were thematically analysed. Key findings of the study were discussed in the context of previous research.

The study found that children's involvement in the EHCNA process in this LA was mixed. Adults made judgements about children's capacity in determining if children should be involved. EPs, SENCOs, and children themselves valued children's participation and felt that it had a positive impact. Some barriers to children's involvement included children's capacity to engage, SENCOs' lack of knowledge and skills relating to facilitating children's participation, and systemic challenges that EPs and SENCOs faced. Factors that facilitated children's participation included children having agency and the support of a familiar adult with whom they shared a good

relationship. EPs and SENCOs valued collaborating with each other. Unique contributions of the study and its limitations were addressed. Practical implications for SENCOs, EPs, and children were highlighted, as well as avenues for future research.

Impact Statement

The current study is one of few studies in the existing literature that sought children's perspective on their own participation in the EHCNA process. Although the scale of the study was small, the original contribution of children's perspectives is significant in the context of the previous research. The study added to the understanding of factors that are barriers to children's participation. While previous research has focused on 'within-child' factors, the current study highlighted some barriers to children's involvement that related to adults' limitations and systemic challenges. The study also identified two additional factors to consider in facilitating children's involvement. First, it highlighted the importance of children's emotional coping skills and emotional readiness to be involved in the EHCNA process. Second, it shed light on the unique role of EPs in promoting children's involvement in the EHCNA process. These findings fill significant gaps in the literature on children's participation.

The key findings of the current study have practical implications for SENCOs or schools, EPs, and for children.

- Schools and SENCOs are encouraged to have a generous and empowering view of children's capacity to engage.
- SENCOs and school staff should be curious about children's views and seek to engage all children in sharing their views.
- Children should be facilitated to share their views through their preferred method of communication.
- Adults should give children choice over the decision to participate and control over aspects of their participation.

- EPs should offer schools and SENCos support to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to involving children in the EHCNA process.
- EPs may offer support in the form of training, workshops, and supervision.
- EPs should promote children's participation in the schools that they support by setting expectations of children's involvement and supporting SENCos to involve children.
- EPs should undertake systemic work on creating an ethos that values children's participation in schools and EP teams.
- Children should have access to information regarding their own role in the EHCNA process and should be encouraged to fulfil that role during Annual Reviews of the EHC plans.

In order to facilitate the dissemination of the findings of the current study, the researcher will share the findings with peers and colleagues at the Institute of Education and the Local Authority in which this research was carried out. Summary reports will also be made available to the participants of this study, including a child-friendly report for the children who took part.

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List of Abbreviations

ASC	Autism Spectrum Condition
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BPS	British Psychological Society
CFA	Children and Families Act
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education
EHC	Education, Health, and Care
EHCNA	Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
LA	Local Authority
MLD	Moderate Learning Difficulties
MS 1	Mainstream School 1
MS 2	Mainstream School 2
PPD	Pupil Profile Document
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
SEMH	Social, Emotional, and Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEN CoP	Special Educational Needs Code of Practice
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SEND CoP	Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice
SLCN	Speech, Language, and Communication Needs
SSEN	Statement of Special Educational Needs
TA	Teaching Assistant
UNCRC	United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Chapter 1: Introduction

Significant reforms in legislation regarding the rights of children and young people, vis-à-vis their education, have taken place over the last six years. At the forefront of this change is the emphasis on children's participation in making decisions about their education (Long, 2016). In 2014, a revision of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (SEND CoP), published by the Department for Education (DfE, 2014), called for the transfer of Statements of Special Educational Needs (SSENs) to Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans. EHC plans are driven by the reforms in legislation and seek to empower children and their families to be equal partners in decision-making (DfE, 2014). Educational professionals, such as Educational Psychologists (EPs) and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), work closely with children and families through an EHC Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process (Appendix A) to identify and describe children's strengths and needs. They also have a responsibility to involve children and families as partners in decision-making throughout this process.

The purpose of this research was to explore children's involvement in the EHCNA process from the perspectives of EPs, SENCOs, and children themselves. The research was carried out in one inner-London Local Authority (LA). The researcher sought the experiences of the adults and the children in order to holistically consider the extent and manner of children's involvement in the EHCNA process in this particular LA. There was also a focus on illuminating the factors that facilitated or acted as barriers to children's involvement, with a view to inform good practice. This research contributed to an emerging picture of children's involvement in the EHCNA process.

1.1 Terminology

Given the focus on children's participation in this research, it is necessary to consider how 'participation' can be defined. One definition of participation states that it is "the process of sharing decisions that affect one's life" (Hart, 1997, p.5). This definition is reflected in research and policy around children's participation in decision-making, including in the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015), and provides a useful frame of reference.

It is important to note that the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) uses the term 'involvement' as well as 'participation'. Much of the literature on the topic also uses both terms in reference to similar practices without explicitly distinguishing between the two (Adams et al. 2017; Harris & Davidge, 2019; Hart, 1997; Lundy, 2007). For example, the following two excerpts from the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) use the terms 'participate' and 'involved' respectively but both describe how children should be a part of discussions and decision-making:

1.9. 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.

9.23. By using this approach within a family context, professionals and local authorities can ensure that children, young people and parents are involved in all aspects of planning and decision-making.

Lansdown (2009) concluded that the term 'participation' was the subject of much debate and that there was no clear consensus about its definition. However, Redwood (2015) noted the role of power imbalance between adults and children in participation, where adults hold the power. Howarth (2013) differentiated between 'consultation' and 'participation' on the basis that adults drive the action in the former whereas children

perform the action in the latter - adults 'consult' and children 'participate'. In the absence of any research that distinguishes 'involvement' from 'participation', the researcher has drawn on the ideas of Redwood and Howarth to differentiate between the terms for the purpose of this research. The term 'involvement' has been used to refer to practices where children were passive and were invited to contribute by an adult, who held the power in this dynamic. 'Participation' has been used for practices where children actively contributed to the process without requiring an adult to invite them to do so. In the context of the EHCNA process, which is rarely initiated by children, 'involvement' is more often the appropriate term but 'participation' is also used due to its widespread use in relevant literature and policy.

A review of the existing literature on the topic of children's participation revealed that the concepts of 'involvement' and 'participation' are highly nuanced and require more detailed exploration. This will be revisited in Chapter 2, where the researcher will consider these concepts in the context of the current study and the wider literature.

1.2 Legislative Context

In order to understand the current national context of this study, it is important to consider the history of legislation concerning the education of children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) in the UK. Mid-twentieth century legislation, the Education Act of 1944, described children with SEND as 'handicapped' and advised that they should be educated in special educational settings (7 & 8 Geo. 6 c. 31) as they were often considered 'ineducable'. Children with SEND were not included in their community or local schools, let alone allowed to have a voice. Change was slow over the next three decades, until the publishing of the Warnock Report in 1978. The report introduced the term 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) and recommended that children with SEND should be educated in mainstream schools (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1978). The Warnock Report was instrumental in

bringing reforms to legislation. The Education Act was reformed in 1981, adopting the use of the term 'SEN' and introducing Statements of Special Educational Needs (SSEN) to support the education of children with SEND. Legislation also recognised the right of parents to be involved in the SSEN assessment process, but still did not give the right of participation to children themselves (Florian, 2002).

Concurrently, on an international scale, the children's rights movement was gathering momentum. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) officially granted children fundamental rights of expression and influence in matters that affected them. This was stated in Article 12 of the UNCRC as follows:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

The UNCRC was ratified by the UK in 1991 and the UK was thereby obligated to uphold its tenets through national policy and practice (Weil et al. 2015). This was reflected in the next iteration of the Education Act in 1993, which introduced the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (SEN CoP) in 1994 (DfE, 1994) to provide statutory guidance to schools and professionals on the provision of SEN support. However, although the SEN CoP 1994 and its revision in 2001 stated that children and parents have the right to be involved in the assessment of SEN, the accompanying statutory assessment process of acquiring a SSEN was not successful in accomplishing this (Martin & White, 2012).

The UK has been repeatedly criticised by the UNCRC Committee for not fully committing to upholding the Article 12 rights of children (Harris & Davidge, 2019;

Lansdown, 2000). Acknowledgement of these shortcomings, amongst others, precipitated the introduction of The Children and Families Act (CFA, 2014) as a significant reform in legislation. In particular, Section 19 of the CFA 2014, which began to use the term SEND rather than SEN, states that LAs must:

1. give regard to the views of children with SEND and their parents
2. involve children and their parents as fully as possible in decision-making
3. provide children and their parents with the necessary information and support to facilitate their participation

These principles were designed to support the participation of children and their parents in decision-making and to give children and parents greater choice and control over support. The CFA 2014 also required collaboration between various professionals, schools, children, and parents to promote children's development and support them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Following the CFA 2014, the SEND CoP was also revised, first in 2014 and again in 2015. The SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) sought to transform the statutory assessment process for children with SEND to align with the principles laid out in the CFA 2014. It replaced SEN with the new EHC plans. At its core, the EHCNA process was designed to promote multi-professional collaboration and to create plans that are individualised, aspirational, and attainable. To achieve this, the EHCNA process emphasises the active participation of children and families in the planning of support. In terms of facilitating children's participation, the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) advises that the EHCNA and planning process should:

- focus on children as individuals and centre the process around them
- consult and involve children and their parents throughout the process to the fullest possible extent

- use simple language or images to communicate information in a way that is easy for children and parents to understand
- give children and parents time to prepare for discussions and making time in meetings to hear their views
- provide children and parents with the necessary support to express their views or participate in the process
- enable children and their parents to share their views and participate in decision-making
- enable children to share their interests, aspirations, and desired outcomes
- give children and their parents more control over the support that children will access

In summary, the SEND CoP advocates the use of a person-centred approach to facilitate children's participation in the EHCNA process.

The SEND CoP leaves it to the discretion of LAs to decide on the design of the EHC plans but provides guidelines around the content and structure of the plans. Twelve sections are specified (Appendix B), including one section dedicated entirely to children's views (DfE, 2015). LAs across the UK began to implement the EHCNA process in September 2014 and continue to do so at present according to the guidelines of the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015), although its execution varies across LAs (Palikara et al., 2018).

1.3 Local Context

The LA in which this study was carried out is situated in inner-London and has a large and diverse community. The researcher was on placement in the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) of this LA as a Trainee EP for two years. The EPS operates on a partially-traded model in which statutory work, including EHC assessments, is

delivered to schools as a funded core service and all other work is bought in by schools. The EPS supports forty-seven primary schools in addition to children's centres and secondary schools. Each school is assigned a 'link' EP who delivers statutory and traded services to the school.

The LA has a number of special schools which cater to a range of SEND. These schools are reputed and highly sought after by parents of children with SEND. Many children with SEND from neighbouring LAs also attend schools in this LA. As a result, the LA has a high number of children with SEND in its schools. In an annual evaluation of its services, the LA Council reported that approximately 4% of children in its schools had EHC plans- a higher percentage than the LA's statistical neighbours, inner-London neighbours, and the national average. The evaluation also reported that the most common primary need stated in EHC plans was Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC). The number of EHC plans with ASC as the primary need was more than double that of the next most common primary need- Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD). The third most common primary need was Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs.

The LA follows the guidelines relating to the EHCNA process laid out in the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015). One of the stated priorities of the EPS is to ensure that the voice of the child is heard in all educational matters. This is reflected in the report templates that EPs use, which have a dedicated space for children's views and serve as a reminder to EPs to gather these views as part of their work with children. Another way in which the LA endeavours to hear children's voices is through a document called the pupil profile document (PPD) that is included in children's EHC plans (Appendix C). This document is a concise way to collate children's views about their strengths, interests, preferences, and aspirations as well as information about their needs and

support. A unique feature of this LA's practice in relation to the EHCNA process is that it commissions an external agency to draft EHC plans from the advice provided by schools, families, and professionals. These plans are then reviewed and amended by a team of SEN Keyworkers, who are LA employees but are not part of the EPS. This system is flawed and can result in draft plans that poorly reflect the children they are meant to support. The EPS is actively engaged in problem-solving to rectify this issue. Overall, while the EPS is committed to hearing children's voices and involving them in the EHCNA process some practices currently in place in the LA mean that children's views are not always perfectly translated into their EHC plans.

1.4 Personal Interest in The Topic

The researcher's interest in this topic stems from reading '*Stuart- A Life Backwards*' (Masters, 2006), a biographical book about Stuart Shorter. The book traced back through Stuart's life from his adulthood, as a homeless man with significant mental health needs and muscular dystrophy that he had since he was a boy. Stuart examined his past like an investigative journalist, wanting to pinpoint the exact moment in his childhood when his life began to fall apart. Although many factors contributed to his eventual fate, one event that Stuart described was his exclusion from mainstream primary school, where it was felt that Stuart's physical needs could not be managed. Despite being cognitively able, Stuart was enrolled in a special school where he was socially isolated as he did not identify with his peers who had significant learning disabilities. In the book, Stuart recalled how he had not wanted to leave his primary school, where he felt he belonged. He attributed his move to the special school as a profoundly negative experience that altered the course of his life for the worse. Reflecting on this book, the researcher was struck by the thought that if only the adults who made the decision to move Stuart to a special school had asked him what his views were, then the trajectory of Stuart's life may have been very

different. In the current legislative context, the researcher felt it was therefore interesting and important to explore how children were being involved in making decisions about matters that affect their lives.

1.5 Earlier Project by the Researcher

An earlier research project undertaken by the researcher as a First Year Trainee EP, in a different London LA, also explored children's experiences of the EHCNA process. Four secondary school-aged children who attended mainstream schools and had EHC plans were interviewed. They were asked whether their voice had been sought as part of the process and whether they felt their views were valued. Three children reported that they had been involved in Annual Review meetings to discuss their EHC plans, but the extent of their participation varied. Two children had been present at the meetings and had the opportunity to respond to decisions made by adults about their education. One child had shared his views and directly influenced some of the decisions and targets set out in his plan. The participant who was not invited to attend any meetings was told that the meeting was taking place and was shown a draft of her plan but was not given an opportunity to share her views or respond to the plan. Overall, the findings of the project suggested that children's involvement in the EHCNA process was limited and inconsistent.

Some barriers to participation that children identified included not knowing all the adults who were present at the meetings, not being well-prepared to attend the meeting, and not knowing what to expect. One factor that facilitated children's participation was the use of active listening by adults, as children reported that they felt listened to when adults employed these techniques. Giving children control over certain aspects of the meeting, such as time and venue, also facilitated their involvement. Additionally, the children valued being allowed to decide the seating arrangement for the meeting and preferred to seat familiar or key adults close to them

and less familiar professionals farther away. Children identified Teaching Assistants (TAs) as the key adult who facilitated their participation, rather than a SENCo or EP.

1.6 Aims of the Current Research

The earlier project by the researcher provided interesting insights into some children's experiences of participating in the EHCNA process but it also raised several questions which the researcher aimed to explore for this thesis. First, the previous project focused only on the children's perspective. The experiences of other groups who are typically involved in the EHCNA process were expected to be valuable contributions to knowledge about the topic. SENCos and EPs are named as facilitators of children's involvement in policy (DfE, 2014) but the children did not identify them as key adults in the process. Capturing the perspectives of SENCos and EPs was anticipated to shed light on the reasons behind this difference between policy and practice. Second, it was considered useful to explore EPs', SENCos', and children's attitudes towards children's involvement in the EHCNA process, including their views on the outcomes and impact of children's participation. Finally, further research was needed to generate a rich picture of the factors that facilitate or act as barriers to children's involvement in the EHCNA process.

1.7 Research Questions

In line with the aims of the current research and the bigger goal of capturing what good practice for involving children in the EHCNA process may look like, this study sought to explore the following questions:

1. How are children involved in the EHCNA process?
 - Are children involved in the EHCNA process?
 - To what extent are children involved in different aspects of the EHCNA process?
 - How is children's involvement initiated?

2. How is children's involvement perceived?

- What are SENCOs', EPs' and children's views on children's involvement?
- What is the perceived impact of children's involvement in the EHCNA process?

3. What factors facilitate or act as barriers to children's involvement?

- What are the challenges of involving children in the EHCNA process?
- How is children's involvement supported?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter begins with an exploration of the concepts of participation and involvement in the context of this study and the wider literature. The importance of children's involvement is then considered. Next, research on the degree to which children are currently involved in the EHCNA process is presented. Then, techniques that can be used to elicit children's voice are described and key adults who can support children's involvement are considered. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the existing literature.

2.1 Models of Participation

Models of participation offer context to explorations of children's involvement in the EHCNA process. They also provide a frame of reference against which experiences of children's involvement in the EHCNA process can be compared and evaluated. Two models of children's participation anchored this research- Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' model (Hart, 1997) and Lundy's 'Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence' model (Lundy, 2007), which is commonly referred to as 'the Lundy model'. Although neither model was developed explicitly or exclusively for the purpose of promoting children's involvement in the EHCNA process, both models provide valuable insights into how this can be successfully achieved. This research was also informed by an adaptation of Hart's model by Sutcliffe and Birney (2015), which was designed specifically to be compatible with the EHCNA process. Each of the models are described and evaluated in the following sections.

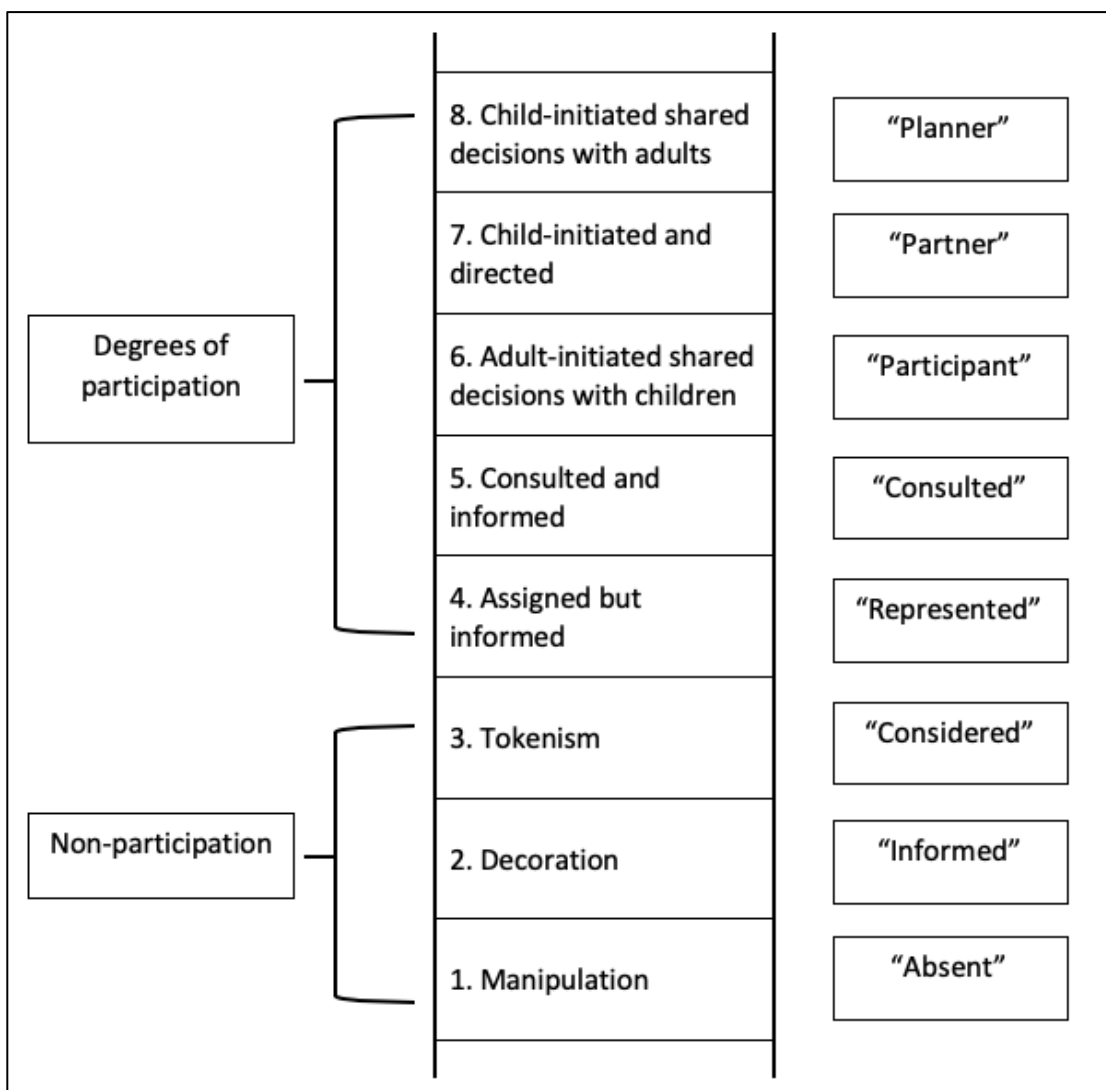
2.1.1 The 'Ladder of Participation' Model

The 'Ladder of Participation' model (Hart, 1997) is a hierarchical model of children's participation that developed out of work commissioned by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Hart's model of participation describes the different degrees of participation through the metaphor of

a ladder (Figure 1). While Hart’s model is a useful framework, it was developed from a survey of children’s participation in environmental projects (Hart, 1997) and cannot be readily applied to the EHCNA process. Therefore, Sutcliffe and Birney’s (2015) adapted model, which borrows the metaphor of the ladder from Hart’s model, will be considered alongside it. The labels assigned by Sutcliffe and Birney to each stage of participation are represented in the boxes alongside Hart’s ladder in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Hart’s Ladder of Participation and Sutcliffe & Birney’s Adapted Labels



Each rung of the ladder in Hart’s model and Sutcliffe and Birney’s adaptation corresponds to a different level of children’s participation, from least involved to most involved. The bottom three rungs of the ladder are categorised as non-participation,

while the top five rungs relate to increasing degrees of participation. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of practices at each level of the model.

TABLE 1

Summary of Hart's Model Alongside Sutcliffe and Birney's Adaptation

Hart's Model	Sutcliffe and Birney's Adapted Model
<p>MANIPULATION Adults involve children without giving them the necessary information to understand the context or impact of their involvement. Children are not given feedback on the outcomes of their participation. The decision-making process is claimed to have been influenced by children even though the children have no knowledge or understanding about their involvement.</p>	<p>ABSENT Children are absent from the EHC process and are discussed by adults without their knowledge. Children are thought of as 'cases' or 'problems' rather than as people.</p>
<p>DECORATION Adults involve children in order to give the outward appearance of fostering children's participation. Children are still not informed of the purpose of their involvement.</p>	<p>INFORMED Children are informed of the EHC assessment and are aware that adults are meeting to discuss them. They are notified of outcomes and decisions made.</p>
<p>TOKENISM Adults appear to involve children by giving them a voice but actually children have little or no opportunity to participate. Children have no choice in what they are asked to share views on or how their views are communicated and no real opportunities to form and express their true views.</p>	<p>CONSIDERED Adults use their knowledge of the children to infer their views when children are unable or unwilling to share their views directly.</p>
<p>ASSIGNED BUT INFORMED Children understand the purpose of their participation and know who made decisions about their involvement. They are able to choose if they would like to participate. They have a meaningful role in the project.</p>	<p>REPRESENTED Children's views are shared in their own words or through their own work if they attend meetings. If they do not attend meetings their views are shared by a nominated adult.</p>
<p>CONSULTED AND INFORMED The project is initiated and facilitated by adults but children understand the purpose of their participation and share their views, which are taken seriously.</p>	<p>CONSULTED Children can answer direct questions at a meeting and can respond to decisions that are made.</p>
<p>ADULT-INITIATED SHARED DECISIONS WITH CHILDREN The project is initiated by adults but children have an equal role in decision-making.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT Children can pose their own questions to adults. They contribute more to decision-making and influence outcomes and plans.</p>
<p>CHILD-INITIATED AND DIRECTED Children initiate, manage, and execute projects without direction from adults.</p>	<p>PARTNER Children are involved in deciding what will be discussed. They may lead a section of the meeting or suggest outcomes for themselves and actions for themselves and others.</p>
<p>CHILD-INITIATED SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS Children initiate and execute projects and invite adults to support them in a supervisory or advisory role. Children enlist adults in joint decision-making.</p>	<p>PLANNER Children can give feedback to adults about the support they receive. They may help adults evaluate service and provisions.</p>

Non-Participatory Practices. In order to describe what participation is, it is important to first consider what participation is not. A comparison of the three non-participatory levels reveals that they are characterised differently in Hart's model and in Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation. This is explored in the following sections.

Level 1- 'Manipulation' or 'Absent'. In Hart's model, the lowest level of participation involves practices in which adults claim that children have been involved despite children themselves not having any knowledge of this. Hart gives an example in which adults claimed that children's drawings were used to inform an urban environment planning project without telling children that their drawings were used for this purpose or explaining how they would be used (Hart, 1997, p. 9). Children are present in the project, albeit deceived and manipulated. On the other hand, in Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation, children are entirely absent from the EHCNA process at the lowest level of participation. For example, when a child is 'absent' from the EHCNA process, the child's teacher may give an account of the child's interests, preferences, and abilities without considering the child's views. The child is not told that this will be discussed with other adults to inform a plan to support their needs (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015, p. 28).

Level 2- 'Decoration' or 'Informed'. At the second rung of Hart's ladder, children continue to be used by adults to give the appearance that a project is "inspired by children" (Hart, p. 9)- for example, by using children in campaigns to promote the project- but children are not informed of the purpose of the project and their role in it. In contrast, Sutcliffe and Birney characterise practices at this level of participation as informing children about the EHCNA process without involving them in it. For example, adults meet to discuss the child's needs and make decisions about how to support them and, while the child is told that adults are meeting to talk about them, the child

does not attend the meeting and adults communicate with the child about the decisions that were made afterwards (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015, p. 28).

Level 3- 'Tokenism' or 'Considered'. Non-participatory approaches are tokenistic when they involve children simply to 'tick the box' and fulfil expectations of statutory requirements. Such practices appear to give children a voice without truly giving them any control or influence over the project. Hart (1997) gives the example of children's involvement in speaking at conference panels where it is implied that their voice represents the perspective of their peers but, in reality, they have not had the opportunity to consult with their peers or form their own views (p. 10). The views that they share, therefore, do not have any real impact on the project. At the same level, Sutcliffe and Birney describe practices that begin to recognise children as people who hold views. However, children are still not encouraged to directly express or share these views. For example, Sutcliffe and Birney (2015) described how a child's parents and professionals who worked with the child used their judgement to infer the child's views and supported this with evidence from observations of the child. The child attended the initial part of the meeting, where adults spoke directly to the child rather than about him (p.28).

In summary, Hart's view of non-participation is more cynical than Sutcliffe and Birney's view in that it described practices in which children's apparent involvement is deliberately used to bolster the image of projects without making any attempt to seek children's views or let them influence the projects. On the other hand, Sutcliffe and Birney's view of non-participation assumes that adults typically have children's interests at heart but that they fail to adequately involve children or seek their views. Adults may decide what is best for children without involving children or having any consideration of children's views or they may consider what children's views are

without directly asking children. At worst, non-participatory practices use children's involvement to further the agenda of adults and, at best, they take into account what children's views may be even if children are not directly involved.

Participatory Practices. The top five rungs of Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1997) describe what children's participation looks like through participatory practices at different levels of involvement. Sutcliffe and Birney's (2015) adapted model is more aligned with Hart's model in describing participatory practices, although there are some deviations. The following sections consider what participatory practices look like by comparing Hart's model and Sutcliffe and Birney's EHCNA process-specific adaptation.

Level 4- 'Assigned but Informed' or 'Represented'. This is the lowest level in Hart's model and Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation that the researchers consider to be participation because children are directly involved and have a meaningful role to play. Hart (1997) gives the example of how children were enlisted as pages to various world leaders in attendance at a United Nations conference (p. 11). The children were assigned the roles by adults but had the option to choose if they would like to participate after their role was explained to them. In the context of the EHCNA process, Sutcliffe and Birney (2015) highlighted that, at a minimum level of involvement, children's views are collected directly from children themselves and are shared in their own words or through their preferred form of communication. They give the example of a child who shared his views by completing a series of sentences about his preferences and interests which were read out by the SENCo at the meeting (p. 28). Although Hart's and Sutcliffe and Birney's descriptions of participatory practices at this

level vary, they are united by a common thread of meaningful and direct participation of children.

Level 5- ‘Consulted and Informed’ or ‘Consulted’. This level of participation in both Hart’s model and Sutcliffe and Birney’s adaptation marks the point on the ladder where adults begin to react to children’s views. For example, Hart described how children were consulted by a television company to share their views on children’s programming that they would like to see. The children’s ideas were executed and shown to the children and changes were made based on the children’s feedback (Hart, 1997, p. 12). In the context of the EHCNA process, Sutcliffe and Birney gave the example of a child who created and presented a poster about himself and his experiences at a meeting with adults. He also answered questions about his views that adults posed (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015, p. 27). These practices show adults engaging with children’s views and ‘listening’ to them, rather than passively collecting them.

Level 6- ‘Adult-Initiated Shared Decisions With Children’ or ‘Participant’. The top three rungs of the ladder are described by Hart as “true participation” (Hart, 1997, p. 12) because children begin to take on increasingly active roles in these practices. For example, Hart describes a park planning project in which adults involved children in designing, planning, and modelling park designs which were made available for the local community to critique (p. 13). The children were involved in debates about which features to prioritise and in implementing feedback from the local community. Hart argues that it is the influence that children have over decisions that makes such practices truly participatory. Similarly, Sutcliffe and Birney identified children as being ‘participants’ when they begin to take on an active role in the EHCNA process and in influencing decision-making. They presented the example of a child

who shared his views through a poster and chose some examples of his work to be shared with adults at his meeting. He had the opportunity to ask adults questions and, as he attended the whole meeting, he was able to respond to and influence the decisions made regarding his support (pp. 30-31).

Level 7- 'Child-Initiated and Directed' or 'Partner'. This level on Hart's ladder of participation marks a significant shift in power as it refers to practices which are led by children themselves. Hart described a project in which primary school-aged children designed and built a model of a dam without any intervention from adults (Hart, 1997, p. 14). According to Hart, practices at this level feature children actively planning and implementing projects without requiring adults to play any role. The conceptualisation of what constitutes participatory practices in which children are 'partners' in Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation differs in one key way. In the context of the EHCNA process, which is rarely initiated by children, the balance of power between children and adults is never entirely in the hands of children, as it can be in Hart's model. Children can take on an active role that may be equal to the role of adults. Sutcliffe and Birney give the example of a child who worked with an adult to prepare a list of topics to discuss at his meeting. The child took the lead for a section of the meeting and was supported by the adult who later took over from the child at his request (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015, p. 27). In contrast to Hart's definition, adults continue to support children's participation at this level in Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation. However, both definitions highlight the increase in children's autonomy over their own participation.

Level 8- 'Child-Initiated Shared Decisions With Adults' or 'Planner'. This is the highest level of participation in Hart's model and Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation. In Hart's model, practices are most participatory when they are driven entirely by children, who involve adults in an advisory role in decision-making and

providing support in actioning their projects. For example, Hart described a project to improve sex education in American schools that was entirely initiated and driven by adolescents. Adults were only involved in the project when the young people approached the Board of Education with a petition to overhaul the sex education curriculum in schools, an action that could not have been achieved by the young people themselves. Once again, this level of participation looks slightly different in Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation but, even within the EHCNA process, they recognise that children have a role to play in determining future directions that support will take. For example, they describe a case in which a child planned his EHC meeting with an adult and provided feedback that was implemented in all future meetings (p. 27). In this way, at the highest level of participation, children play an active role in shaping what their participation looks like and are able to give adults feedback on the process.

In summary, participatory practices involve children in varying degrees. At a minimum level of participation, children are assigned roles and their views are heard directly during the process. At a maximum level of participation, children are entirely in charge of the project and involve adults in a supervisory role. An important theme that emerges relates to who holds the power in the process. Hart's model depicts an increasing transference of power from the adults to the children as practices become more participatory, until adults are involved by children in a supportive capacity. Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation aligns with Hart's model in some ways, but the different nature of the EHCNA process necessitates that the adaptation diverges from Hart's original model in others. Although children rarely initiate the EHCNA process themselves, adults can ensure children are involved as equal partners by empowering

them to take control over aspects of the process and by enabling children's participation in shaping decisions and support for themselves.

Evaluating the Ladder of Participation Model. Hart's model of participation is a useful tool to conceptualise the different levels of children's participation. However, it has been criticised for its linear, hierarchical structure (Kirby & Woodhead, 2003). Others disagree with the implication that certain forms of participation are more genuine or more preferable to others (Reddy & Ratna, 2002). For example, there is debate about whether children working with adults in a supportive or supervisory role demonstrate a higher degree of participation than children initiating but sharing decision-making with adults (Macpherson, 2008). Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation, on the other hand, acknowledges that there is significant overlap between the different levels of the model and recognises that children's participation may vary across different contexts. The fluidity and flexibility of Sutcliffe and Birney's model lends itself more easily to real-world practices.

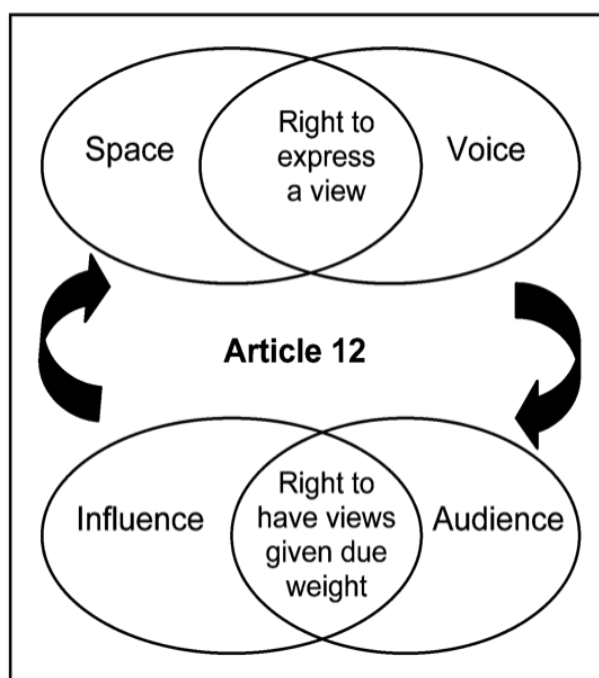
The upper rungs of Hart's model have been criticised as being idealistic standards of participation that are not achievable for every child, particularly those with SEND (Hill et al., 2004). For example, in the context of the EHCNA process, young children can never be involved at the highest levels of participation in Hart's model as these practices require children to initiate the process themselves. As EHC requests can only be made by children who are over the age of sixteen, Hart's model restricts even the most capable young children to lower levels of participation. Sutcliffe and Birney's adaptation, on the hand, was developed specifically to promote children's participation in the EHCNA process. It acknowledges that some children will always find it challenging to participate at the highest levels of the model but stresses that children can gradually be enabled to participate more.

2.1.2 The 'Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence' Model

The Lundy model (Lundy, 2007) was proposed as a new way to conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC and developed out of an audit of children's rights in Northern Ireland by Kilkelly et al. (2005). The model consists of four elements- Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence (Figure 2)- and aims to provide a framework to ensure that children's rights to express a view and have their views given due weight is fully exercised.

FIGURE 2

The Lundy Model of Participation



The four elements of the Lundy model reflect the two aspects of Article 12. 'Space' (children must be given the opportunity to express a view) and 'Voice' (children must be facilitated to express their views) relate to children's right to express a view. 'Audience' (the view must be listened to) and 'Influence' (the view must be acted upon, as appropriate) relate to children's right to have their views be given due weight (Lundy, 2007). A significant feature of the Lundy model is that it acknowledges the interrelatedness of these elements. In particular, it recognises that there is overlap

between 'Space' and 'Voice'- if children are not supported to express their views when they have the opportunity to do so, then providing them the opportunity to express their views is futile and if children do not have the opportunity to express their views, then supporting them to do so is redundant. It also recognises the overlap between 'Audience' and 'Influence'- if children's views are not listened to, then they cannot be acted upon at all and if children's views are not acted upon in appropriate ways, then it can be argued that their views were not truly listened to. The Lundy model also illustrates that there is a natural chronological order inherent in Article 12. In order for children's views to be listened to and given due weight, their views must first be sought and expressed. The Lundy model is also dynamic in that it recognises that children's involvement is not a static process. For example, once children understand the influence that their views can have there may be a need to provide them with further space to express their views and the whole process may restart. The following sections will examine the four elements of the Lundy model more closely.

Space. According to the Lundy model, the first step in involving children is to provide them with a space in which to express their views. This includes adults creating opportunities for children to participate and share their views. Lundy emphasised that it is the duty of adults to proactively create these spaces and offer them to children. The model also explains the need for the space to be safe. Lundy describes this in terms of the space being conducive to children expressing their views freely. Finally, the space must also be inclusive- it must be made available to all children. This inclusivity is particularly important as Article 12 grants any child who can form a view the right to express it, but affords the right to have that view influence decisions to those children who are deemed to be 'capable' or 'mature' (UNCRC). Lundy noted that this is often confused in practice, with adults also applying judgements of capacity to

children's right to access the space to share their views. Instead, Lundy's model highlights that this space should be inclusive to all children who can express a view regardless of their assumed capacity or maturity.

Voice. All children who are capable of forming views have the right to express their views but the Lundy model acknowledges that some children may need adult support to do so (Lundy, 2007). This element in the Lundy model encapsulates children's right to receive guidance and direction from an adult in order to find and liberate their voice and suggests that adults can support children in a number of ways. Crucially, the model recognises that children's 'voice' is not limited to what they can express in words and asserts that 'voice' also applies to children's non-verbal communication. Children must be facilitated to share their views through their chosen method of communication. In aid of this, adults must be creative and adaptive in their approaches to engage children to express their views through their preferred form of communication. Lundy referred to a range of approaches, including play, drawing and art, and the use of assistive technology, that were recommended by the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007). The Lundy model also advocates for children to be adequately prepared for participation. This includes ensuring that children have access to child-friendly information about processes and sufficient time to understand what involvement entails. The element of 'voice' in the Lundy model constitutes a step towards ensuring that children's voices are heard and promotes their genuine involvement.

Audience. The Lundy model emphasises that children have a right to have their views listened to by adults who have the power to make decisions about matters which affect them. This can be achieved directly, where children themselves share their views to an audience of adults who make decisions, or indirectly, where children

share their views with adults who pass the views on to those with the authority to make decisions. Lundy makes an important distinction between children's voice being 'heard' and 'listened to' - it is not sufficient for their views to simply be heard, they must also be valued (Lundy, 2007). Adults must employ active listening techniques in order to truly listen to children's voices. In line with the view that children's voice is not just about what they communicate verbally, Lundy reiterates that 'listening' may also be about 'looking' - where children may share their views through actions, drawings, or other non-verbal means. Audiences must be equally open to listening to children's views whether they are expressed in words or through alternative forms of communication. As a part of children having an audience, the Lundy model emphasises that the spaces in which their voices are listened to must accommodate children's preferred form of communication.

Influence. While granting children an audience ensures that children's views are heard, it does not guarantee that their views will be listened to. Children's involvement may be tokenistic as adults can appear to involve children but may not truly listen to their views. Adults must listen to and take children's views seriously by valuing them and using them to inform decisions. The final element of the Lundy model of participation addresses this as it relates to children's right to have their view be given 'due weight'. In other words, children's views must impact the decisions made in matters which affect them. However, Article 12 stipulates that the extent of the influence of children's views depends on children's age and maturity. The need for adults to be cautious of suppressing the views of children who are capable of forming views on the basis of judgements about children's capacity has been noted previously in this chapter. Lundy reiterates this warning and advocates for adults to apply a "generous and child-empowering" interpretation of children's capacity (p. 938). In

doing so, the model accepts that the extent of influence of children's views should be in proportion to their age and maturity but encourages adults to see the potential in children and to empower them to access opportunities for influence.

A common argument is that children's views and preferences are not always in children's best interests, so it may be inappropriate for children to have complete control over decisions. Lundy acknowledges that adults have a duty of care towards children but stresses that they should balance children's best interests with their right to have their views influence decisions. A perfect example of this comes from a study by Harris and Davidge (2019), who interviewed SENCOs and other professionals about how they use children's views to inform the provision in the children's EHC plans. One SENCO noted that a child who had a physical disability expressed the view that she aspired to be a mermaid, so access to hydrotherapy was included in her EHC plan. This example showcases how adults can use children's views, even when they are unrealistic, immature, or unattainable, to inform decisions that are made about children's lives while also exercising their duty of care to keep the child's best interests in mind.

Lundy emphasises that practices that fully espouse the element of influence require systemic culture shifts, which can be driven by raising awareness of children's rights. A step in this direction is to ensure that children are told or shown how their views are used and that the reasons behind decisions that are made are explained to children, regardless of whether their views have influenced those decisions. Finally, Lundy also notes that the need for adults to moderate children's influence over decisions changes as children's capacities evolve. As children develop their skills and become more mature, children should have more autonomy over matters which affect

them and adults' roles diminish, and the notion of children's participation itself becomes redundant.

Evaluating the Lundy Model. One criticism of Lundy's model is that it fails to consider the emotional component of children's involvement (Kennan et al., 2019). For example, in their paper, Kennan and colleagues explored the emotional aspects of safety in the space that is made available to children for their participation. The researchers noted that the space needs to be private, with only those adults present whom children choose to invite. In terms of the physical environment, they spoke about the child-friendliness of the space and suggested that it should be a space in which children feel comfortable.

Lundy advises that the use of interpreters is one way to hear children's voices. This is mentioned in relation to cases where there is a language barrier between children and the adults who seek to involve them but it raises an important question about adults' interpretations of children's views. The SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) advises against the use of adults' interpretations as a proxy for children's views and research validates this stance. In one study, Pearlman & Michaels (2019) interviewed twenty-two children with moderate, severe, and profound and multiple learning difficulties about their experiences of school. Assistive technology was used to facilitate the children to share their views. The interviews were video recorded and watched by adults who knew the children well. Based on the video clips that they saw, the adults reported their interpretations of the children's views. For a majority of the children, there were differences in the interpretations of the various adults as well as differences between the interpretations of the adults and the views that the children communicated. By including this strategy, the Lundy model risks promoting a practice that is unreliable and may stifle children's voices instead of amplifying them.

2.1.3 Comparing the Hart and Lundy Models

Lundy's model provides a framework of the process of participation, while Hart's model provides a framework against which to evaluate how successfully specific practices foster children's involvement. Put together, the two models can help to holistically understand experiences of children's involvement. According to Hart's definition of true participation, which is characterised by children and adults sharing decision-making, all of the elements of Lundy's model- space, voice, audience, and influence- must be present if children's involvement is to be achieved. However, in practice, professionals and key adults who work with children with SEND use their professional judgement and knowledge of the children's level of need to determine the extent to which they may be expected to participate in a meaningful way (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). This means that participation varies on a subjective, case-by-case basis.

The challenge lies in enabling participation in a manner that is ambitious enough to not hold children back, while also being supportive enough to empower them to share their views. In the context of the EHCNA process, which is rarely initiated by the young person, it can be argued that the minimum level of participation that may be expected is that children's involvement is adult-initiated and that children share decision-making. These are practices in which children are 'participants'. However, the influence of children's views depends upon adults' judgements of their capacity or maturity and, as the focus of this study is children in Key Stage 2, it is unlikely that this minimum is appropriate. Turning to Lundy's model, which acknowledges this caveat, suggests that at a minimum children should be given information about the purpose of their involvement, be able to choose if and how they would like to participate, and be made aware of how their contributions will be utilised.

Therefore, the current study recognises that the appropriate level of participation will vary but that participation should not be tokenistic. At a minimum, children should be supported to express their views, either directly or through a nominated adult. These views should be listened to by those who have the authority to make decisions that impact children's lives.

2.2 Importance of Children's Involvement

The reformed statutory assessment process prioritises children's involvement in making decisions about their education and promotes person-centred planning. This section will examine some of the catalysts for this change in policy and legislation by considering why children's involvement is important.

2.2.1 Involvement Is Prioritised by Children

One reason for promoting children's involvement is that children themselves prioritise their participation in decision-making and consistently rate having a voice in matters that impact their lives as one of the most important issues that concern them (Kilkelly et al., 2005). Evidence in support of this comes from various fields. In one study, Swedish adolescents were interviewed about their experiences of accessing mental health care (Persson et al., 2017). The authors identified some broad themes from adolescents' positive experiences with professionals. The adolescents preferred to have some control over choosing the topics for discussion in sessions with professionals. They also valued being heard and seen by professionals. Another study found that being listened to by adults was the most important healthcare priority for primary, secondary, and college students across Europe (Bensted et al., 2015). The findings of these studies are consistent with those of a systematic review of children's experiences of working with professionals, which reported that involvement in decision-making was one of eight domains children identified as contributing to a positive experience (Ambresin et al., 2013).

Studies have found that participating in decision-making is similarly important to children in educational settings (Adams et al., 2017; Burke, 2010; Redwood, 2015). A nationwide survey by the Children's Commissioner reported that student voice initiatives were amongst the most popular activities in schools and were valued by children (Burke, 2010). In another national survey, Adams et al. (2017) reported that children who had been involved in their EHC assessment rated their satisfaction with the process more highly than children who had not been involved. Finally, an in-depth case study by Redwood (2015), who interviewed one child about his experience of participating in the EHCNA process, described the importance that the child ascribed to being invited to participate in decision-making for his EHC plan.

The theory of social constructionism can explain why children view their own participation as important. According to social constructionism, people make sense of the world by constructing meaningful narratives of their experiences (Burr, 2015; Kelly, 1955). These narratives are socially constructed as they develop relative to the context and culture that the person is a part of. They are, therefore, influenced by the person's social interactions. While social context plays a role in shaping people's perceptions, their interpretations of similar experiences are unique and guided by their own world view. By engaging in discourse, people co-create meaning to reach a shared understanding and move towards a common goal. Children's preference for being involved in making decisions that affect them can be understood as a need to communicate their unique perspective and arrive at a solution that is personally meaningful. Each person's lived experience is different and cannot be assumed, so it is important to facilitate children to share their views during the EHCNA process.

2.2.2 Person-Centred Planning Is Effective

The latest edition of the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) promotes person-centred planning as a key tool to drive children's involvement. Person-centred planning

primarily aims to put children at the centre of planning decisions that impact them and that build to meaningful outcomes for children and their families (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). As part of the person-centred planning process, children and their families work in partnership with professionals, share their views, and collaborate to create a plan that can bring children closer towards achieving their goals (Sanderson & Lewis, 2012). Person-centred planning derives from a range of psychological traditions. It is influenced by positive psychology and strives to celebrate children's strengths and facilitate the identification of structures and systems that support children's development (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). It also draws on concepts from social constructionism. Plans developed through person-centred planning processes are personalised and reflect children's preferences and views (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015).

Evidence from a range of sources suggests that person-centred planning results in plans that are individualised and effective. Research in the field of healthcare suggests that adolescent patients' satisfaction with services, understanding of health, and adherence to treatment plans is higher when person-centred approaches are applied to planning their treatment (Hargreaves, 2014). There is also evidence of the effectiveness of person-centred planning in educational settings. A longitudinal study examined the impact of, and barriers to, using person-centred planning for children with learning disabilities across England (Robertson et al., 2007). Twenty-five children with learning disabilities were selected from four sites of an organisation located across England. Sites were chosen based on the diversity of the locality, with the aim of obtaining a sample that was demographically representative of England's population. The sites were included based on an evaluation of their commitment to using person-centred planning to enrich the lives of children with learning disabilities. Measures of social skills were taken before and after the implementation of person-

centred planning over two years. A moderate positive change was observed in multiple social skills at the end of this period, suggesting that person-centred planning contributes to positive outcomes for children with learning disabilities. One limitation of this study is that it focused on a single organisation. Sutcliffe and Birney (2015) highlighted the need for person-centred planning to take place within the context of a person-centred culture, in which all members share person-centred values. In choosing an organisation which was already committed to person-centred planning, and therefore had some of the shared values necessary for person-centred planning approaches to be applied successfully, the transferability of the findings is limited to other organisations which share similar cultures. Nonetheless, the study shows the impact that person-centred planning can have when people and organisations are invested in the process.

In another longitudinal study, person-centred planning tools including one-page personal profiles and reflective problem-solving circles were used with children with learning and behavioural difficulties in a residential education setting (Holburn et al., 2004). A matched control group received traditional interdisciplinary service planning over the same period. The intervention group was reported to have made significantly greater gains in outcomes related to self-care and independence skills compared to the control group (Holburn et al., 2004). The study is limited by the presence of a confounding variable. Over the course of the study, some participants moved out of the residential facility and into the community, where they had access to community activities and resources. It is not possible to determine the impact of this factor on participants' outcomes or to separate its effects from those of person-centred planning as the researchers did not measure or control this factor.

The authors of both longitudinal studies described above asserted that participants reported feelings of ownership over plans created through person-centred processes and felt motivated to work towards their goals (Holburn et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2007). Both studies gathered information about children's views through advocates or supporters of the children rather than from the children themselves. According to Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1997), these children were merely "considered" and were not truly involved in the planning process. Furthermore, the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) advises that children's views should be sought directly as information provided by a proxy is the proxy's interpretation of children's views. The reliance on key people to share participants' views constitutes a significant limitation of both these studies. Despite the limitations of the studies, both suggest that person-centred planning promotes satisfaction with the agreed plan and motivates children to work towards their goals. The studies also highlight an opportunity to extend the existing research base through studies in which children directly share their own views.

2.3 Children's Involvement at Present

In establishing the context of the current study, it is important to consider children's involvement at present. Since the EHCNA process was implemented, there has been some research focused on the extent of children's involvement. This section will describe these studies.

2.3.1 Children's Involvement in Decision-Making

In a large-scale national survey, Adams et al. (2017) collected information about children's and parents' involvement in the EHCNA process. While a majority of parents surveyed reported that their own views had been sought during the EHCNA process, they felt that children's views were sought less frequently. Children's involvement was mediated by various factors which will be described subsequently in this chapter.

Although some children responded directly to the survey, the researchers acknowledged that many of the responses about children's involvement were gathered from parents rather than directly from the children. Overall, a mixed and inconsistent picture of children's involvement emerged. Adams et al. concluded that, while children are involved in the process to some degree, their inclusion as active partners was not yet ingrained in everyday practice.

While Adams et al.'s (2017) survey gathered information on a large scale to determine the extent of children's involvement in the EHCNA process, other researchers have focused on deeply understanding children's experiences of participation and professionals' experiences of involving children in the EHCNA process. Implementing a multiple nested case study design, Cochrane (2016) sought three SENCOs' and one EP's views on involving children in the EHCNA process. Most of the professionals interviewed felt that facilitating children to share their voice helped inform the EHC plan. Involving children in the process was described as being the key to obtaining valuable insight into the world of individual children whose development the EHC plan was meant to support. Speaking from her own experience of involving a child in the EHCNA process, the EP described the sense of empowerment the child felt as a result of his participation, which was thought to be a positive experience.

In an earlier case study, a ten-year-old boy was interviewed about his experience of the EHCNA process (Redwood, 2015). This child recounted details that contributed to making his experience of involvement a positive one. He described how positive attitudes towards children's involvement on the part of the professionals led him to feel that his voice was valued. In particular, the child named active listening techniques, including receiving verbal and non-verbal feedback from professionals, as indicators that he was being listened to. This culminated in being given the opportunity

to review a draft of his plan, which reflected the child's views and evidenced the value of his participation. This child's account of his involvement shows some elements of Hart's definition of participation (Hart, 1997), specifically that the child was consulted in decision-making and that his contributions were reflected in the final plan.

Research suggests that children's participation in decision-making is inconsistent and not yet embedded in professionals' standard practice (Adams et al., 2017; Burke, 2010). Other research indicates that professionals see the value in involving children, as meaningful participation contributes to the creation of plans that better meet children's needs (Cochrane, 2016). Children themselves value the opportunity for learning that involvement in the process presents. Finally, the research revealed that meaningful involvement is more than simply being listened to (Redwood, 2015). Being able to influence decisions that are made is an important element in children's participation.

2.3.2 Factors That Influence Children's Involvement

A number of factors are reported to impact the degree of children's involvement in decision-making processes, including age, ethnicity, SEN status, language and communication ability, and mental capacity (Adams et al. 2017; Burke, 2010; & Redwood, 2015). Age appears to be a critical factor in determining children's involvement. One survey found that an average of 58% of the children reported that their views had been sought and an average of 51% stated that they had been included in meetings (Adams et al., 2017). A clear pattern emerges when the data are grouped according to children's age. While approximately 75% of participants in the age range of sixteen to twenty-five years felt that they had been consulted and included in meetings about their EHC plan, only 46% of participants between the ages of five and ten years were asked to share their views and only 32% were included in meetings. A significant limitation of this survey was that it did not collect details of how the children

participated so it is not possible to ascertain the nature of children's participation in the context of Hart's (1997), Sutcliffe and Birney's (2015) or Lundy's (2007) models of participation. For example, children may have attended meetings but they may have had no active part in them and may not have been involved in influencing the decisions made. The lack of qualitative information about children's experiences of participation constitutes a gap in the literature which this study hoped to fill.

Children's SEND, particularly speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN), were also reported to be a factor influencing children's involvement in the EHCNA process (Adams et al., 2017). The survey found that children with SLCN and those who were English language learners were less likely to be involved in the EHCNA process. This is linked to reports that visual and communication aids were not utilised in 25-33% of cases in which their use could have enabled children to access discussions about issues that affect them and supported children to participate in the EHCNA process (Adams et al., 2017). In a case study, Cochrane (2016) found that children's views had been sought during the EHCNA process for two out of three children. The one child who had not been involved in the EHCNA process was excluded due to significant SLCN, which adults viewed as a barrier to her participation. In another case study, Redwood (2015) found that only one out of five participants had been involved in the EHCNA process. This child was the oldest child in the sample and was judged to have good social communication skills by the adults

Overall, research suggests that children's age and SEND impact children's involvement in the EHCNA process. Older children and those who are judged by adults to have good speech and language skills and low levels of SEND are more frequently asked to share their views and be involved in the EHCNA process (Adams et al., 2017; Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). It is worth noting that it is often the adults'

judgement of children's capacity, based on their age and SEND, that determines the children's involvement.

2.4 Facilitating Children's Involvement

Young children and children with SEND, particularly SLCN, have fewer opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes (Adams et al., 2017; Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). One possible reason for this is that it is more challenging for professionals to facilitate the participation of very young children and children with additional needs. Identifying factors that can facilitate children's involvement is an important step in supporting all children to participate in the EHCNA process. This section will consider which professionals are ideally placed to support children to become involved in decision-making and describe creative methods to access children's voices.

2.4.1 Adults As Facilitators

The SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) regards the role of adults as facilitators whose role is to enable and empower children and families to share their views and participate in making decisions. In this capacity, EPs and school staff who work closely with children, including SENCos, class teachers, and TAs, have a vital role to play. Adults can fulfil this duty in a number of ways which exemplify each rung of Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1997). One role that adults may adopt is that of a proxy, in which they use their judgement and knowledge of the children to share what they believe the children's views are. Here, the child is "considered" but is not supported to make a direct contribution to the process (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). An adult may instead take on the role of an advocate for the child, wherein the adult supports the child to consider and express his or her views directly so that they are "represented". A survey found that this was the most common form of facilitation that adults engaged in, with adults acting as advocates for children in 41% of cases (Adams et al., 2017).

Another common practice is for children to be invited to participate in meetings, such as Team Around the Child meetings or Annual Review meetings (Adams et al., 2017). At these meetings, adults may facilitate children by supporting them to respond to decisions made for them (they are “consulted”), to ask questions and contribute to making decisions (they are “participants”), to choose topics for discussion or lead sections of the meeting (they are “partners”), or to provide meaningful feedback to adults on the support they require (they are “planners”) (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). At present, there is little research that distinguishes between the degrees of participation, particularly the higher levels, so it is difficult to say how prevalent this type of involvement is.

2.4.2 Methods to Elicit Children’s Voice

In order to successfully involve children to be “partners” or “planners” in the EHCNA process, professionals need to adopt creative and innovate methods to ensure that children with a range of needs can access and participate in the decision-making process. This reduces the reliance on familiar adults to interpret the views of children who cannot communicate their views themselves. The use of proxies in this manner, although advised against in the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) is nonetheless common in cases involving children with SLCN (Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). Several researchers have developed and evaluated methods by which children’s views can be gained directly, including visual and narrative methods.

A simple, yet effective way to gain the views of children is the use of visual methods. These are commonly used with children with a range of SLCN (Redwood, 2015). Adults and professionals working with children with poor expressive language skills can support them to participate by using visual aids, such as images of smiling and frowning faces or gestures such as thumbs up or down to express likes and dislikes (Hill et al., 2006). The use of photography is also a popular choice for a number

of reasons. First, photography is an attractive activity that few children have the opportunity to engage in. Second, photographs taken by children that are used as stimuli for discussions are argued to elicit rich responses as they are personal and meaningful to children (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010).

Children's drawings are another visual tool that can provide information about children's views. Kinetic family drawing is a projective tool that is often used to gain insight into children's worlds and perspectives. It is particularly useful when seeking to discuss sensitive issues with young children and those with expressive language needs (Driessnack, 2005). Other drawing-based techniques involve the creation of maps and reproductions of familiar spaces (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Some methods also ask children to create an ideal version of a familiar space (Stafford, 2017). Discrepancies between the true space and the children's recollection of the space represented in his or her drawing can help adults understand the children's subjective experience or perspective (Stafford, 2017). The researcher also proposes that an analysis of the ideal space drawing can yield information about children's desired outcomes and their views about the support needed to help them achieve their goals (Stafford, 2017). A major drawback of these visual methods is that while they enable children with expressive language difficulties to communicate their views, they do not accommodate the needs of children with receptive language difficulties, who may struggle to follow the language-saturated instructions and questions that accompany these methods.

Another common method for eliciting children's views is the use of oral, written, or visual stimuli. The "Graffiti Wall" is a technique in which verbal discussions and written or visual materials are used to support children to share their views (Hill et al., 2006). Written prompts can include sentence completion, word choice prompts, and

the completion of unfinished stories to which children may respond by speaking, signing or gesturing, drawing, or writing (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). While this method can be adapted to meet the needs of children with both receptive and expressive language difficulties, it is not clear how the information generated is shared in meetings with professionals.

Narrative methods are also used to elicit children's views. These methods seek to learn about and understand historical events in children's lives through the generation of a personal story over a period of time (Niemi et al., 2015). This can be achieved through sorting or ranking tasks such as the diamond ranking activity, in which children rank statements, images, or photographs in the order of their personal significance (O'Kane, 2008). While the ranking of the stimuli is the apparent objective of the task, it is, in fact, the reasoning behind the decisions made in determining the ranking that provides valuable information (Clark, 2012). In addition to these tasks, personal narratives can also be elicited through a range of tasks such as arranging personal photographs in a meaningful order (Newman, Woodcock & Dunham, 2006) and the use of diaries, memory books, and life storybooks (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Narrative methods are highly engaging and provide rich and valuable information about children, but they are cognitively demanding and require good language and communication skills. Adults who seek to use these activities with children must ensure that tasks are adapted to meet the needs of children with SEND.

2.5 Gaps in the Existing Literature

A review of the existing literature highlighted a number of gaps which the current study aimed to address. First, much of the research about children's participation in the EHCNA process has focused on determining if and to what extent children are involved (Adams et al., 2017). Few studies have sought to understand the

experiences of children involved in the EHCNA process. Where this has been done, studies have focused on exploring experiences from the perspectives of adults rather than children (Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). This study aims to go beyond this by understanding children's experiences of the EHCNA process directly from their perspective as well as the perspectives of adults.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explores the methodological decisions that underpin the current study. It begins by summarising the purpose of this study and restating the research questions. The ontological and epistemological perspectives that inform the study are then presented. Next, the design of the study is described, including the participant recruitment process and data collection methods and tools. The steps taken to ensure that the study adhered to ethical standards are then outlined. Finally, the data analysis methods are described.

3.1 Aims and Purpose of the Research

The study explored children's experiences of participating in the EHCNA process as well as EPs' and SENCOs' views on involving children in the process. The study aimed to answer the following broad research questions:

1. How are children involved in the EHCNA process?
2. How is children's involvement perceived?
3. What factors facilitate or act as barriers to children's involvement?

The purpose of the research was to extend the current literature on the topic and deepen understanding of the process of involving children in decision-making. Another goal of the study was to provide insight into good practice to promote children's involvement in the EHCNA process that could be of practical value to adults who work with children in schools.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives

Ontology relates to beliefs about the nature of reality, while epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge or how we come to know about reality (Pawson & Tilley, 2004). It is important to consider the ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpin research as they govern choices made during the process of designing the study, collecting data, and interpreting the information gathered (Thomas, 2013).

Some researchers take a position of positivism, which claims that there are 'truths' or facts in the external world that can be observed and measured (Gray, 2004). Positivism dictates that researchers must be objective and dispassionate in their methods to study reality. This view is criticised as being reductionist when applied to social research, as it fails to capture the complexities of the social world that cannot be directly observed (Thomas, 2013). A contrasting position is relativism, which claims that there is no objective truth and that there are realities shaped by the individual's beliefs in the context of his historical or cultural background (Gray, 2004). This perspective is criticised because it restricts the transferability of research- if reality is subjective then findings are strictly limited to the sample of the study and reveal nothing of the reality of others (Thomas, 2013).

Few modern researchers take a purely positivist or relativist perspective and there are many positions along the continuum between the two extremes (Bryman, 2006). One such position is social constructionism, which holds that reality is subjective and co-constructed through dynamic and reciprocal social interactions (Burr, 2015). Burr describes how meaning is made through shared values, culture, and discourse that shapes individuals' views of themselves, others, and the world. Social constructionism takes the epistemological stance that understanding is embedded in social processes, therefore, interaction between the researcher and the subject is important (Creswell, 2007). Criticisms of research adopting the social constructionist perspective relate to the transferability of findings but it is argued that generalisation is not the intention of this type of research (Thomas, 2013). Instead, some suggest that researchers draw 'practical wisdom' from their findings, reflecting on what can be learnt from a sample of individuals to formulate personal theories or working hypotheses that can be applied to other cases (Schram, 2012).

The current study sought to explore children's, EPs' and SENCOs' views on involving children in the EHCNA process. It sits within the social constructionist perspective and acknowledges that participants' views on the subject are co-constructed in the context of the current discourse around empowering children to have a voice in decision-making. The study aimed to generate 'practical wisdom' that could inform good practice for education professionals who support children with SEND. The development of the design and methodology of the study were therefore guided by social constructionist principles.

3.3 Research Design

The study aimed to gain rich and detailed information about participants' views and experiences, so the research was qualitative in nature. Creswell (2007) describes five types of qualitative research designs: ethnography, narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study. Ethnographic designs require researchers to be immersed in the context that they study, often as 'participant observers'. As the researcher was not part of the schools in which this study was carried out, this design did not suit the current study as it would not adequately capture the views of other professionals and children. Creswell describes narrative designs as being focused on sequencing events to construct a cohesive story. This design was not appropriate either as the current study was interested in participants' views at a single point in time. Phenomenological designs seek to describe events or phenomena and grounded theory goes a step further by attempting to explain events by developing theories (Creswell, 2007). Neither of these approaches were suitable as the purpose of the current study was to gain insight into the views and experiences of participants to inform professional practice, not to build theories. A case study design, which allows the researcher to deeply understand a particular case or topic of interest, was therefore judged to be the most appropriate for this research.

Case study designs are widely used in research in a number of disciplines as they align with a range of epistemological positions (Robson, 2011). Critics point out that this flexibility makes case studies hard to define, leading to inconsistency in its design and use by different researchers (Gerring, 2007). Thomas (2015) argues that case studies are a broad framework designed to be adaptable to different epistemologies. Case study designs can be centred on a single case or they may draw on common themes from multiple cases (Thomas, 2011). A multiple case study design was selected for this research for a number of reasons. First, the flexible nature of the case study design meant that it would fit with the social constructionist stance that this research took. By design, case studies celebrate the subjective nature of reality and do not assume that an objective truth can be discovered (Thomas, 2011). Second, the research was exploratory in nature as there are only a small number of similar studies in the existing literature that could be used to inform the design and direction of the current study. A case study design complements this type of exploratory research as it supports in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives (Gray, 2004). Given the limited research about experiences of the EHCNA process, rich and detailed accounts from participants were expected to constitute a valuable addition to the current literature. Finally, a multiple case study design was preferred to a single case study design as the research sought to generate 'practical wisdom' that could inform professional practice. This purpose is better served by collecting the views of a number of participants and identifying common emerging themes (Thomas, 2015) as capturing diverse views leads to a better understanding of the topic being researched (Yin, 2014).

3.4 Data Collection Method

Careful consideration was given when choosing a data collection method for this study. Focus groups were initially considered. However, this method was rejected

as it limits the interviewer's ability to ask clarifying questions or follow-up questions for more detail whilst ensuring that the conversation remains centred on relevant topics (Robson, 2011). This was at odds with the epistemological position of the current study which valued the reciprocal process by which meaning was co-constructed between the researcher and participants. Additionally, the focus group method favours participants who have strong social communication skills and those who are outgoing or assertive (Acocella, 2012). Even with high quality facilitation on the part of the researcher, focus groups do not provide an equal opportunity for participants who are more reserved or have poor communication skills to share their views. Acocella argues that this method is also more susceptible to the effects of conformity, wherein members whose views that are different to the view of the majority may refrain from sharing their views or change their views to agree with the group. This can result in data that do not fully reflect the views of each individual or that are biased.

Interviews were also considered as a method of data collection. Robson (2011) described and evaluated three types of face-to-face interviews: structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews. Structured interviews are based on a strict script and a set of pre-determined questions which drive the conversation between the researcher and participant. The advantage of this method is that the researcher's interaction with participants is controlled, removing differences in questions and prompts as a factor that can influence participants' responses (Robson, 2011). However, this method has a similar shortcoming to the focus group method in that the researcher cannot stray from the interview script, which removes the opportunity to ask clarifying or follow-up questions (Phellas, Bloch, & Seale, 2011). On the other hand, unstructured interviews elicit free-flowing narratives from participants, with the researcher only prompting participants to say more without guiding the conversation

in any particular direction (Robson, 2011). This method generates rich and detailed information and is participant-driven but, similar to focus groups, it is less suitable for participants who are reserved (Robson, 2011). Additionally, in allowing participants to take a lead, there is a risk that the conversation may digress from topics that are relevant to the research questions (Opdenakker, 2006). Semi-structured interviews have specific areas of focus with broad questions and prompts to guide the conversation but allow the researcher to vary these according to the participant's response (Robson, 2011). Robson further argues that semi-structured interviews are strengthened by drawing on the advantages of both structured and unstructured interview formats.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of data collection for this research for a number of reasons. This method aligns with the epistemological position of the study as it acknowledges that the researcher plays a role in co-constructing of shared understanding with participants (Robson, 2011). The EHCNA process that was central to this study was designed to be participatory and to involve children and parents in decision-making, therefore it was logical that the data collection method used also promotes participation. As a participatory approach, interviews espouse the view that people should be involved in research that seeks to explore topics that have implications for their lives (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) and are consistent with the policy behind the EHCNA process. Another reason for choosing semi-structured interview for this research was that they are effective in generating rich and detailed descriptions from participants (Yin, 2014). This fits with the exploratory nature of the research.

In comparison to other methods of gathering participants' views, semi-structured interviews give the researcher the opportunity to actively react to

participants' responses and adjust prompts and questions based on these responses. This allows for checking of participants' understanding of the researcher's questions and permits the researcher to re-phrase questions if there has been any misunderstanding. Researchers can also check their own understanding of participants' responses, resulting in the gathering of more accurate information (Bowling, 2005). Furthermore, the researcher is able to ask clarifying and follow-up questions to probe participants' responses in order to elicit further detail. This fosters deep, meaningful interactions that create shared understanding (Robson, 2011). The ability to tailor questions to participants' needs was particularly important when interviewing children with SEND, as the language and format of the interview could be adjusted to suit them. The freedom to follow up on particularly interesting responses from participants lent a casual, conversational tone to the interview, which has been found to be more comfortable for the participant (Gray, 2004), while the interview schedule prevented the interview from digressing too far from the topic of interest (Robson, 2011).

3.5 Participants

The participants in this study were EPs, SENCOs, and primary-school aged children from one London LA. This section outlines the inclusion criteria applied to participants and describe how they were recruited. Relevant demographic information of the participants who took part in this study is also presented. All names of children, SENCOs, EPs, schools, and school staff that appear in this thesis are pseudonyms assigned by the researcher to maintain anonymity.

3.5.1 Inclusion Criteria

Qualified EPs and SENCOs from primary schools in the LA in which this research was carried out were invited to participate. Children who were in Key Stage 2 and had EHC plans that were issued during the Autumn term of the 2019/20

academic year were invited to participate. Primary school-aged children were chosen as the target age group because previous research mainly focussed on older children, leaving a gap in the existing literature that this study aimed to fill. Furthermore, a report published by the LA in which this study was carried out found that EHC plans were more commonly requested in primary school, as children whose needs were significant enough to require a plan were often identified at a young age, so it was anticipated that the pool of potential participants would be larger in primary schools. Children's interviews were conducted in the same term that their EHC plan had been issued so that the process of getting the plan was more likely to be recollected accurately. Children with significant SLCN, severe or profound deafness, or blindness were excluded from the study to allow the semi-structured interview experience to be comparable across participants, while ensuring that children could meaningfully engage with the questions. Vulnerable children, including those who experience severe anxiety when interacting with new people, were also excluded to avoid causing distress.

3.5.2 Participant Recruitment Procedure

Recruitment began by identifying children who met the inclusion criteria. This was done by monitoring the outcomes of EHCNAs. In the LA in which this research took place, a document is circulated on a weekly basis within the EPS to keep EPs apprised of the LA's decision to issue or not issue EHC plans for children following the completion of their EHCNA. These documents were monitored over the Autumn term of the 2019/20 academic year and were used to identify children who had been issued an EHC plan in that term. These children were added to a list of potential participants. Approach letters were sent, via SENCOs, to head teachers of schools that these potential participants attended (Appendix D). These were followed up with a phone call a week later to further discuss the study and verbally seek the head

teacher's consent for the research to take place in his/her school. During these initial conversations with the head teachers and SENCos, it was discovered that some of the identified children did not meet the participant inclusion criteria for various reasons (Figure 3). These children were excluded from the study at this point. With the head teachers' consent, approach letters and consent forms were sent to the SENCo (Appendices E and F) and parents/carers (Appendices G and H) of the identified children who met the participant inclusion criteria. This was followed up a week later with a phone call to the SENCo. The researcher arranged for SENCos who consented to participate to be interviewed in their schools.

If parents/carers gave permission, the researcher liaised with the SENCo to set up a meeting with the child. The researcher met with each child individually to explain the research, share the participant information sheet (Appendix I) with them and go through it together, answer any questions about the research, and seek their consent to participate (Appendix J). A time to interview him/her at school was arranged with the SENCo.

EP recruitment took place in the Spring term of 2019/20 academic year, after the children's interviews were completed. EPs who were linked to the schools that the participants attended were approached during a team meeting and approach letters and consent forms were circulated via email (Appendices E and F). This was followed up with an email and further conversations. Interviews with EPs were conducted at the EPS office.

3.5.3 Participant Demographics

Of the thirteen children whose parents were approached for this study, consent to participate was received from five children (Figure 3). These five children were spread across three schools. As a result, three SENCos were approached and interviewed for the study. One of these schools had two link EPs, each of whom was

involved in the EHCNA process for a child who participated in the study. Therefore, four EPs were approached and interviewed. The links between the children, SENCOs, and EPs who participated are depicted in Figure 4.

FIGURE 3

Diagram of the Participant Recruitment Process

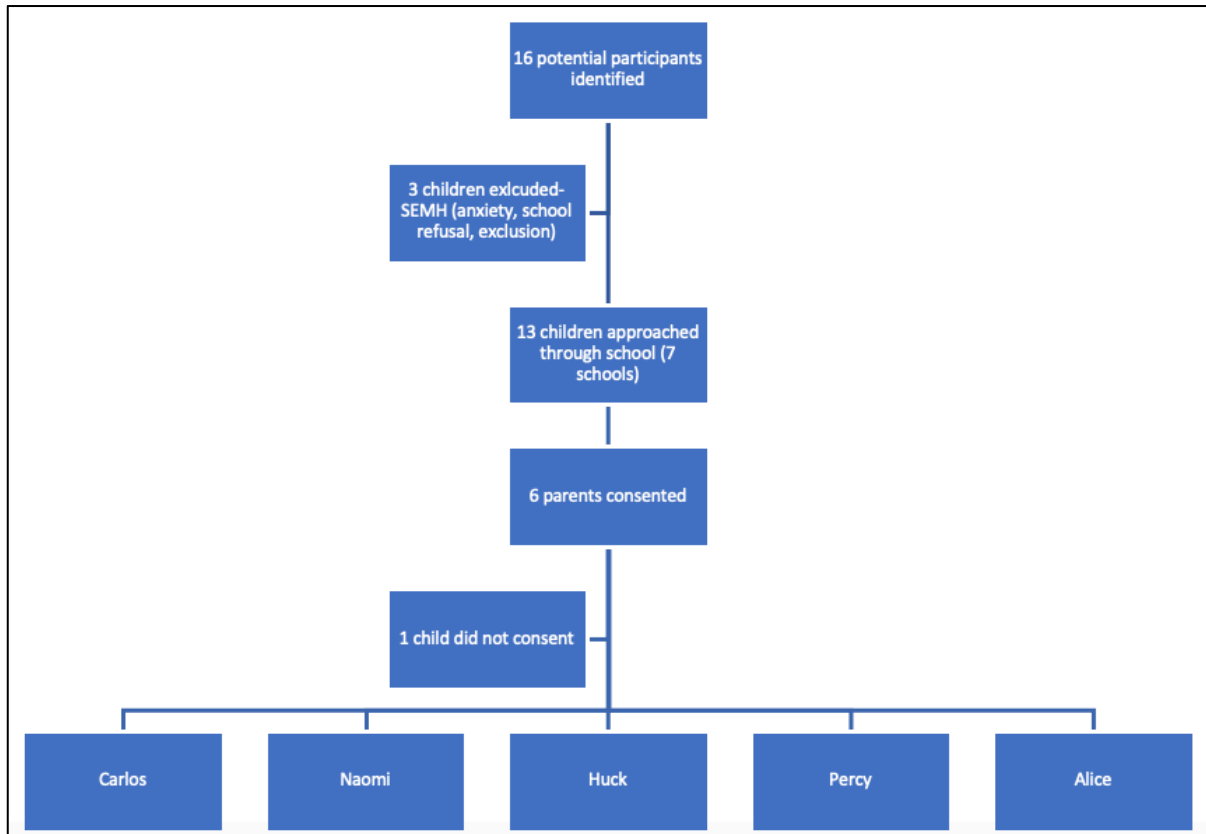
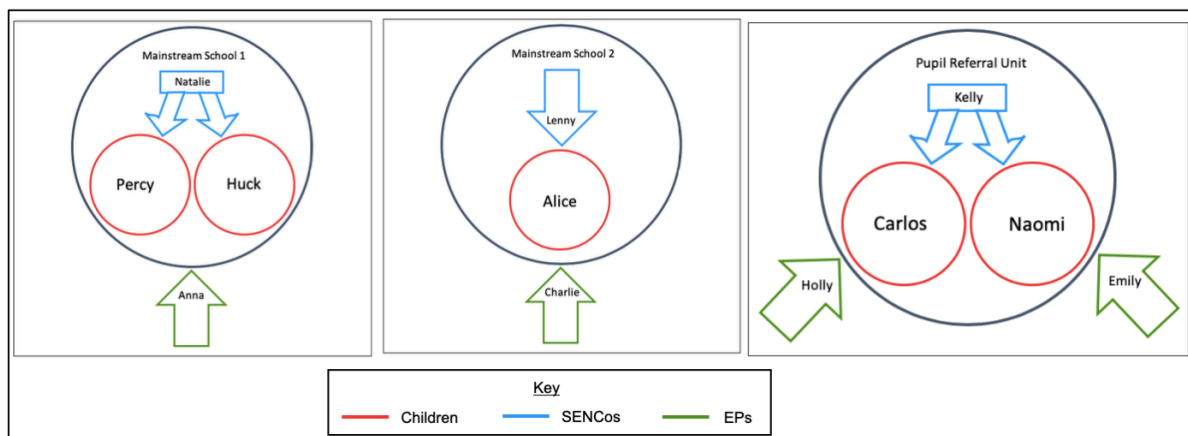


FIGURE 4

Diagram Showing Links Between Participants



Children. Table 2 shows the demographic information of the children who participated in this study. The children were spread across all year groups in Key Stage 2 and had diverse ethnic backgrounds. Both boys and girls participated in the study. The children’s primary needs indicated on their EHC plans were ASC, SEMH, and MLD, which were the most common primary needs identified in a report by the LA which was described in Chapter 1. Based on this report, the sample of children who participated in this study are believed to have been representative of the children in the LA in which this study was carried out.

TABLE 2

Demographic Information of the Children

Child's Name	Gender	Year Group	School	Ethnicity	Primary Need
Carlos	Male	3	PRU	Mixed-White and Black Caribbean	SEMH
Naomi	Female	5	PRU	Palestinian	SEMH
Huck	Male	6	MS 1	White British	ASC
Percy	Male	3	MS 1	Turkish	ASC
Alice	Female	4	MS 2	Mixed-White and Black Caribbean	MLD

SENCOs. Table 3 shows the demographic information of the SENCOs who participated in this study. There was one male SENCOs and two female SENCOs and their prior experience in the role ranged from one year to twenty-eight years.

TABLE 3

Demographic Information of the SENCOs

SENCO Name	Number of Years in Role	School
Kelly	1	PRU
Natalie	12	MS 1
Lenny	28	MS 2

EPs. Table 4 shows the demographic information of the EPs who participated in this study. There was one male EP and three female EPs. Two EPs were Seniors who had many years of experience in their role as EPs, and two EPs were maingrades who were recently or newly qualified as EPs.

TABLE 4

Demographic Information of the EPs

EP Name	Number of Years of Practice Since Qualification	Post in Educational Psychology Service	Link School
Holly	3	Maingrade	PRU
Emily	<1	Maingrade	PRU
Anna	21	Senior	MS 1
Charlie	19	Senior	MS 2

3.6 Data Collection

Two interview schedules were created to collect data for this study- an adults' interview schedule for EPs and SENCoS and a children's interview schedule. This was done in recognition of the different perspectives of adults and children as service providers and service users of the EHCNA process respectively. The procedure for the interviews with the adult participants and the children also differed. These are described separately in the following sections.

3.6.1 EP and SENCo Interviews

This section describes the interview schedules and interview procedure for the SENCoS and EPs who participated in this study.

EP and SENCo Interview Schedules. The development of the adult participants' interview schedule (Appendix K) was informed by the research questions, which in turn emerged from the existing literature on the topic of children's participation and the EHCNA process. Additionally, the adults' interview schedule was also informed by conversations with the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) and the SENCo Network Co-ordinator in the LA in which the current study was carried out.

The researcher sought their opinion on what would make the study a useful contribution to their professions. This helped to focus the interview schedule to seek information that could have valuable practical implications for professionals. The PEP highlighted the utility of gathering information about creative ways to facilitate children's participation in the EHCNA process, taking account of any SEND. The SENCo Network Co-ordinator suggested that there was a gap in the LA SENCos' knowledge about the impact of involving children in EHC decision-making processes and a lack of awareness about the various tools that could be used to facilitate children's involvement. These considerations led to the inclusion of three focus areas for the professionals' interviews:

1. Operationalisation of children's involvement - how do SENCos and EPs involve children in the EHCNA process?
2. Views on children's involvement - what do SENCos and EPs think about children's involvement?
3. Factors that facilitate or act as barriers to children's involvement- what helps or hinders children's involvement?

The first EP interview and the first SENCo interview were treated as pilot interviews and necessary changes to the interview schedule and procedure were made prior to interviews with the remaining adult participants. The question, "what is your top tip for other EPs/SENCos who want to facilitate children's participation in the EHCNA process?" was added to the interview schedule to conclude the interview and capture what SENCos and EPs viewed as the key to facilitating children's involvement. This was a minor change that did not create a significant difference between the data gathered in the pilot interview and the other interviews.

EP and SENCo Interview Procedures. The EP and SENCo interviews took thirty minutes to complete. The adult participants' interviews were composed of three phases.

Phase 1: Rapport Building. Building rapport is an important starting step when conducting interviews (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). Guillemin and Heggen describe how good interpersonal relationships are essential to address the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant, allowing participants to feel comfortable and resulting in the generation of rich data. For this study, the researcher spent approximately five minutes engaging the participant in casual conversation. Participants were affirmed of their ability to make a valuable contribution on the basis of their professional experience in their current role in order to shift the balance of power between the researcher and participant to a more equal state. The researcher also collected demographic information at this stage.

Phase 2: Interview. The interview was guided by the interview schedule in Appendix K.

Phase 3: Debrief. Participants had the opportunity to reflect on the interview and ask questions. They were also informed that the findings of the study would be made accessible to them through a research summary report after the research was completed.

3.6.2 Children's Interviews

This section describes the interview schedule and interview procedure for the children who participated in this study.

Children's Interview Schedule. The development of the children's interview schedule (Appendix L) was informed by the research questions, which were in turn informed by previous research, in particular studies by Cochrane (2016) and Redwood (2015). The children's interview schedule was also informed by a previous project the

researcher conducted in which four secondary school-aged children were interviewed about their experiences of the EHCNA process. In recalling their experience of the EHCNA process, the children noted that it was often the SENCo or a key adult at school who first told them about the EHCNA process and worked with them to gain their views. Children also shared their experience of attending meetings about their plan and felt that this was when they were most involved in the process. They also described what they liked about participating in the process, such as having control over aspects of the meetings, and what they disliked, such as having to interact with adults that they did not know. Overall, most of the children interviewed knew that they had an EHC plan but had not seen the document and many had little involvement in the process apart from their attendance at Annual Review meetings. These considerations led to the inclusion of four focus areas for the children's interviews:

1. Initiating the process- how do children become involved in the process?
2. Participation in the process- what does children's participation look like?
3. Views on participation- what do children think about their own involvement?
4. Facilitators and barriers to participation- what factors help or hinder children's involvement?

The first two interviews conducted with children were treated as pilot interviews. Some changes were made to the interview procedure and schedule prior to conducting the remaining children's interviews. The interviews were initially planned to take up to thirty minutes, however, the pilot interviews took approximately one hour to complete. Taking into account the children's age, attention span, and comfort, it was necessary to split the interview into two thirty-minute sessions. Due to children's timetables and the researcher's own availability, these sessions often were on separate days. In all cases, the researcher ensured that both sessions took place in the same week to

minimise the variability in children's experiences of the interview. Additionally, the order of some questions was changed to improve the flow of the interview and a question about whether children knew they had an EHC plan or an extra support plan was added at the start to establish children's knowledge about the topic. In the pilot interviews, the children were engaged in a card sorting activity in which they sorted images representing practices which they found to be 'helpful' or 'unhelpful' during their participation in the EHCNA process. The purpose of this task was to deepen the discussion about children's experiences. This was replaced with a diamond ranking activity (O'Kane, 2008) as sorting pictures into two categories proved to be too limiting and did not shed light on the motivations behind children's preferences. The diamond ranking activity is described in more detail in the following section.

Children's Interview Procedure. The children's interviews were completed over two thirty-minute sessions and consisted of five phases in total.

Phase 1: Seeking Consent and Pre-Interview Information. Once parental consent for children's participation in the study had been received, the researcher arranged to meet with the child individually to seek his/her consent. The children's information sheet (Appendix I) was reshared with the child and the researcher went through it with him/her. The researcher also shared an information sheet about the EHCNA process (Appendix M) and discussed this with the children. This initial meeting served multiple purposes. It informed children about the research and provided them with some background information about EHC plans so that they were aware what the interview referred to. It also gave the children an opportunity to interact with the researcher prior to the interview so that they would be more comfortable during the interview. Finally, this opportunity allowed the researcher to get a sense of the child's communication, attention, and processing skills so that the interview would be pitched

at the appropriate level. This ensured that children could meaningfully engage in the conversation.

Phase 2: Rapport Building. In research with children, power imbalance is twofold as there is the added dynamic of an adult researcher interviewing a child participant (Punch, 2002). This makes rapport building particularly important in research with children. The researcher spent approximately ten minutes engaging the participant in casual conversation. This was facilitated through ice-breaker games and activities. The researcher brought a collection of puzzles, word games, card games, and logic games that children were able to choose from. Demographic information was collected from the school rather than from the children.

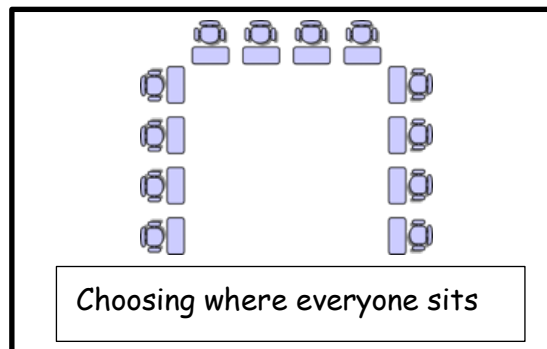
Phase 3: Interview. The interview was guided by the interview schedule in Appendix L. A visual communication aid was developed based on a method described by Hill et al (2016) and Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) in order to facilitate communication with children who have SEND, particularly speech and language needs. The children's interview schedule was illustrated and each question was printed on an individual card which was displayed on the table when the researcher asked the question. Questions to prompt children to give more information were also illustrated, printed, and displayed in a similar way, when necessary. Appendix N shows an excerpt of a child's interview.

Pictorial communication aids were also available to help children respond to the interview questions. This tool consisted of some picture cards based on themes that emerged from the previous studies on similar topics (Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). For example, Cochrane reported that children expressed a preference for choosing the seating arrangement for a meeting so a card depicting this (Figure 5) was included in a set of visual communication aids used in this study. Similar cards

were created based on findings from other key studies in the existing literature (Appendix O). Children were able to choose a card to communicate a response to a question if they were unable to express it in words. Blank cards and pens were also

FIGURE 5

A Pictorial Communication Aid Card Used in the Children's Interviews



available so participants could draw any responses that were not represented by pre-prepared images. This method aided communication without restricting participants' responses to themes that have emerged from previous research. The availability of visual resources helped participants to communicate views that they may have experienced difficulty in expressing verbally and also allowed for checking the researcher's understanding of children's views in the next phase.

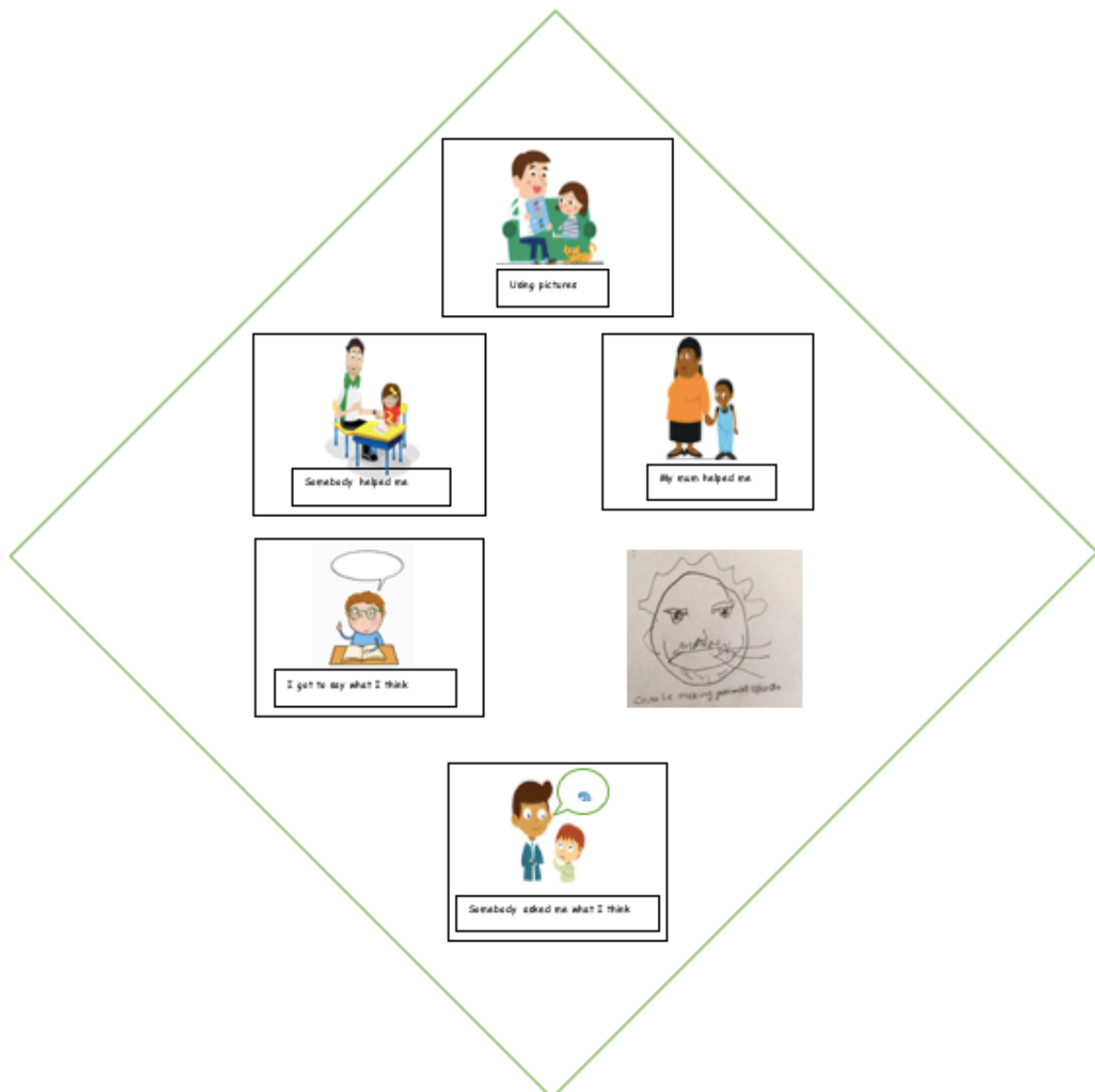
Phase 4: Diamond Ranking Activity. Pictorial communication aid cards which represented key information from children's responses in the interview, including the cards which they chose and images that they drew, were presented to the children for the diamond ranking activity. This activity, described by O'Kane (2008) and Hill et al. (2016), required the children to arrange the cards on a diamond template, with the most important card at the top of the shape and the least important card at the bottom. Figure 6 shows an example from one participant in this study. In this example, the child ranked 'using pictures' to communicate as the most important factor in his participation. As noted by Clark (2012) the ranking of the cards itself was less

important than the justifications that the children gave for placing cards at particular positions on the diamond template. This task presented the opportunity to deepen discussion around children's experiences of the EHCNA process and to gain insight about the type of support that they valued. This task also provided an opportunity to summarise the children's responses and verify the researcher's understanding.

Phase 5: Debrief. The debrief was similar in nature to that described in the adult participants' interviews.

FIGURE 6

One Participant's Responses in the Diamond Ranking Activity



3.7 Ethical Considerations

Guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were referenced to ensure that the research adhered to ethical standards. Informed consent of all participants and the parents of the children was sought. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed with the consent of the participants. Participants were given pseudonyms by which they have been referred to throughout this thesis. Transcripts and audio recordings were stored securely in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018 guidelines.

Prior to being interviewed, all participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to provide a reason. There was a low risk that participants may experience anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment in meeting and talking to the researcher, an unfamiliar person. To minimise this, steps were taken to build rapport with each participant prior to commencing the interview to put them at ease. The nature of the research did not cover any particularly sensitive topics but if, at any point in the interview, the participant appeared to be anxious, uncomfortable or embarrassed the interview was paused and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study. The interview was discontinued immediately if they chose to withdraw. If participants appeared tired at any point during the interview, they had the opportunity to take a short break before continuing.

At the end of the interview, all participants were debriefed about the purpose of the study and had the opportunity to reflect and ask questions. All participants were offered the option to receive a research summary report containing key findings of the study. A child-friendly version was offered to participating schools to be shared with the children who participated in the research. All participants were made aware of the availability of the report and children were given information about how to access it.

3.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of data analysis for this study. Thematic analysis is a widely used method of data analysis as it is compatible with a range of epistemological positions and research designs (Thomas, 2013). This method requires the researcher to group commonalities in the data collected from participants into 'codes' which are then further categorised into common themes. There are several frameworks to guide this process and this research made use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. The framework presents some choices that the researcher must make before data analysis can begin. First, the researcher must consider how to create themes. There are two possibilities: 1) themes can be formed from the most commonly occurring codes within the data or 2) they may comprise of the most unique perspectives in the data. Braun and Clarke suggest that the most frequently occurring codes contribute to the most transferable themes and the most unique codes give rise to themes that are valuable as they may constitute new knowledge about the topic of study. Given that the purpose of this study was to extend the body of research on children's involvement in the EHCNA process and to generate information that can inform professional practice, themes were created through both approaches.

A further distinction in the thematic analysis process lies within the approach to coding. Thomas (2013) distinguishes between a deductive approach, in which hypotheses or theories drive coding, and an inductive approach, in which codes and themes arise from the data without being predetermined. An inductive approach is considered to be more appropriate for exploratory designs, as there is little previous research or theory to guide the prediction of themes prior to collecting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They suggest that an inductive approach captures a range of perspectives and prevents unexpected findings from going unnoticed in the

analysis. Therefore, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was taken in this study.

Once data collection was complete, the interviews were transcribed. As the purpose of the diamond ranking activity with children was to expand on children's responses to the interview schedule and check the researchers understanding, the images themselves were not important and were not directly analysed. Instead, the conversation between the child and the researcher during this phase of the children's interviews was also transcribed and thematic analysis was applied to this information. Analysis began with the researcher reading the transcripts. Braun and Clarke suggest that immersing oneself in the data is a key step in thematic analysis. The researcher then began to code the transcripts as patterns began to emerge. These codes captured commonalities and interesting aspects of the data. After initial coding, sections of coded transcripts were cross-checked with colleagues and supervisors to check reliability and validity (Yardley, 2008). This resulted in some agreement and some re-coding. Appendix P is an excerpt of a transcript which shows how the initial codes were refined following the process of peer-reviewing the coded transcript. Once all the interviews were coded, the codes were collated and grouped to identify themes. Finally, the themes were named according to the salient thread or feature that defined them.

Chapter 4: Findings

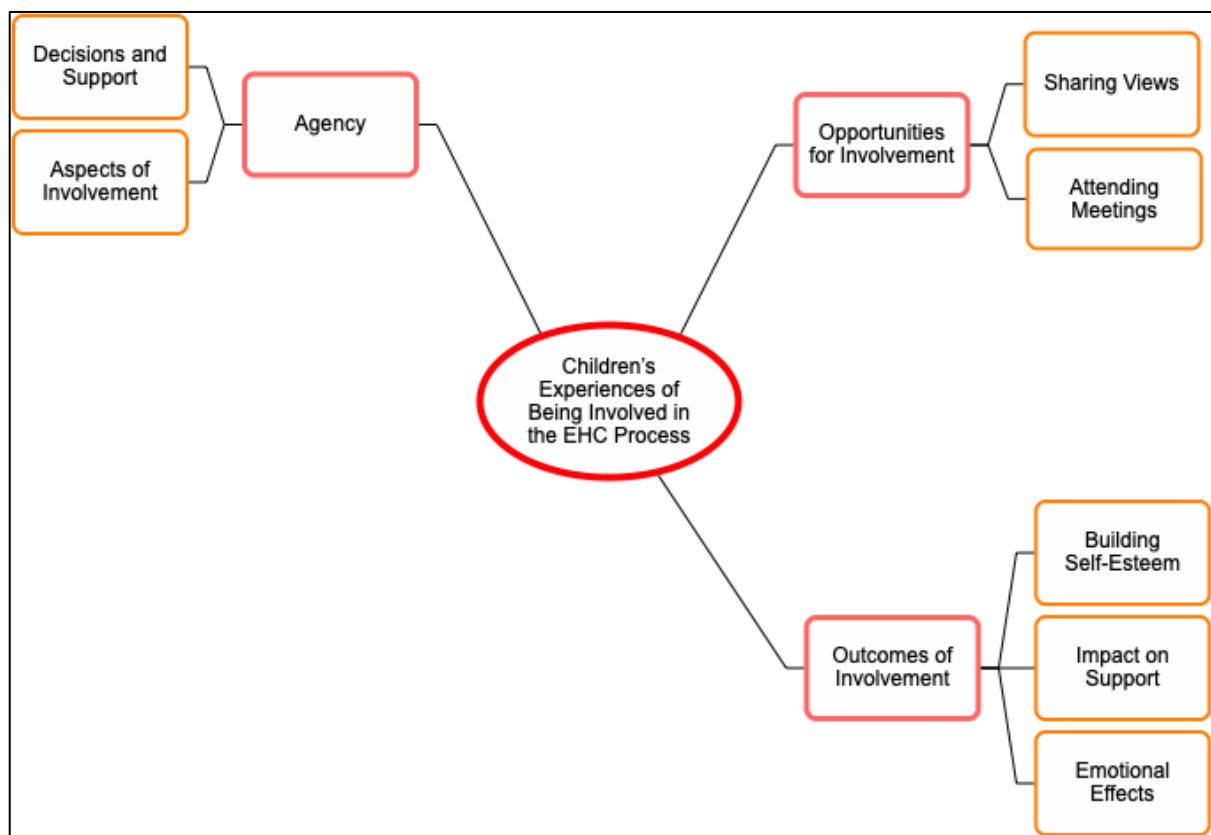
This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis described in Chapter 3. Themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with SENCOs, EPs, and children are presented and described separately. The themes have been broken down further into subthemes to help structure the presentation of findings. Within each group, the themes are presented in an order that allows a coherent story about the data to be told (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Direct quotes from interview transcripts are used to illustrate important aspects of the subthemes and support the argument being made. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

4.1 Themes From the Children's Interviews

Five children were interviewed for this study. Overall, these five children's experiences of involvement in the EHCNA process were different. Only one child (Huck, Year 6, MS 1) reported that he had known about his EHC plan prior to his participation in this study. The other children did not know about their EHC plans but they had some awareness of their needs and of the additional support they received in school. All of the children's views had been sought but they were involved in the EHCNA process to different degrees. Figure 7 shows the themes that emerged out of the thematic analysis of the children's interviews. These themes are examined more closely in order to describe these children's experiences of the EHCNA process.

FIGURE 7

Themes That Emerged From the Children's Interviews



4.1.1 Theme 1: Agency

An important theme that emerged out of the children's interviews was the extent to which children had choice or control over their involvement in the EHCNA process. Each of the children made comments relating to agency and it was chosen as the most important factor in their involvement by three out of the five children, as seen in their decisions during the diamond ranking activity. They spoke about agency in terms of having a say in the decisions made about their plans and support as well as having control over aspects of their involvement. Figure 8 depicts these aspects, which are explored in the following sections.

FIGURE 8

Factors That Contributed to Agency



Decisions and Support. The children who were interviewed for this study were not asked their views on requesting an EHC assessment and were not involved in making the decision to apply for an EHC plan:

AR:

Did anybody ask you what you thought about getting an EHC plan?

Huck (Year 6, MS 1):

No, I don't think so. But I was okay with it.

Decisions about the need for an EHC plan were taken without seeking the children's views on their needs and preferences.

The children were aware of the support that they received in school and three of the children felt that they were able to choose when they wanted this support:

AR:

Did Miss G or anybody else ask you if you'd like to have extra help?

Naomi (Year 5, PRU):

Yeah, Miss G asked me if I want to go to the art class.

One child was involved in discussions about the type of support that would be available to him. The other children did not have control over the type of support that they received, and this appeared to have been decided without seeking children's views or involving them in another way. However, children expressed that they would like to

have control over the type of support that was available to them, for example, by choosing which activities were offered during regulation breaks:

AR:

Would you like to be able to choose?

Carlos (Year 3, PRU):

Yeah. I want a football card so I can play football. And a painting card.

Two of the five children were invited to share their views at meetings and were given the choice of whether they would like to be involved:

AR:

When Mr F told you it would be nice to share what you wrote with other people, did you get to choose if you wanted to do that or not?

Huck (Year 6, MS 1):

Yes, Mr F asked me if I would like to tell my mum and Miss J.

These children valued being able to choose whether they would like to participate by sharing their views at meetings.

Aspects of Involvement. When children were invited to participate in the EHCNA process, they had some choice and control over certain aspects of their involvement. The two children who shared their views at meetings were able to choose which snacks were served at the meeting and were given control of the seating arrangement:

AR:

Was there anything else that made it easy for you?

Alice (Year 4, MS 2):

Mr B let me say where everyone should sit. I sat next to my mum. And we had Jaffa Cakes at the meeting.

Another child was able to choose the time and place in which she felt most comfortable to share her views with her teacher:

AR:

What made you feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings?

Naomi (Year 5, PRU):

Because it was Mrs S's activity and she's my teacher. And we did it in Maths. I don't like Maths and I got to miss the lesson and go outside in the playground with Mrs S.

Children valued and appreciated any opportunities they had to choose or control even the smaller aspects of their involvement.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Opportunities for Involvement

The extent of the children's involvement in the EHCNA process varied, but they each spoke about some experiences of participation. The opportunities that these children described included sharing their views with a familiar adult and attending meetings with a group of adults. Children valued any opportunities for involvement that they were offered and rated their experiences of participation highly. Figure 9 illustrates these opportunities and they are examined in the following sections.

FIGURE 9

Opportunities For Children's Involvement



Sharing Views. Although the extent of children's involvement varied, all but one of the children described experiences of sharing their views. They perceived this

as an opportunity to talk about themselves and described sharing their views about their likes and dislikes, their interests, and the support they received. Two out of the five children recalled completing the PPD:

AR:

Did you get to share your thoughts and feelings about the EHC plan or about yourself?

Huck (Year 6, MS 1):

Yes, on Mr F's...the paper with the questions...there were loads of boxes to write about me.

Although the children shared their views, a majority did not know what the purpose of doing so was and were not aware that the PPD fed into their EHC plans. All the children reported that they valued the support of a familiar adult, typically the TA, class teacher or parent. Each of the children relied on a trusted adult to help them and reported that they enjoyed sharing their views because a familiar adult had sought them.

All the children also spoke about using pictures or drawings to communicate their views:

AR:

Did you share your thoughts in any other way?

Alice (Year 4, MS 2):

I did drawing...and I made a thing out of sticks.

The children valued how familiar adults had engaged them in thinking about their views and facilitated the conversation by encouraging them to express themselves through creative methods, including drawing and crafts.

Attending Meetings. Most children had the opportunity to share their views with a familiar adult, but two out of the five children were also invited to attend meetings to share their views with a group of adults:

AR:

What did you do with the pictures that you made? Did you show them to anyone?

Alice (Year 4, MS 2):

Yes, I showed my mum and Miss K. And some other people.

AR:

Can you tell me more about that? How did you do it?

Alice:

I went to a place...room and there were people and my mum and Miss K and Mr B [SENCo- Lenny]. And I showed them what I made. And we sat in a circle like this.

Both children who had attended meetings reported that it was an enjoyable experience and they valued the opportunity to share their views with a wider audience. Again, the presence of familiar adults at the meetings was a source of support for the children:

Huck (Year 6, MS 1):

It was nice that Mr F was there and he told me that he would help me and not to be nervous. And my mum was there and she helped me think about what I wanted to say at home. And everyone was listening to me and said I did well.

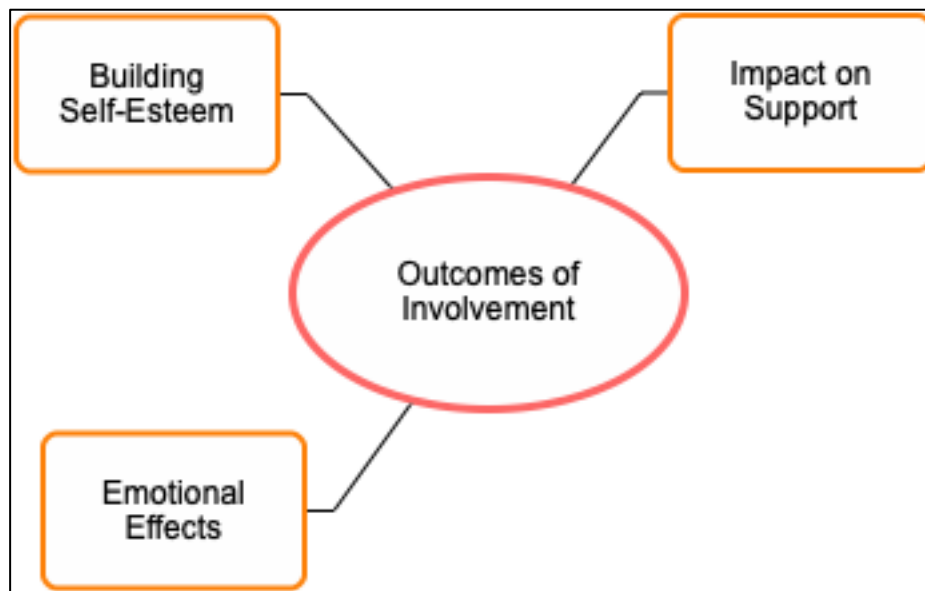
The children also appreciated receiving praise and encouragement from the adults at these meetings.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Outcomes of Involvement

Each of the children described the perceived effects that involvement in the EHCNA process had on them. They reported both positive and negative emotional outcomes of participation, relating to self-esteem and anxiety. Some children also spoke about the impact that they perceived their involvement to have had on their EHC plans and support. Figure 10 illustrates the various outcomes of involvement that children described, which are explored in the following sections.

FIGURE 10

Perceived Outcomes of Children's Involvement



Building Self-Esteem. The children reported positive feelings about themselves in relation to their involvement in the EHCNA process, both in cases where they shared their views with individual adults and in cases where they shared their views in meetings. Children who were involved to a greater extent, in particular, felt listened to and valued by the adults:

AR:

And how did it feel to take part?

Huck (Year 6, MS 1):

It felt nice. Because I could talk as much as I wanted and everyone listened. I felt like everybody wanted to know about me and that was nice. Everyone said I did a good job and I felt happy and they said I should feel proud.

These children reported feeling proud of their involvement and had a sense of achievement as a result of their participation.

Impact on Support. Children explained how their involvement was necessary in planning their support as they felt they had unique perspectives on their needs:

Naomi (Year 5, PRU):

Because I know myself the best so if they want to help me then I should be able to tell them about me.

These children felt strongly that they needed to be consulted in creating plans for their support. Some children felt that their involvement had an impact on their EHC plans:

Huck (Year 6, MS 1):

Miss P said that she didn't know that I like listening to music when I do maths because it helps me and she said that she could try to...to let me do that in class. So now I can do that if I want.

Children who were given more opportunities to be involved in the EHCNA process were able to see how their views contributed to changes to their support.

Emotional Effects. All the children rated their experience of involvement highly, indicating that they were positive and enjoyable experiences. Most children reported feeling happy about their participation:

AR:

How did you feel about getting to choose how Rosie helps you?

Percy (Year 3, MS 1):

I like it. I feel happy. Not sad.

Some children perceived the interest that adults showed in them when seeking their views to be enjoyable and reported that it made them feel special.

On the other hand, some children reported some negative experiences of involvement. One child expressed discomfort at talking about the things that she found difficult but enjoyed talking about her likes and interests and had a positive experience of involvement overall. Another child described feeling anxious and shy when she attended a meeting with a group of adults but was able to overcome this with the support of familiar adults. Another child also spoke about the negative experience created by the presence of unfamiliar adults at a meeting that he attended.

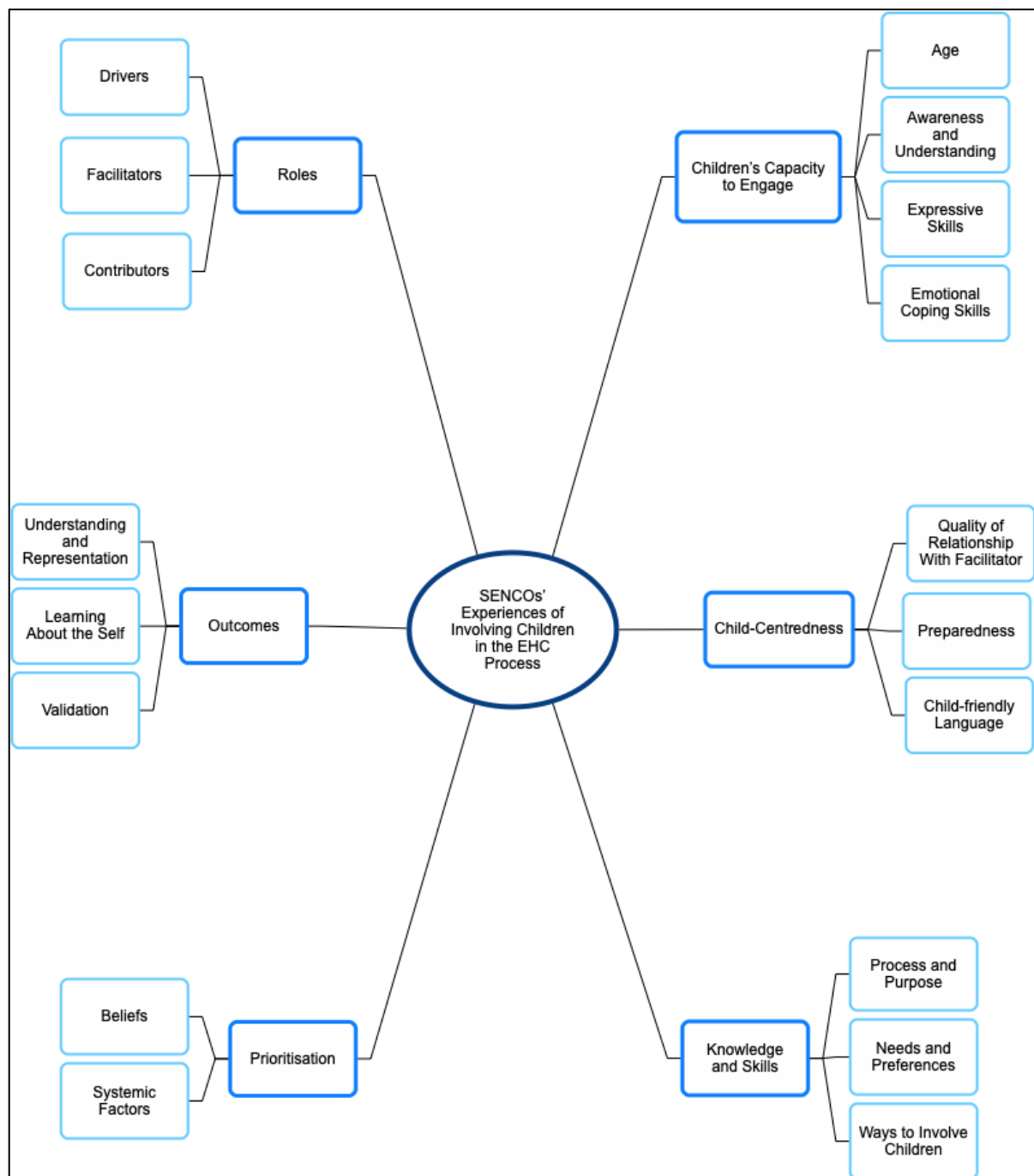
Overall, children experienced both positive and negative emotions during involvement. In most cases, the negative factors were mitigated by positive factors, particularly the presence of familiar adults.

4.2 Themes From the SENCOs' Interviews

Three SENCOs were interviewed for this study. Overall, their experiences of involving children in the EHCNA process revealed that children's involvement varied on a case-by-case basis. The SENCOs frequently cited the need for involvement to be "appropriate". This variation is explored and the themes that summarise these SENCOs' experiences of involving children in the EHCNA process are examined in this section. Figure 11 provides an overview of the six themes that emerged from the interviews with SENCOs, each containing a set of subthemes.

FIGURE 11

Themes That Emerged From SENCOs' Interviews



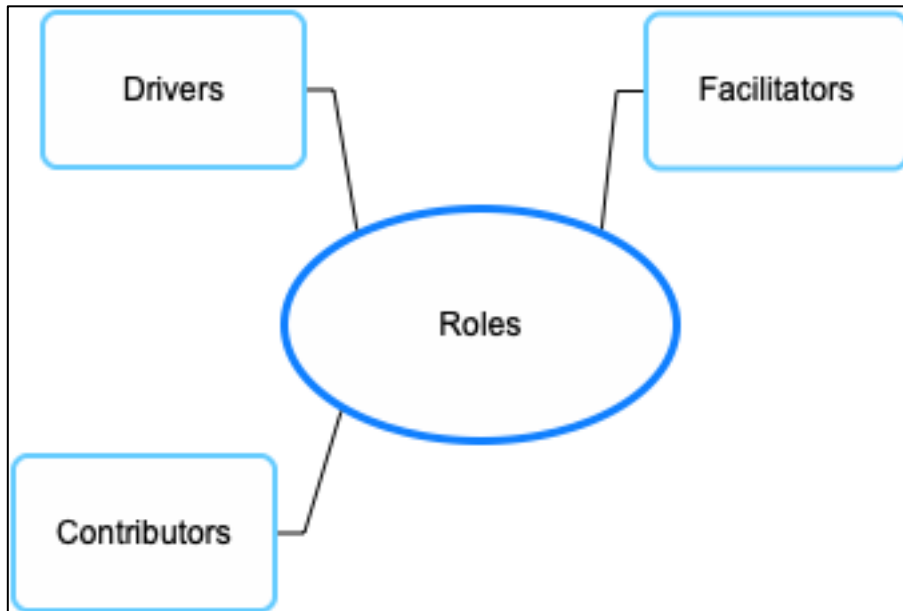
4.2.1 Theme 1: Roles

During the interviews, the SENCOs referred to a number of different people who played a part in involving children in the EHCNA process. The SENCOs named themselves, class teachers, TAs, professionals, parents, and children as having roles

to play. The SENCOs described these roles and identified who played each role. These roles are depicted in Figure 12 and are described in the following sections.

FIGURE 12

Various Roles Identified by SENCOs



Drivers. One of the roles that the SENCOs described was that of a ‘driver’ of the process- a person who initiated and ‘held’ it. Each of the three SENCOs who were interviewed identified themselves as the driver:

The SENCO at a school is usually the person who would be holding that [the process]. So it's my role. (Lenny, MS 2).

As drivers of the process, SENCOs spoke about multiple aspects of the role. Within schools, they initiated requests for EHC assessments and completed the relevant paperwork. They also saw it as their role to initiate children’s involvement in the EHCNA process by directing other school staff, such as TAs or class teachers, to seek children’s views. In this capacity, SENCOs and school staff were gatekeepers, deciding if children’s involvement was appropriate:

We need to also consider what is appropriate involvement for each child and that will look different so as SENCOs, I would say, we need to be looking to the people who know them well to make that decision. (Lenny, MS 2).

Children's involvement in the EHCNA process therefore relied, to some extent, on the judgements and decisions of these gatekeepers.

In their role as drivers, SENCOs also organised meetings between parents, school staff, and professionals to discuss children's needs and invited children to these meetings where it was appropriate to do so. The SENCOs felt that they had a role in co-ordinating the input of the various people involved in the EHCNA process, including professionals and parents, and saw it as their responsibility to oversee the process and keep it moving along.

Facilitators. Another role that the SENCOs identified was that of a 'facilitator'- a person who directly supported children's participation in the EHCNA process:

I try to have someone who knows the child well gain their views...(Natalie, MS 1).

Rather than themselves, the SENCOs identified adults whom the child was familiar with as facilitators due to their knowledge of the child's needs and preferences. This knowledge was seen as necessary in deciding if it was suitable for a child to be involved in the EHCNA process and determining the appropriate level of involvement for the child.

Different adults played the role of facilitator for the children in this study. School staff were often positioned as facilitators. In one case, the SENCO named the child's class teacher as the facilitator. For many children, SENCOs felt that TAs were the facilitators of children's participation. One SENCO noted that, in addition to support

from school staff, the child's parents played the role of facilitator. The SENCOs noted that facilitators supported children's participation in a variety of ways. Facilitators helped children to reflect on and understand their views and also supported children to express and share those views with others, thereby facilitating children's involvement in the EHCNA process.

Contributors. The final role that emerged was that of a 'contributor' - a person who provided information about children and their needs or preferences:

Carlos' mum was involved and she shared a lot of things that went into his profile, along with what we knew about Carlos. (Kelly, PRU).

The SENCOs identified different adults as contributors, including parents and professionals. One SENCO specifically mentioned the school's link EP as being a contributor. She described how the EP gained the children's views during the early stages of the EHCNA process and fed the children's views back to the SENCO, school staff, and parents.

Importantly, SENCOs also identified children themselves as contributors to the EHCNA process:

Especially by the time they [children] get to about Year 4, and certainly Year 5 and 6, they have some clear preferences and some insight into their needs and their lives that we ought to understand if we want to support them well. (Lenny, MS 2).

SENCOs highlighted the importance of including children in the EHCNA process and recognised the contribution of information from a range of sources to develop a holistic understanding of children's needs and preferences.

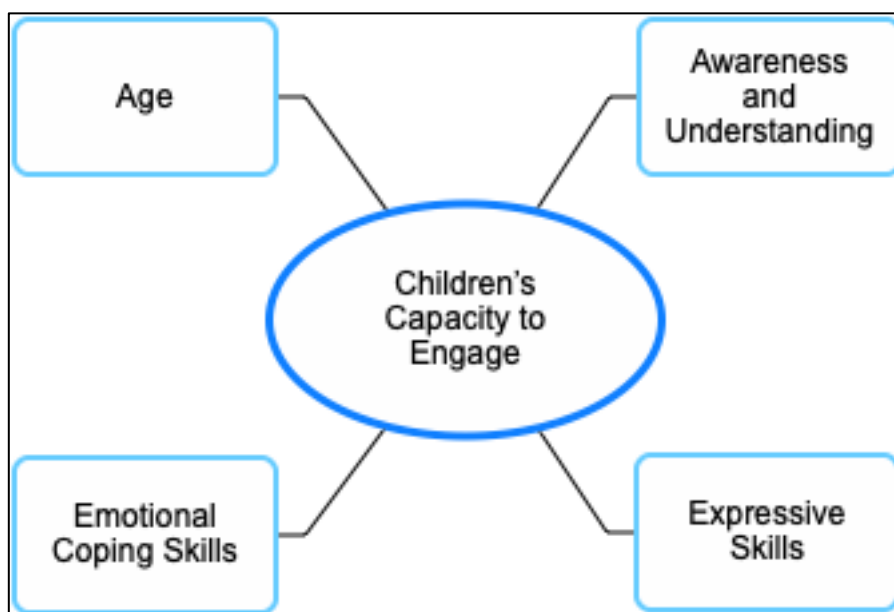
4.2.2 Theme 2: Children's Capacity to Engage

The SENCOs identified a number of factors that were important in deciding whether it was appropriate to involve children in the EHCNA process and in

determining the extent to which children could be involved. The factors they identified were ‘within-child’ factors- characteristics of individual children rather than external or environmental factors- and related to children’s capacity to engage with the EHCNA process. Figure 13 illustrates these factors, which are described in the following sections.

FIGURE 13

Factors That Contributed to Children’s Capacity to Engage



Age. Each of the three SENCOs cited age as a factor that contributed to children’s capacity to engage in the EHCNA process and considered it to be important in making decisions about children’s involvement:

I have a couple of children here that are in Year 3 or 4 and they probably could pinpoint some things that they find difficult but it's just really hard for them. I think it probably would be different if you were working with teenagers. (Kelly, PRU).

They described younger children as being less involved in the process than older children and held the view that older children were more capable of engaging with the

process, therefore making their involvement easier. The SENCOs viewed children's capacity to engage in the EHCNA process as increasing gradually as they moved up the Key Stages. They felt it was most difficult to engage children in Key Stage 1 in the process and spoke of the challenges of gaining the views of children in the Early Years. By Key Stage 2, SENCOs viewed children as beginning to be able to engage with the EHCNA process to some extent but noted that considerable difficulties still arose in some cases. Although these SENCOs worked in primary schools, they each expressed the belief that it would be significantly easier to engage adolescents in the EHCNA process.

Awareness and Understanding. The second factor that SENCOs felt was important for children's involvement was the children's capacity for awareness and understanding. This was frequently linked to children's SEN, particularly where there were underlying learning needs:

Taking account of her needs and level of understanding was important.

(Lenny, MS 2).

SENCOs further differentiated between two different aspects of children's awareness and understanding. One of these aspects was children's capacity to be aware of and to understand their own needs:

I think also just their level of understanding about their own difficulties...I

think a lot of our children know they find things hard but they don't really

know why. (Kelly, PRU).

The SENCOs felt that the extent of children's understanding about their own needs varied but that most children tended to have some sense of their difficulties.

The second aspect related to children's capacity to be aware of and to understand the EHCNA process. All three SENCOs reflected on the extent to which

they perceived the children to have been aware of the EHCNA process and they each felt that the children had little awareness about the process. Specifically, SENCOs felt that children's understanding of the purpose of their involvement was an important factor:

He shared his views, but I'm not sure that he really understood the reason his views were being sought. (Natalie, MS 1).

Again, SENCOs felt that children's understanding of the purpose of the EHCNA process and their involvement varied, depending on other factors related to children's capacity to engage. From the perspective of the SENCOs, children's awareness and understanding of their own needs was essential in order for them to be meaningfully involved in the process. An understanding of the process and its purpose was seen as equally important in contributing to experiences of genuine participation.

Expressive Skills. Another aspect that the SENCOs considered to be important was the children's capacity to express their views. All the SENCOs felt that children's capacity to express themselves impacted their involvement in the EHCNA process:

Different children are able to express their views to varying degrees so the child's view part of the plan will look different. Some will have more of the child's voice and some will have less. (Lenny, MS 2).

Two of the SENCOs spoke about children's capacity to express themselves in terms of their verbal communication skills. They reflected that it was more difficult to involve children who had SLCN because they were less able to articulate their views in words.

One SENCO spoke about children's expressive skills more generally. He described this as children's capacity to communicate their thoughts by any means, not just through language, but agreed with the other SENCOs that children with poor expressive skills were less involved. All the SENCOs noted that children's expressive

capacity contributed to differences in the extent of children's involvement as well as variability in the EHC plans created through the process.

Emotional Coping Skills. SENCOs also touched on children's emotional coping skills as an aspect of their capacity to engage in the EHCNA process. Each of the SENCOs described the perceived emotional experiences of children during their participation in the EHCNA process:

It can be quite a scary, daunting experience for them. It can be quite hard for them and uncomfortable to be put in that position. (Natalie, MS 1).

They acknowledged that the EHCNA process is complex and felt that participation could cause children to feel anxious and distressed. For this reason, the SENCOs viewed children's capacity to cope with or manage difficult emotions as a key factor in their involvement. They cited children's emotional coping skills as an important consideration in determining the appropriate level of involvement for each child.

The SENCOs described the risks of involving children in the process without considering their emotional coping capacity:

It can be quite overwhelming for children...and in some ways it can be more of a trigger than actually helping. (Kelly, PRU).

They felt that misjudging children's emotional skills or involving them beyond their capacity to cope was not in the children's best interests. By taking into account children's emotional coping skills, SENCOs assessed the appropriate level of involvement for each child in order to create a safe and positive experience for children.

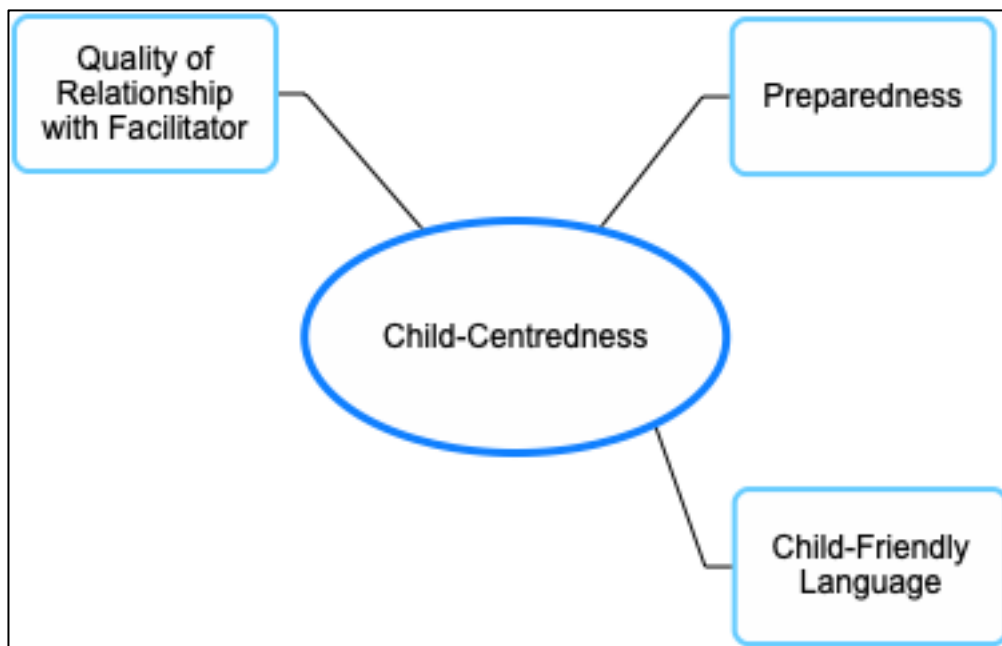
4.2.3 Theme 3: Child-Centredness

The SENCOs highlighted the importance of designing the EHCNA process around each individual child. They noted the need to keep children at the centre of the

process and take the children’s needs and preferences into account when planning for their involvement. They described some factors which help make the process more child-centred. Figure 14 shows these factors, which are described in detail in the following sections.

FIGURE 14

Aspects of Child-Centredness in the EHCNA process



Quality of Relationship with Facilitator. In the view of these SENCOs, a key aspect of making the EHCNA process child-centred was considering who facilitated the children’s involvement. As noted in section 4.2.1, SENCOs identified TAs, class teachers, and parents as those who often played the role of facilitator. The SENCOs further specified familiarity as a particular aspect of the quality of the relationship between the child and the facilitator which promoted children’s involvement:

They [facilitators] are the staff members that they [children] have the best relationships with and I find that, rather than being asked these quite personal questions by someone like me, who they don’t necessarily

interact with everyday, they're more likely to be open...with someone that they know very well. (Natalie, MS 1).

In particular, the SENCOs felt that children were able to share their thoughts and views more openly when the person who sought to elicit their views was someone that they knew well and interacted with frequently.

Another key aspect was comfort and trust in the relationship between child and facilitator. The SENCOs noted that children shared their views more readily when the facilitator was someone that they felt comfortable with and trusted. Overall, facilitators who had good relationships with children enabled them to share their views and participate in the EHCNA process.

Preparedness. This subtheme related to children's preparedness to be involved in the EHCNA process. The SENCOs distinguished between children's capacity to be involved, which was related to their needs, and their willingness to participate:

They [children] can be very reluctant to talk about the things that they find difficult. (Kelly, PRU).

They highlighted the importance of children having choice and control over their involvement. Some SENCOs reported that they gave children the opportunity to choose whether they would like to be involved in the process.

The SENCOs also spoke about children's preparedness prior to being involved

I think that helped them [parents] to talk to him [child] about the plan and so I think when it came time for us to seek his views at school, he'd already done a lot of the thinking around it at home and he was...almost pre-prepared to talk about [it]. (Natalie, MS 1).

Preparedness was described as children having the opportunity to reflect and think about what they would like to share or how they would like to be involved prior to being asked their views. This was reported to support children's involvement.

Child-Friendly Language. The SENCOs acknowledged that the EHCNA process is lengthy and complex, making it difficult for children to understand and follow. They emphasised the need to use simple language and to explain the process in a way that children can understand:

Explaining it to them [children] in a way that's meaningful, that they can engage with it, is really important. (Natalie, MS 1).

They saw the need to use child-friendly language also extending to the ways in which children's views were sought, so that children understood what was being asked of them and could meaningfully engage and share their views.

One SENCO highlighted the need for the process itself to be made more child-friendly:

If it was more child friendly...the actual process...that would probably help them to understand what was going on. (Kelly, PRU).

The SENCO cited the complexity of the process and the language used in EHC documents as a contributing factor to the difficulty she experienced in involving children in the process.

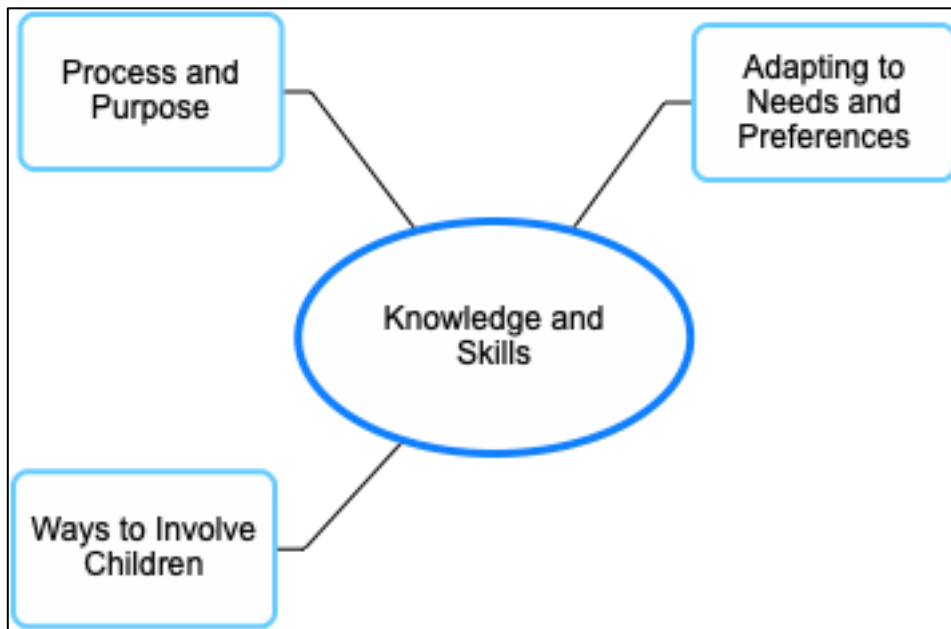
4.2.4 Theme 4: Knowledge and Skills

Another theme that emerged out of the SENCO interviews related to the knowledge and skills of adults who supported the children through the EHCNA process. The SENCOs spoke about different aspects in relation to knowing about the purpose and process of the EHC assessment, knowing about children's needs and

preferences, and knowing how to facilitate children’s involvement. Figure 15 depicts these aspects, which are further examined in the following sections.

FIGURE 15

Aspects of Adult’s Knowledge and Skills



Process and Purpose. Knowledge about the purpose and process of the EHC assessment was raised by each of the three SENCOs as an important factor in children’s involvement. They spoke about this knowledge with reference to different adults who were involved in the EHC plan. The SENCOs’ views about parents’ knowledge and understanding of the EHCNA process and its purpose were mixed as they felt that parents differed in their depth of knowledge:

Some parents know more about the process and I think that benefits their children when it comes to their participation. (Natalie, MS 1).

They attributed this variation to a range of factors, such as parents’ educational background, their English-language communication skills, and any prior experience the parents may have had with the EHCNA process, for instance, if another one of

their children had a plan. Children of parents who knew more about the EHCNA process were reported to have been more involved.

The SENCOs did not explicitly speak about their own knowledge, but their comments suggested that they considered themselves to have adequate knowledge about the EHCNA process. One SENCO felt that school staff, including class teachers and TAs, did not have sufficient knowledge about the process or purpose of the EHC assessment, and that this negatively impacted their ability to facilitate children's involvement:

If I ask the staff within the class team to do it, often they don't really know the angle to go at...the type of information that is needed...so the information [that comes back] isn't always great. (Kelly, PRU).

Finally, SENCOs spoke about the knowledge of professionals, who were seen as the 'experts' in terms of knowing about the EHCNA process, and whom the SENCOs turned to for advice and guidance.

Adapting to Needs and Preferences. The SENCOs also reflected on adults' knowledge about children's needs and preferences. This was distinct from children's understanding of their own needs and related specifically to adults having knowledge about how children's needs and preferences could affect their involvement in the EHCNA process. Each of the SENCOs acknowledged that they often did not possess this knowledge, as they did not typically support the children on a daily basis. They relied on school staff who were familiar with the children to contribute knowledge about their needs and preferences:

If it weren't for them [TAs] I don't know how we would get it done...I wouldn't have the time or enough knowledge about the children's

communication preferences and needs to work with them one-to-one to gain their views. (Natalie, MS 1).

TAs in particular were seen as key sources of knowledge about children's needs and preferences, which was considered essential information to facilitate their participation.

Each of the three SENCOs recognised the importance of adapting the means or style of children's involvement to suit their needs and preferences:

[Percy's TA] knows Percy so well that she knows how to get the most out of him. She knows how he communicates and she could adapt the questions so that what they're asking is more accessible to him...(Natalie, MS 1).

Once again, TAs, with their intimate knowledge of children's needs and preferences were viewed as having the skills to adapt tools and communication to meet children's needs and fit their preferences in order to facilitate their involvement. These adaptations were reported to have been done in a range of ways, depending on the children's needs and preferences. Using drawing or pictures as a form of sharing and communicating views appeared to be especially popular.

Ways to Involve Children. All of the SENCOs spoke about knowledge of how to involve children in the EHCNA process. They each mentioned the PPD, which was used to gather the views of all the children in this study. They also shared that it was the method they most often used to gain children's voices. In the experience of the SENCOs, completing the PPD was the extent of some children's involvement.

Another way in which children were involved was by sharing their views at a meeting where school staff members, child's parents, and other professionals were present. Children's involvement in such meetings was determined based on

judgements of their capacity to engage, as described in Section 4.2.2. SENCOs emphasised that determining the most appropriate way to involve children in the process was itself a skill that they and other members of school staff needed to possess in order to facilitate children’s participation.

The SENCOs also spoke about having the skills to be able to facilitate meetings in which children were present so that children felt supported to share their views. One SENCO reported that SENCOs in the LA had received training on how to plan and facilitate child-centred meetings but felt that a long time had passed since the training. Each of the SENCOs highlighted the need for additional training and skill-building opportunities for themselves, school staff, and parents on how to talk to children about the EHCNA process and how to involve them in it:

I think also support for schools and for parents on how to broach this with the children and how to get them involved. (Kelly, PRU).

4.2.5 Theme 5: Prioritisation

The SENCOs also reflected on their practice in terms of how they prioritised children’s involvement in the EHCNA process. Their practice appeared to be impacted by their beliefs about children’s participation and by various systemic factors. FIGURE 16 depicts the factors that influenced how SENCOs prioritised children’s involvement, which are described in the following sections.

FIGURE 16

Factors That Influence SENCOs’ Prioritisation of Children’s Involvement



Beliefs. SENCOs' attitudes and beliefs about the importance of gaining children's views impacted how they prioritised children's involvement. Each of the SENCOs felt that hearing children's voices and involving them in the process was important. One SENCO expressed that he would like to have every child be involved in the process:

Getting children's views is important and I would want to do that...to have every child involved in some way... (Lenny, MS 2).

Although they considered children's involvement to be important, all the SENCOs expressed the belief that their efforts to involve children were inadequate:

I'm aware that we probably don't do as much to include children as we should. (Natalie, MS 1).

One SENCO reflected that she had not given children's involvement much thought until she was interviewed for this research, suggesting that there may be a need for SENCOs to have regular opportunities to reflect on their practice. Overall, despite SENCOs' views that children's involvement was important, they believed that children's participation was not prioritised and that it was being overlooked in practice.

Systemic Factors. In reflecting on why children's involvement is often neglected despite considering it to be important, SENCOs spoke about the systems around the EHCNA process. They named various factors as affecting the prioritisation of children's involvement. Two of the SENCOs suggested that time pressures affected their ability to include children in the process:

Sometimes there just isn't the time to do it [involve children]...to give it the priority or the importance I would like to. (Lenny, MS 2).

They explained that the strict timescale of the EHC assessment process sometimes meant that there was insufficient time to seek children's views or involve them in the process beyond gaining their views.

SENCOs also cited competing demands and their own workload as factors that affected how they prioritised children's involvement:

I'm the SENCO and I'm also the Deputy Head and I've got other duties...and I'm only here three days a week so it can be really tough to get everything done. (Kelly, PRU).

SENCOs spoke about the various other roles they played within their schools and described how their other duties limited their capacity to engage children in the EHCNA process.

Finally, SENCOs also referred to the logistical challenges of co-ordinating the input of school staff, parents, and the various professionals who were involved in the EHCNA process:

Getting everyone together can be very challenging and sometimes that's all I can manage. (Lenny, MS 2).

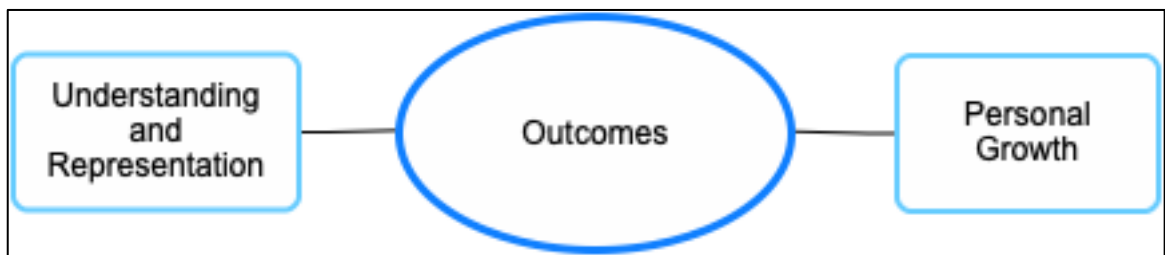
This meant that sometimes they were not able to include children. Faced with these challenges within the system, SENCOs felt that they were often unable to prioritise children's involvement in the EHCNA process despite viewing it as important.

4.2.6 Theme 6: Outcomes

The SENCOs described the perceived outcomes of children's involvement in the EHCNA process. They spoke about two different kinds of outcomes- those that were reflected in the EHC plan and the perceived personal outcomes for children who were involved in the process. These are depicted in FIGURE 17 and are examined in the following sections.

FIGURE 17

Perceived Outcomes of Children's Involvement



Understanding and Representation. The SENCOs felt that one outcome of children's involvement in the EHCNA process was that it helped adults to understand children and gave them insight into the children's lives. The SENCOs reported that having children be involved in the EHCNA process deepened professionals' understanding about children's needs, perspectives, and subjective experiences. They positioned children as the 'experts' on their own lives and saw their involvement as providing valuable contributions to EHC plans:

They [professionals] don't have that knowledge about the child's life and experiences and what it's like to be them so by asking the child about that it helps them to make the plan more personal, more individualised to that child. (Natalie, MS 1).

The SENCOs felt that children's views were reflected in the plan when children were a part of the process and that this led to the creation of plans that were tailored or personalised to individual children and represented them in a holistic way.

Personal Growth. SENCOs also described the personal growth that they perceived children to have undergone as a result of their involvement in the EHCNA process. They believed that children's participation led to personal growth in two ways. First, the SENCOs felt that participating in the EHCNA process helped children to learn

about themselves. They thought that children who had been involved were able to understand their own needs better:

I think it also helped him to learn about himself a bit better and accept some of his needs. (Natalie, MS 1).

They believed that participating in the process helped children to acknowledge and accept their needs and understand and appreciate the support that was available to them.

SENCOs also felt that being involved in the process was a validating experience for children as they felt listened to and valued by adults:

He was being asked his opinions and he had people...adults who were listening to him and were very interested in that and were encouraging him. (Natalie, MS 1).

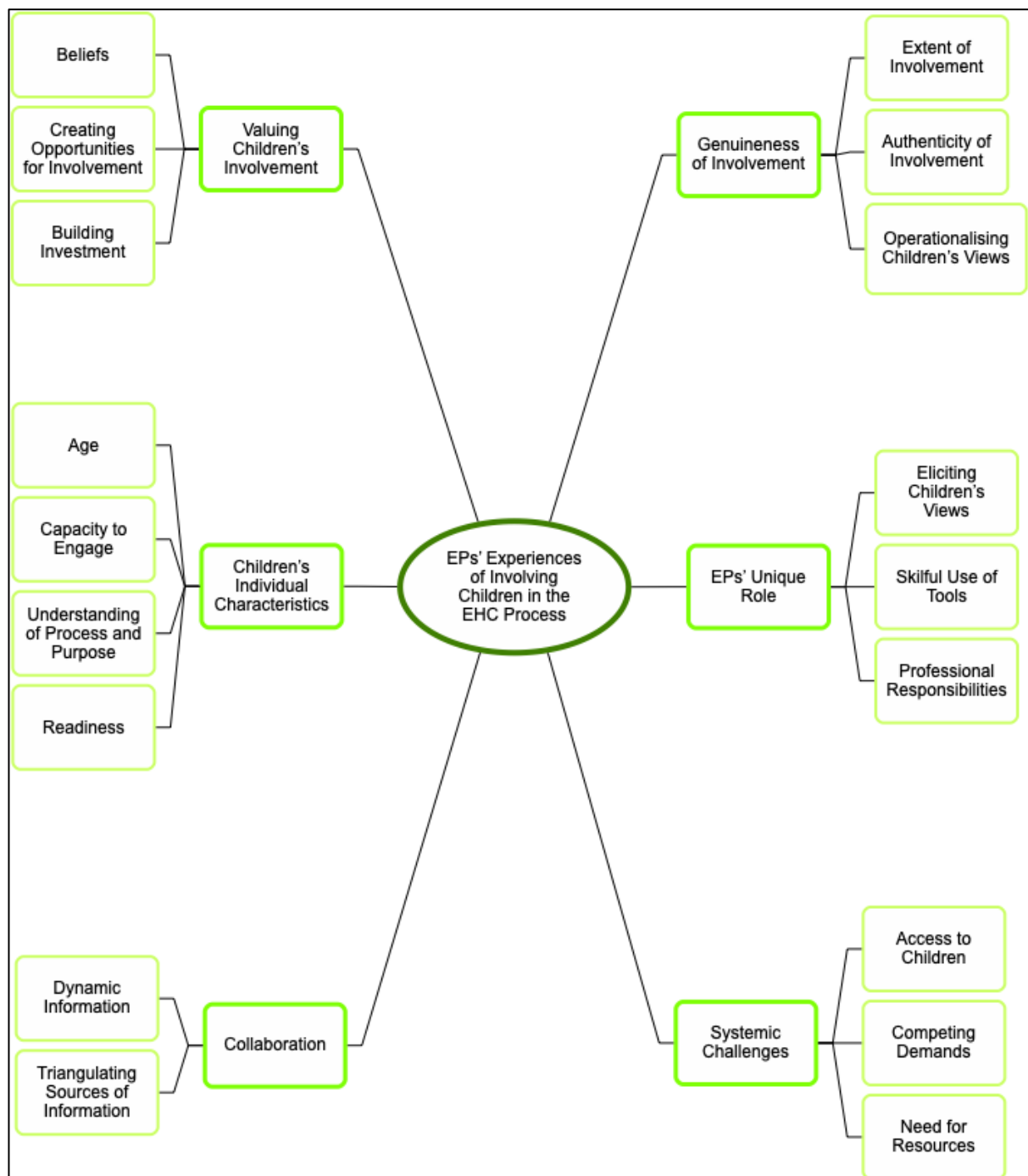
The SENCOs believed that this encouraged the children and made them feel appreciated. They also noted that children felt proud of their involvement and that it improved their self-confidence.

4.3 Themes From the EPs' Interviews

Four EPs were interviewed for this study. Their experiences of involving children in the EHCNA process were similar to the experiences of the SENCOs in some ways but there were also some crucial differences in their perspectives. This section summarises the EPs experiences of involving children in the EHCNA process. FIGURE 18 shows the themes and subthemes that emerged from the EP interviews. Overall, EPs also perceived variation in the ways in which children were involved in the EHCNA process. They described some of the same factors as contributing to this variation that the SENCOs identified but they also attributed the differences to some other factors, which will be explored in the following sections.

FIGURE 18

Themes That Emerged From the EPs' Interviews



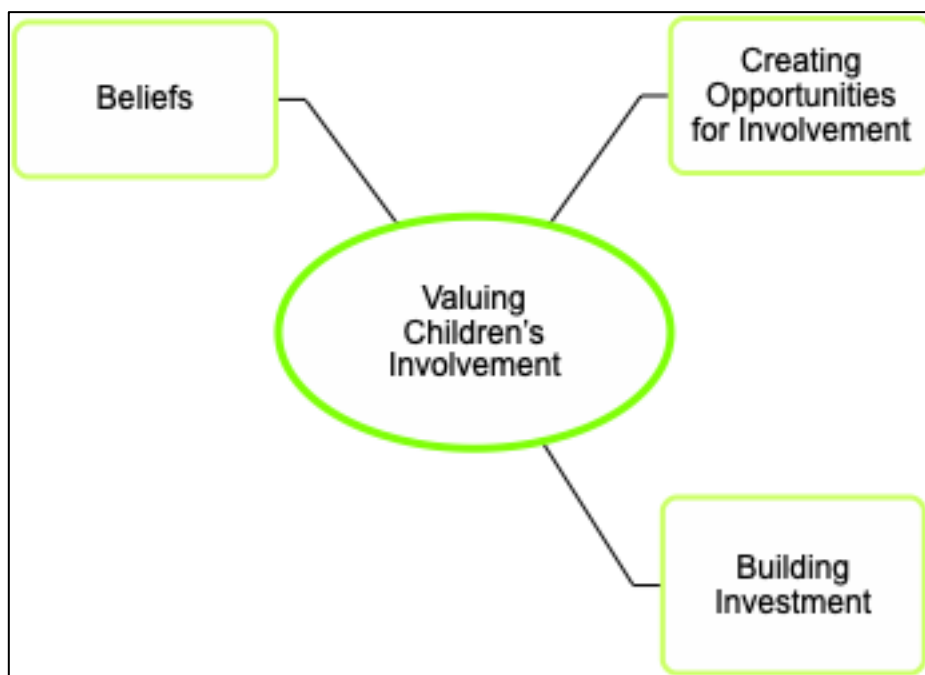
4.3.1 Theme 1: Valuing Children's Involvement

The EPs each commented on the value of children's involvement in the EHCNA process. They shared their beliefs about children's involvement and emphasised the need to create opportunities for children to become involved in the EHCNA process.

They also spoke about the importance of building children’s investment in their EHC plans and saw children’s participation as a key factor to achieve this. FIGURE 19 illustrates these aspects, which are described in the following sections.

FIGURE 19

Aspects of Valuing Children’s Involvement



Beliefs. Each of the four EPs valued children’s participation in the EHCNA process. They felt strongly that children’s involvement was not just a legal requirement, but a centrally important part of the process, and believed that all professionals shared this view. EPs valued children as contributors to the EHCNA process and felt that gaining children’s views helped them learn more about the children. They described children as having unique perspectives of their experiences and viewed the children as experts on their own lives:

Although it's likely that parents would have an accurate view of their children's needs, there might be circumstances where they don't. So

even if an adult knows a child very well, either an adult in school or an adult at home, they might be missing bits. (Anna, MS 1).

In the experience of these EPs, children's involvement in the EHCNA process led to plans that were truer representations of children- addressing their needs more accurately and identifying support more effectively.

The EPs themselves believed that capturing children's voices and involving them in the EHCNA process was important, but one EP noted that it was crucial that the wider systems around the children also shared the same values:

I definitely notice in my schools some have a much stronger pupil voice threaded throughout the school, in terms of how they make decisions, than others. (Holly, PRU).

In the experience of these EPs, children were often involved in the EHCNA process when schools and professional teams had an ethos that valued children's voices.

Creating Opportunities for Involvement. EPs noted the importance of creating opportunities for children to participate in the process. They spoke of a number of ways in which children's involvement was possible:

The child's involvement would be, for example, attendance at parts of planning meetings and discussions, having the opportunity to express their views to a wider audience. (Emily, PRU).

The EPs identified children sharing their views as a key aspect of their involvement. They felt that it was particularly important that children's voices be heard by a range of adults, not just in one-to-one settings with a familiar adult. They believed that it was important to give children space to share their views and to create opportunities for them to do so in front of a wide audience of adults who played a part in the children's EHC assessment. The EPs reported that this was often achieved by inviting children

to participate in meetings with their parents, school staff and professionals where discussions about children's EHC plans took place. Importantly, EPs felt that it was not simply that children's views were gained, but also the manner in which their views were disseminated that was a crucial aspect of children's participation.

Building Investment. EPs described the importance of children's participation with reference to children's investment in the EHCNA process. They valued children's involvement in the EHCNA process because they felt that it contributed to children's empowerment and feelings of ownership over their own education and lives:

We as psychologists know that change comes from people, and that we ought not do to, but do with. If we want this child to feel empowered about this plan, they need to be part of the creation of this plan for it to work.

(Emily, PRU).

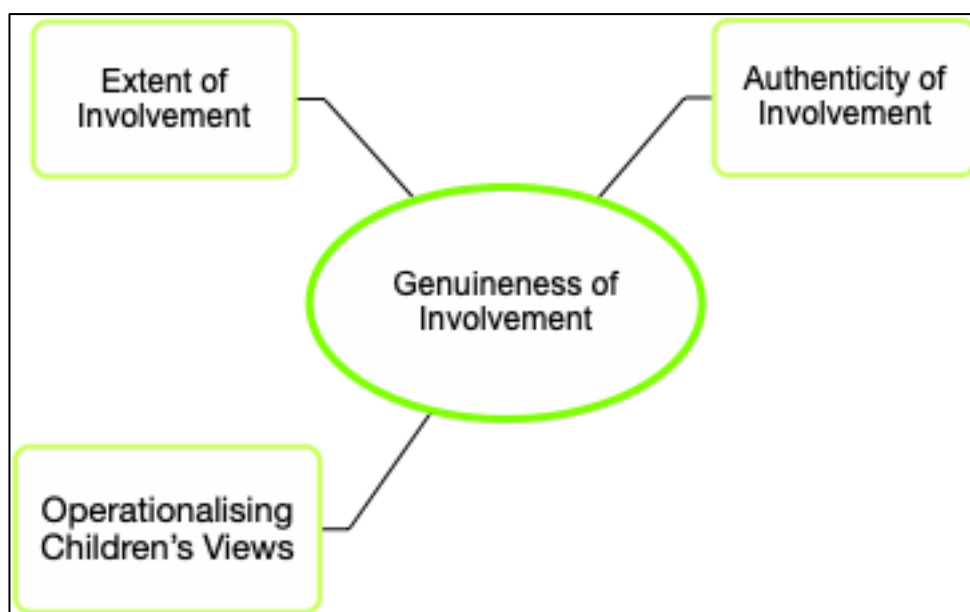
The EPs felt strongly that empowering children to share their views and involving them in the process of creating their plan resulted in plans that provided support that children themselves viewed to be effective, thereby motivating and enabling them to achieve better outcomes. Overall, the EPs felt that investing children in the process created EHC plans that were more successful at meeting children's needs and supporting their development.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Genuineness of Involvement

The EPs reflected on the genuineness of children's involvement. They shared their views on the extent to which children were involved in the EHCNA process and considered whether children's involvement was authentic. They also commented on their perception of how children's views were used in decision-making. FIGURE 20 depicts these different components, which are explored in the following sections.

FIGURE 20

Aspects of Genuine Involvement



Extent of Involvement. EPs felt that children’s involvement varied case by case and that it was not yet fully embedded in practice. They felt that more could be done to involve children in the EHCNA process. EPs reflected on whether the process of gathering children’s views was often simply a tick-box exercise to meet the requirements stipulated in guidance about the EHCNA process rather than a genuine attempt to hear children’s voices:

I think there's pressure on the professional when they're doing the EHCP or doing the assessment to get certain boxes filled, if you like, one of which would be pupil views. (Charlie MS 2).

The EPs believed that children’s participation was theoretically possible at every stage of the EHCNA process, from being involved in making the decision to request an EHC assessment to contributing to finalising the details of the plan. EPs felt it was important that children’s views were sought and considered before

requesting a plan. They also saw value in children contributing to setting goals and identifying the support they would need to achieve their targets.

Finally, EPs believed that children should be involved in making amendments to their draft plan so that the final plan was an accurate representation of themselves. However, in the experience of these EPs, children's involvement seemed to be superficial in practice. They felt that children were often only involved in the assessment stage, when their views were elicited, and in the draft stage, when they completed the PPD, and they believed that the extent of many children's experiences of involvement was to share their views in the PPD. Overall, each of the EPs felt that children were not consistently or genuinely involved in all stages of the EHCNA process.

Authenticity of Involvement. EPs also considered the authenticity of children's participation. In their experience, children's views were often collected through the PPD. However, the EP described occasions when they questioned whether children had completed the PPD themselves or if adults had completed them on the children's behalf:

When you get the pupil voice bit at the beginning of the plan, you often read it and you think no child has written this...this has been written by a parent and it's the parents' hopes and desires and views that are projected onto the child. (Charlie, MS 2).

Where the children's views appeared to have come from the children, the EPs still questioned whether the views truly reflected children's voices. In some cases, they felt that children's views may have been collected in a hurry and children may not have had time to reflect on the questions and gather their thoughts in order to express them effectively. In other cases, EPs felt what was offered as the children's view was

actually adults' interpretations of the children's view. As EPs viewed children as experts on their own experiences, they questioned the reliability of views presented in these ways. EPs believed that when adults employed these practices, children's involvement was not authentic but merely tokenistic.

Operationalising Children's Views. EPs also spoke about how children's views informed the EHCNA process once they had been gathered. They felt that it was important that children could see the impact that their views had on their EHC plans:

What you don't want is for children to be a central part of this process, and then come away thinking I can't see how what I said is similar to what has either been done or been written. (Emily, PRU).

They felt that if children were genuinely involved in the EHCNA process, their views and preferences would inform the decisions made and reflected in their EHC plans. However, EPs were sceptical about the extent to which children's views were listened to and acted upon in practice.

Importantly, EPs acknowledged that there were times when it was necessary for the provision in children's plans to differ from the views and preferences they had expressed. In these cases, EPs believed that genuine participation could be achieved by involving children in discussions and in the decision-making process of the adults so that they understood the reasons behind the decisions:

You have to kind of acknowledge those views and ensure that children understand your decision-making process and how their views are still a part of that decision process, even if the decision at the end doesn't correlate with their view. (Emily, PRU).

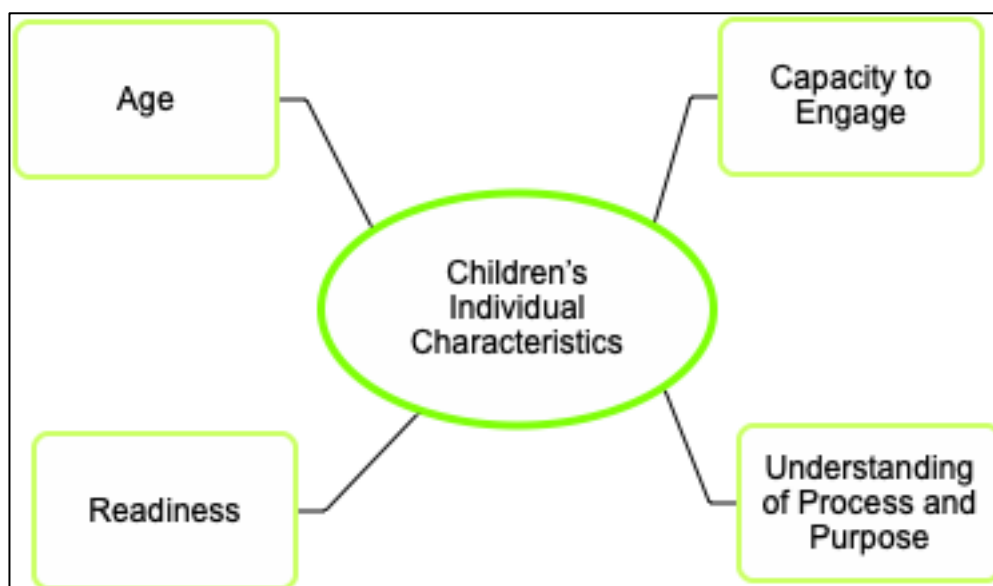
EPs believed that doing so would give children a voice in shaping the decisions made about their own lives and would constitute genuine participation.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Children’s Individual Characteristics

Similar to SENCOs, EPs also noted that children’s involvement in the EHCNA process varied case-by-case and was based on judgements of appropriateness. EPs also spoke about how children’s individual characteristics influenced their involvement in the EHCNA process. They identified many of the same characteristics that were described by SENCOs. These are depicted in FIGURE 21 and described in the following sections.

FIGURE 21

Children’s Individual Characteristics That Impact Involvement



Age. Similar to the SENCOs, the EPs who were interviewed also identified the children’s age as a factor in their involvement in the EHCNA process. EPs felt that it was more challenging to gain the views of young children, particularly those in the Early Years and Key Stage 1. By the time children entered Key Stage 2, EPs felt they had strong views and perspectives that they were more able to share. EPs believed

strongly that older children, those in secondary school and further education, had clear views and ought to be involved in the EHCNA process:

I think for many children it's really important, especially older children, for example, those in secondary school and in higher education. Often these children can express their views very articulately when they're given the chance. (Emily, PRU).

EPs also felt that the extent of children's involvement depended partly on children's age. In describing children's involvement in meetings, EPs felt that it was appropriate for children in primary school to attend the initial parts of meetings but felt that older children's participation throughout the meeting, including during discussions of outcomes and support, was appropriate in some cases.

Capacity to Engage. EPs also spoke about children's capacity to engage as a factor in their involvement. Similar to SENCOs, EPs also noted children's expressive capacity and emotional coping capacity. EPs agreed that it was more difficult to gain the views of children with language and communication needs. Importantly, the EPs strongly felt that all children had views but differed in their ability to articulate these views:

They would still have a view...I think it's their capacity sometimes to articulate their views. (Charlie, MS 2).

EPs also mentioned children's emotional coping skills as an important factor in their involvement in the EHCNA process. EPs acknowledged that involvement in the form of attending meetings and having discussions with new adults caused anxiety for some children, which impacted the level of involvement that they were comfortable with:

It might be that for a child with autism it's far too overwhelming to attend meetings. But that doesn't mean that they can't be involved in the process. It just means that their involvement will look different. (Emily, PRU).

Finally, EPs also felt that an awareness of the importance of the EHCNA process itself could be a source of anxiety for children:

They have an awareness that lots of people are meeting them and that lots of people are meeting with each other to discuss them. And so I think they take on that...that awareness and that pressure and feel like this is something that is quite serious. (Emily, PRU).

EPs felt that this pressure could overwhelm children who are less able to cope with difficult emotions, making it harder for them to be involved in the EHCNA process.

Understanding of Process and Purpose. EPs also highlighted that children's capacity to understand the purpose and process of the EHC assessment impacted the extent of their participation. They described this in terms of children's mental capacity or maturity to understand and participate in the process:

I'm thinking about, not probably the age group, but do they have the mental capacity to make a decision. (Charlie, MS 2).

EPs linked children's capacity to understand the process closely to their age or their needs and perceived younger children and those with language needs as having lower capacity to understand the purpose and process of the EHC assessment and, therefore, to be less involved in it.

Readiness. During the interviews, EPs highlighted children's readiness and willingness to participate in the EHCNA process as factors in their involvement and differentiated between the two. EPs spoke about children's emotional readiness to

acknowledge and accept their needs. EPs felt that this readiness was integral to children's participation in the EHCNA process, as they believed that involving children who were not ready to accept their needs caused emotional distress and was not in the children's best interests:

It might cause the child anxiety to read a lot of detail and information about the autism diagnosis or the ADHD diagnosis so you'd have to tread carefully around that to make sure that the child was understanding at the right level about their diagnosis. (Anna, MS 1).

EPs also spoke about children's willingness to be involved in the EHCNA process. Similar to SENCOs, the EPs indicated that this related to children choosing whether they would like to share their views or participate in the process:

It will then depend partly on how forthcoming the child is to share their views and their perspectives. (Charlie, MS 2).

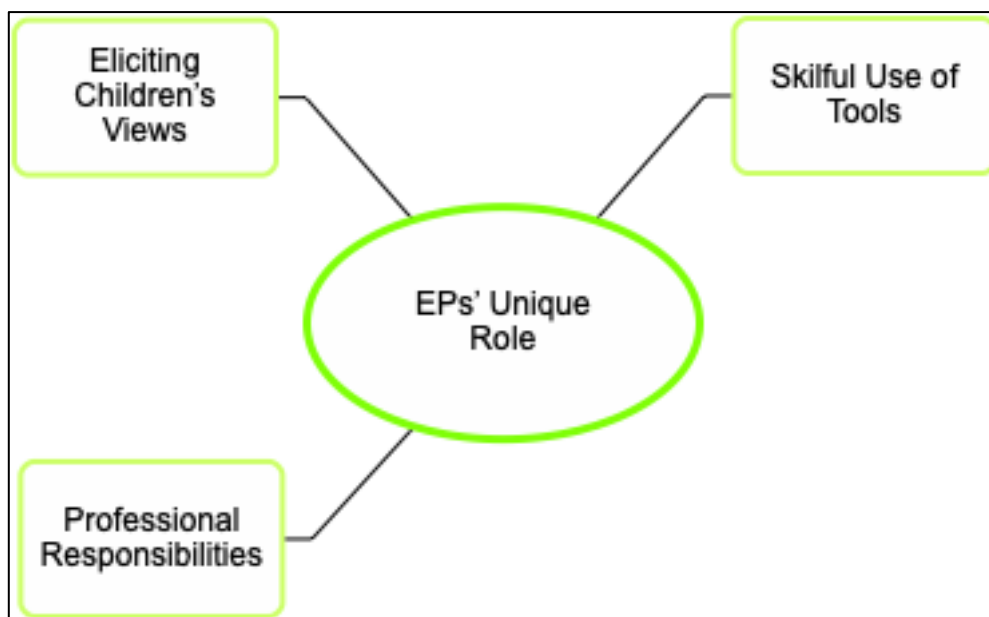
EPs felt that some children were reluctant to share their views but that it was the responsibility of adults to support the children to participate in the process up to the extent of their choice.

4.3.4 Theme 4: EPs' Unique Role

EPs saw themselves as having a unique role to play in promoting and facilitating the involvement of children in the EHCNA process. They described the part they played in eliciting children's views using a range of tools and methods. They also spoke about the professional responsibilities they perceived themselves as holding and described the duties they felt lay within this. FIGURE 22 illustrates these aspects, which are described in the following sections.

FIGURE 22

EPs' Unique Role in Involving Children in the EHCNA process



Eliciting Children's Views. EPs felt strongly that a core aspect of their work in relation to the EHCNA process was to elicit children's views. As a part of this, they saw it as their role to help children understand their needs, explore their preferences and reflect on the kind of support that they valued or found effective. In this capacity, EPs believed that they had a role to play in helping children find and develop their voice:

I see part of my role as helping the child develop a bit of an understanding about what might help them and what they see as useful in the classroom and the kinds of things they want. (Holly, PRU).

EPs saw it as part of their involvement to seek and hear children's views and feed this into any reports or advice that they contributed to the children's EHC assessments and saw this as a central component of their role.

Skilful Use of Tools. EPs firmly believed that all children have views and, although it was more difficult to gain the views of some children, that the skilful use of

a range of tools could liberate the voices of children. They believed that they were ideally placed to elicit children's views owing to their professional knowledge and skills. EPs strongly emphasised that children's views were not limited to what children could express verbally and that there was a need to be flexible and creative in their approaches in order to capture the voices of all children, irrespective of their verbal skills:

Sometimes it will be direct and verbal and sometimes it will be indirect through your interpretation of what they are doing and saying. I think everything you get from the child is a communication about their voice.

(Charlie, MS 2).

EPs described how they sometimes interpreted children's views from their behaviour or through observations of play, particularly in the case of very young or non-verbal children.

EPs also spoke about the importance of planning prior to meeting with children to elicit their views and using tools that were adapted to children's needs and preferences. The EPs believed that the key to successfully gaining children's views was to ensure that they brought a range of tools with them so that they could choose tools that were accessible to children. The EPs felt that they were adept at identifying the tools that were the most appropriate for individual children and were skilled in using a variety of tools to capture children's voices.

EPs believed that an important aspect of their role was using their knowledge of psychological theories and frameworks to seek and interpret children's views:

We use our psychology...to capture the views and perspectives and underlying thoughts of children. (Emily, PRU).

The EPs referred to their use of Personal Construct Psychology, Person-Centred Planning and Solution-Focussed Questioning to elicit children's views and involve them in the EHCNA process.

Professional Responsibilities. EPs felt that they had certain professional responsibilities to fulfil in their role in relation to the EHCNA process. They identified one of these responsibilities as promoting the involvement of children in the EHCNA process. EPs explained that this involved working with schools and supporting them to consider what appropriate involvement would look like for each child, depending on children's capacity to engage. They also saw it as their responsibility to set expectations about children's involvement in the EHCNA process and encourage schools to reflect on how they could promote children's participation:

I think reminding other people involved in the process that it's important that we are listening to the views of children and making sure that they are included. (Emily, PRU).

EPs reported that they regularly had conversations with SENCOs exploring child-friendly and creative ways to involve all children in the process and felt that SENCOs valued this support and were able to apply the EPs' advice in their practice. However, EPs also reflected that schools often had anxieties about managing meetings at which children were present:

I just wonder about the adults feeling able to have those discussions in a child-centred way. (Holly, PRU).

They believed they had a role in supporting schools to facilitate such meetings.

Finally, EPs also saw themselves as having a key role in resolving tensions between children's preferences or aspirations and their best interests. The EPs

described how conflict could arise when adults' opinions of what was in children's best interests did not align with the children's views:

If a child doesn't feel they need support and the adults around them do and then the question is who knows best what a child needs. (Holly, PRU).

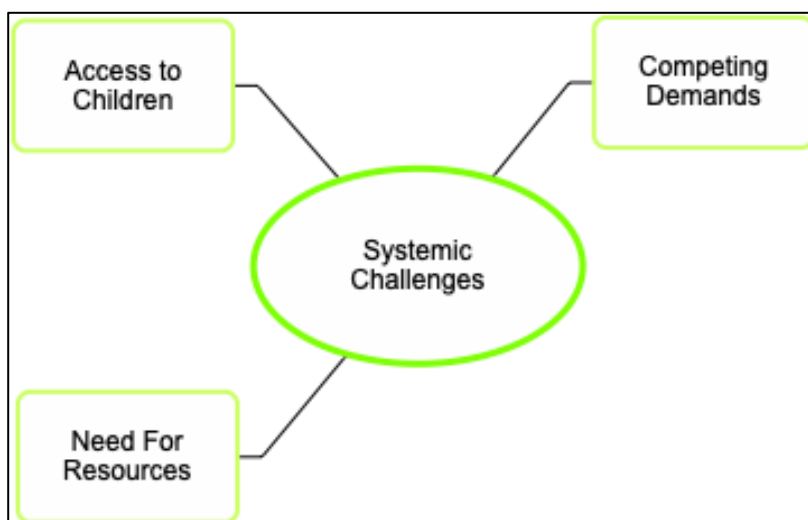
The EPs felt that it was their professional responsibility to anchor negotiations around children's best interests and that they had a part to play in helping schools to make these discussions transparent and to include children in them.

4.3.5 Theme 5: Systemic Challenges

EPs noted a number of factors that impacted their ability to effectively play their part in involving children in the EHCNA process. As professionals who work outside school systems, they felt that they had reduced access to the children. They also spoke about the challenges of managing competing demands and the impact that this had on their ability to involve children. EPs also noted how the need for resources affected the fulfilment of their role. These factors are illustrated in FIGURE 23 and are explored in the following sections.

FIGURE 23

Factors That Contribute to Systemic Challenges of Involving Children



Access to Children. EPs explained that their limited access to children often had implications on their ability to seek children's views as part of the EHCNA process. In the experience of these EPs, they often only met with the children on one or two occasions, either before or during the EHC assessment. This meant that they were often only able to get a snapshot of the children's views at a particular point in time and were not always able to follow up with the children as their views changed over time. Additionally, the EPs felt that this limited contact impacted their ability to build relationships with children, which they saw as an important factor in gaining children's views and promoting genuine participation:

The role of the EP is to sometimes just come in once or twice and the child doesn't really know you so how are you going to really open up communication and get genuine [views]. (Holly, PRU).

The EPs also felt that children's attendance at an educational setting impacted their access to children. They cited children who were not yet attending children's centres, those who were home educated, and school refusers as particularly hard-to-reach groups and expressed uncertainty about how to promote their involvement in the EHCNA process.

Competing Demands. Similar to the SENCOs, EPs also referenced the impact of competing demands on their ability to consistently and effectively involve children in the EHCNA process. EPs explained that their workloads included other work, such as developing and delivering training and working with schools at a systemic level, and felt strongly that their role was not limited to statutory assessment work. The varied nature of their role often meant that they worked at full capacity and they felt that this affected the way in which they engaged with statutory work:

EPs' busy roles and balancing lots of different demands and things like that might get in the way of that and also just falling into a pattern of maybe doing an observation and going to an annual review. (Holly, PRU).

EPs felt that the pressures of work sometimes limited their capacity to apply the full range of knowledge and skills that they possessed to every piece of statutory work.

EPs also spoke about the strict deadlines of the EHCNA process and the associated time pressures as impacting their ability to seek children's views and promote their involvement. They felt that the combination of these demands and pressures meant that they could not always meet with the child more than once to gain a deeper understanding of their needs and views and this, therefore, impacted their ability to fulfil their role.

Need for Resources. EPs also highlighted the need for resources as one of the challenges of involving children in the EHCNA process. In terms of their own practice, they felt that there was a lack of resources available in the EPS relating to how to explain their role and the EHCNA process to children:

I don't have any sort of visual materials to explain about the EHC assessment process. (Anna, MS 1).

They also cited a lack of space to reflect, personally and as a team, about their role in involving children in the EHCNA process:

Not always having the space to really reflect could I be having more powerful input in gaining the child's voice. (Holly, PRU).

The EPs identified these as areas to further develop as a team.

EPs also highlighted schools' need to secure resources as a factor that impacted how they perceived the EP's role and how they used their link EP's time.

They felt that stress on schools to secure the necessary funding and provision to meet children’s needs meant that they often prioritised using EPs’ time for other types of assessment, such as cognitive assessment, over gaining children’s views:

Sometimes valuing other types of assessment over the pupil views about statutory process and, often schools are driven by resources. (Holly, PRU).

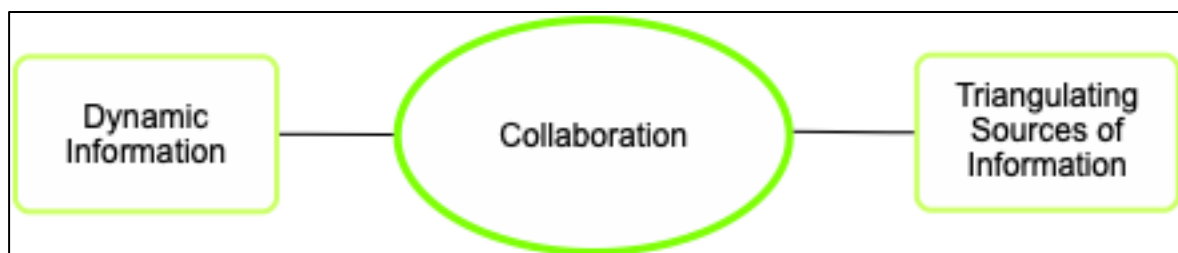
EPs felt that these factors significantly impacted how successfully they were able to fulfil their role as facilitators and advocates of children’s involvement in the EHCNA process.

4.3.6 Theme 6: Collaboration

EPs valued opportunities to work in a joined-up way with other adults who were part of the EHC assessment for children. They felt that this helped them overcome the challenges and limitations that they faced in their role. EPs believed that collaboration resulted in the gathering dynamic information about children from a variety of sources that contributed to forming rich pictures of children. FIGURE 24 depicts these aspects of collaboration, which are described in the following sections.

FIGURE 24

Aspects of Collaboration That Promote Children’s Involvement



Dynamic Information. EPs recognised that the limited contact they often had with children made it difficult to gather the children’s views over a period of time. They

felt that their work to gain children's views often resulted in static pictures of the children, since they were often based on children's views at a single point in time.

I might only see the child once or twice and get their views but their views might change and that wouldn't be represented. (Anna, MS 1).

EPs highlighted the need to produce dynamic pictures of children and valued the ability to work jointly with parents and school staff who had close, daily interactions with children in order to achieve this:

Their views change all the time...as they grow...and we can't be there all the time but parents are and schools are and we can get that information from them. (Holly, PRU).

They felt that this allowed a moving picture of children's views to emerge, which took into account shifts in their perspectives as they grew and developed.

Triangulating Sources of Information. EPs also acknowledged that their position external to school systems meant that they often did not have strong relationships with children, which they believed was important for children to feel comfortable to share their views. They also felt that, while they had knowledge about the EHCNA process and were skilled in gaining children's views and involving them in the process, they were not experts on the children's lived experiences:

We have the psychology but we don't have the knowledge, in depth...in the way that schools and families do, about those children. (Emily, PRU).

The EPs acknowledged that parents and school staff knew more about the children and recognised that adults who were familiar with the children were valuable sources of information, particularly in cases where the children were unable to unwilling to share their views or be involved. They stressed the importance of collaborating with

these adults to gather information from a range of sources and create holistic pictures of the children.

4.4 Comparison of SENCOs', EPs', and Children's Themes

Comparing the themes that emerged from the SENCOs', EPs', and children's interviews is a helpful way to consider the similarities and differences between these participant groups. Figure 25 shows the themes for each group of participants side-by-side. Themes that were similar have been linked in the figure. Examining the figure shows that there were some overlapping themes that emerged from the participant groups. EPs and SENCOs both spoke about children's capacity to engage in the EHCNA process, while SENCOs and children both described the perceived outcomes of children's involvement in the EHCNA process.

Some themes were similar but did not completely overlap with each other. For example, SENCOs spoke about the roles of various adults in involving children in the EHCNA process, whereas EPs spoke about their own unique role. While EPs spoke explicitly about collaboration between different adults, SENCOs referred to collaboration when they spoke about the different roles. Similarly, the SENCOs spoke about designing the EHCNA process in a child-centred way, which involved giving children some choice and control over the process. Children spoke about choice and control in terms of the agency they experienced as participants. SENCOs spoke about the knowledge and skills they had to promote children's participation, which included knowledge of ways to involve children, while children spoke about the different opportunities that they had for involvement. SENCOs spoke about prioritising children's participation, which linked to EPs views on valuing children's involvement and the challenges in involving children.

EPs spoke about one theme, genuineness of involvement, which was not discussed by the SENCOs or the children. Key themes are revisited in the next chapter,

where they are discussed in relation to each other, the research questions, and previous research.

FIGURE 25

Comparison of Themes from SENCo's, EPs', and Children's Interviews



Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the three research questions laid out in Chapter 1. It considers each research question in turn. For each question, a summary of the key findings and themes relevant to that question is presented first. The names of the themes are marked in boldface for ease of reference. This is then explored in the context of models of children's participation and research in the existing literature. Next, the researcher will reflect on the experience of using the data collection tool that was developed for this study. The unique contributions of this study and its practical implications for SENCOs, EPs, and children are then considered. Limitations of the study are explored and some potential avenues for future research are identified. The thesis will conclude with some final remarks about the study.

5.1 Review of Research Aims and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore children's involvement in the EHCNA process through the experiences of SENCOs, EPs, and children themselves. It sought the perspectives of these education professionals and children about the impact and outcomes of children's involvement. The study also aimed to understand more about the factors that facilitate or act as barriers to children's involvement in the EHCNA process. These research aims were met through the following broad questions:

1. How are children involved in the EHCNA process?
2. How is children's involvement perceived?
3. What factors facilitate or act as barriers to children's involvement?

Each question will be explored in the following sections.

5.2 How Are Children Involved in the EHCNA process?

In asking this question, the researcher sought to gain an overview of children's involvement at present in the LA in which this study was carried out. The researcher

was interested in exploring which aspects of the EHCNA process children were typically involved in and in considering the extent of their involvement. Finally, the researcher sought to understand how children's involvement was initiated.

5.2.1 Summary of Key Findings

The SENCOs and EPs agreed that children's involvement did occur but that it varied greatly on a case-by-case basis. The children themselves experienced variation in the **opportunities for involvement** that they were offered. The EPs spoke about the responsibility of adults to **create opportunities** to involve children throughout the EHCNA process but were concerned about the **genuineness** of children's involvement even when it did occur. EPs and SENCOs described the **roles** of various adults in the EHCNA process, including the parts that they themselves played.

5.2.2 Are Children Involved in the EHCNA process?

In exploring experiences of involving children in the EHCNA process, it was important to first establish whether, in practice, children were involved in the process. SENCOs and EPs agreed that children's involvement was inconsistent, with some children being more involved than others. This finding is consistent with a large-scale, national survey by Adams et al. (2017) as well as smaller, localised studies by Cochrane (2016) and Redwood (2015), which similarly reported mixed findings about children's involvement. The variation in children's involvement described by the adult participants in the current study was also reflected in the children's experiences of the EHCNA process. The five children interviewed for this study reported different experiences of involvement, a finding that is again consistent with previous research (Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). The nature of these variations is considered subsequently in this chapter.

The mixed pattern of children's involvement described by participants in this study goes against the guidance in the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015), which encourages

schools and education professionals to involve all children in the EHCNA process as far as possible. However, this appears to be common practice as it is consistently reported in the literature (Adams, 2017; Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). Overall, the findings of this study showed that children's involvement was inconsistent and not yet fully embedded in practice in the LA in which this study was carried out.

5.2.3 To What Extent Are Children Involved in Different Aspects of the EHCNA process?

The EPs felt strongly that children should be involved in all stages of the EHCNA process, from participating in making the decision to request an EHC assessment to being involved in the drafting of the final EHC plan. This view reflects the aims of the CFA (2014) and the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015), which encourages schools and education professionals to involve children in the EHCNA process as far as possible. EPs were concerned that children's involvement was often limited to sharing their views through the PPD and that it did not extend beyond this. EPs in Cochrane's (2016) study also reported that children's involvement was restricted to sharing their views in completing the child's views document in Section A of the EHC plan. Although SENCos did not explicitly share this view, they agreed with EPs that children's current involvement was inadequate and overlooked. This was reflected in the experiences of the children who were interviewed. View of four of the five children had been sought and they described completing the PPD. Only two of the children had been invited to attend meetings about their EHC plan. These experiences are consistent with those reported by the participants in Cochrane's (2016) study, where two out of the three children aged six to eight years had been asked to share their views, but none were invited to attend meetings. Similarly, in Redwood's (2015) study, just one child out of five was asked to share his views and was invited to attend a meeting about his EHC plan.

Positioning the experiences of the children who were interviewed for this study on the adapted Ladder of Participation (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015) sheds some light on the extent of the children's involvement in the EHCNA process. One child in this study was not asked to share his views, which were instead inferred by adults from their knowledge of him- he was merely 'considered'. Three children were 'represented'- they shared their views in their own words. One child was 'consulted'- he shared his views at a meeting and participated in discussions about his support. 'True' participation involves children in sharing decision-making with adults (Hart, 1997) and having influence over decisions (Lundy, 2007). Although most children in this study were involved in the EHCNA process to some degree, none were directly involved in making decisions about their targets or outcomes. Barriers to children's 'true' participation are described subsequently in this chapter.

The inconsistent and limited involvement experienced by children in this study was linked to EPs' doubts about the genuineness of children's involvement. They were concerned that the process of involving children was sometimes simply a tick-box exercise in fulfilling legal requirements laid out in the CFA (2014) and the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015). Such practices are described by Hart (1997) as tokenistic and are examples of non-participation. Even where children appeared to be involved, EPs questioned whether the involvement was authentic- whether children's views had been sought directly and whether they truly reflected children's voices. Concerns about the genuineness and authenticity of children's involvement were also reported in a study by Palikara et al. (2018). The researchers found that even when children's views were written in EHC plans using first-person language, they were often the views of adults presented as the child's views. Similarly, the EPs in the current study were concerned about the use of adults' views as a proxy for children's voice, a practice which the

SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) explicitly advises against, but which was employed by a SENCo in at least one case in this study. Research has shown that using adults' interpretations of children's views can be unreliable even when adults know children well (Pearlman & Michaels, 2019). The SENCos who were interviewed did not express any concerns about the genuineness of children's involvement and children themselves did not report experiences of involvement that they perceived as inauthentic, so this appears to have been a concern only for the EPs. However, Lundy (2007) noted that adults can appear to hear children's views but may not truly listen to the views or allow them to impact decisions, resulting in the inauthentic involvement of children. It is possible that the EPs' doubts about the genuineness of children's involvement may not have been baseless. Considering the influence of children's views on the decisions that were made regarding their EHC plan can shed some light on this issue. This will be addressed subsequently in this chapter.

5.2.4 How Is Children's Involvement Initiated?

Children under the age of sixteen cannot request an EHC assessment themselves. Requests for EHC assessments can be made by schools or parents. Placing this decision in the hands of adults means that adults also hold the power to invite children to be involved in the EHCNA process. Adults who work with children are encouraged to seek children's views about the need for additional support before a request for an EHC plan is made (DfE, 2015; Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). However, none of the children in this study were informed or consulted about their views before the request was made and they played no part in making this decision.

Although children were not involved in making the decision to request an EHC assessment, some children were involved in the process once it was underway. However, children did not hold the power in deciding whether or not to be involved. This was determined by adults, typically SENCos or familiar adults. These adults acted

as gatekeepers, deciding if it was appropriate for children to be involved. SENCOs and EPs both spoke about their reliance on familiar adults to initiate children's involvement in the EHCNA process, and the responsibility to do so often fell to school staff.

SENCOs and EPs both saw SENCOs as the 'drivers' of the process. It was the SENCOs who typically initiated the EHC assessment and co-ordinated the input of the different adults who were a part of the process. For example, SENCOs directed school staff or EPs to seek children's views and were indirectly responsible for initiating children's involvement. The responsibility that was assigned to SENCOs by the EPs and that the SENCOs themselves took on in their role of 'holding' the EHCNA process reflected the views expressed by SENCOs in previous research (Boesley & Crane, 2018; Gore, 2016). In both these studies, SENCOs reported feeling that the onus of the EHCNA process fell on them entirely.

5.3 How Is Children's Involvement Perceived?

This question aimed to shed light on SENCOs', EPs', and children's views about children's involvement in the EHCNA process. The researcher was also interested in understanding the adults' and children's perspectives on the impact of children's involvement.

5.3.1 Summary of Key Findings

EPs and SENCOs both agreed that children's involvement in the EHCNA process was important but that it was often overlooked. The SENCOs spoke about this in terms of not **prioritising** children's involvement, despite believing it to be important, due to the various challenges of involving children in the process. EPs spoke about **valuing** children's involvement as a central part of the EHCNA process and not just as a statutory requirement. Children valued any **opportunities for involvement** and rated their experiences of involvement positively. SENCOs spoke about the **outcomes** of children's involvement and that it contributed to children's **personal growth** and led

to better **understanding and representation** of the children's views in their EHC plans. The EPs agreed with this view and spoke about the importance of children's involvement for **building investment** in the EHCNA process. Children also commented on how their experiences of involvement had a positive impact on their **self-esteem**. They also reported **positive and negative emotional effects** of their involvement. Some children were able to see how their views **influenced the support** that they received following their participation in the EHCNA process.

5.3.2 What Are SENCOs', EPs', and Children's Views on Children's Involvement?

SENCOs and EPs shared the view that children's involvement in the EHCNA process was important, but each group differed in how this view related to their practice. SENCOs felt that children's involvement was bound to judgements about children's capacity to engage in the process. They saw children's involvement as either possible or impossible based on these judgements. Lundy (2007) warned against taking an opportunity-restricting view of children's capacity which interferes with children's rights to express their views, as stipulated in Article 12 of the UNCRRC.

EPs also expressed the view that involvement depended, to some extent, on children's capacity but believed that it was the responsibility of adults to create opportunities for participation that were accessible to all children. This view represents the idea of creating inclusive spaces for children's involvement (Lundy, 2007). The EPs were more flexible and inclusive in their views of children's participation and largely subscribed to Lundy's ideals of a generous and empowering view of children's capacity. In line with their own views and Lundy's notion of 'voice', EPs believed that adults must be creative and resourceful in the ways in which they sought to involve children, making the process accessible to all.

Children valued any opportunities to take part and rated their experiences of involvement positively. They saw their involvement as a chance to talk about

themselves and appreciated the interest that adults took in them. This is consistent with the small body of previous research which reported that involvement in decision-making is important and valued by children (Ambresin et al., 2013; Kilkelly et al., 2005; Redwood, 2015). The reasons for children's prioritisation of involvement are described in the following section.

5.3.3 What Is the Perceived Impact of Children's Involvement?

Children were seen as the experts on their lives, and EPs and SENCOs felt that involving children in the EHCNA process led to plans that better represented the children. This was also reported by Cochrane (2016) and can be understood through the theory of social constructionism (Burr, 2015) - if subjective, lived experiences are to be understood, accounts of those experiences must come directly from those who experienced them. This was thought to contribute to better understanding of children and creation of plans that were more representative, individualised and tailored to the children. This is supported by previous research, which found that involving children in planning led to the creation of plans that reflected the children that they were intended to support (Holburn et al., 2004; Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015).

Additionally, EPs felt that children's participation in planning helped to build investment and ownership in the process. Being involved in setting goals motivated children to work towards achieving these goals. Co-creating positive experiences of participation that foster the feeling of ownership over decision-making has been found to be a motivating factor that empowers children (Hart, 1997). This is consistent with previous research, which found that involving children in planning their provision made plans more effective and was linked to better outcomes (Hargreaves, 2014; Robertson et al., 2007).

SENCOs felt that children's involvement led to children's personal growth and led them to feel validated and valued. This was also reported by the children

themselves and is corroborated by previous research (Cochrane, 2016). The children also shared positive feelings about their self-worth, which was also reported by the child in Redwood's (2015) study. Some children also shared experiences of negative emotions as a result of their participation. They typically described feeling anxious about sharing their views with many adults. The SENCOs and EPs were also aware of these potential negative consequences of children's participation. However, positive experiences of participation often outweighed the negative, and factors that caused children stress were mitigated by the presence of familiar and trusted adults.

As mentioned in previous sections, EPs were concerned about the genuineness of children's involvement. They felt that adults heard children's views but that often the views were not utilised and had no influence over decisions that were made. Lundy (2007) and Kennan et al. (2019) expressed similar concerns and noted that this is a widespread problem in children's involvement. The children in this study had no direct involvement in making decisions about their EHC plans, but some children reported that they could see the impact of their views on the support that they received. This is a positive indication that the SENCOs and EPs who were involved in this study were committed to allowing children's views to influence their decisions on some occasions.

5.4 What Factors Facilitate or Are Barriers to Children's Involvement?

In asking this question, the researcher intended to understand what SENCOs, EPs, and children perceived to be the barriers to and facilitators of children's involvement in the EHCNA process.

5.4.1 Summary of Key Findings

EPs and SENCOs reported **children's capacity to engage** in the EHCNA process to be the main barrier to children's participation. Both groups of adults also cited the impact of **systemic challenges** on their ability to involve children. In addition,

EPs felt that they had limited **contact with children** in their role, which impacted their ability to meaningfully involve children. In addition, SENCOs described a lack of **knowledge and skills** relating to facilitating children's participation. Children themselves noted negative **emotional effects** created by the presence of unfamiliar adults during the EHCNA process as a barrier to their own participation. In terms of factors that facilitated their involvement, children valued their own **agency** and the support of a **familiar adult** above all else. SENCOs and EPs also recognised the importance of children having a good **relationship with the facilitators** of their involvement. SENCOs and EPs described the need for the process to be **child-centred** in its design and approach. They also valued **collaborating** with other professionals and children's parents. EPs in particular also referred to the importance of systems **valuing children's involvement** and felt that they had a **unique role** in promoting children's involvement.

5.4.2 What Are the Challenges in Involving Children in the EHCNA process?

SENCOs and EPs attributed the variation in children's involvement to the need to ensure that it was appropriate. They explained that decisions about the appropriateness of children's involvement were made based on judgements of children's capacity to engage, which relied particularly on children's age and their needs, particularly language needs. SENCOs and EPs reported that young children and those with language needs were less involved in the EHCNA process. This is consistent with research in the existing literature (Adams et al., 2017; Cochrane, 2016; Redwood, 2015). Adams and colleagues reported that children aged five to sixteen were less likely to be involved in the EHCNA process than young people aged sixteen to twenty-five. This was echoed in the views of the SENCOs and EPs, who felt that adolescents were more involved in the EHCNA process than primary school-aged children. In Cochrane's study (2016), none of the children aged six to eight were

involved in attending meetings for their EHC plan. Similarly, of the five case studies of experiences of the EHCNA process described by Redwood (2015), the child had been involved in the EHCNA process in only one case. This child was the oldest of the five and was viewed by the adults as having good language and communication skills. Redwood's research was carried out in 2015 when the EHCNA process was initially introduced but, despite the EHCNA process having been in effect for over five years, there does not appear to have been significant advancement in adults' practices of involving children in the EHCNA process in the LA in which this study was carried out.

The current study also revealed another aspect of children's capacity to engage which has not been reported in previous research. The SENCOs and EPs reported that they considered children's emotional skills when determining the appropriateness of children's involvement. EPs and SENCOs both acknowledged that the EHCNA process could cause children anxiety if they did not have the necessary emotional skills to cope with it. For example, one child who was interviewed in the current study, Carlos, was not involved in the EHCNA process because the SENCO felt that Carlos would be overwhelmed and distressed by any involvement. Additionally, EPs spoke about children's emotional readiness to know about and accept their needs. They felt strongly that involving children who were not emotionally ready to be a part of the EHCNA process or those who did not have the emotional capacity to cope with the process could be detrimental to children's emotional and mental well-being. Kennan et al. (2019) criticised the Lundy model (Lundy, 2007) for overlooking the emotional aspects of participation, which the researchers felt was an important aspect of creating a safe space for children's participation. The findings of the current study strengthen the view of Kennan and colleagues and constitute a unique contribution to the literature.

Judging the appropriateness of children's involvement based on their perceived capacity to engage, while practical, is subjective and may be prone to bias (Sutcliffe & Birney, 2015). While it is important that adults consider the welfare of children and make decisions in the best interests of children, a problem-focused assessment of children's capacity restricts opportunities for involvement and denies children their Article 12 rights (Lundy, 2007). Lundy further highlights that, according to Article 12 (UNCRC) questions about capacity should only affect the influence of children's views, not their right to share their views in the first place. Lundy recommends that adults have a generous interpretation of children's capacity and be creative in empowering them to have a voice. Failing to do so may result in missed opportunities to gain valuable information about children if their abilities have been underestimated. Reflecting on the experience of interviewing these children for this study, the researcher felt that this was the case. With the use of communication aids, all children were able to express their views and therefore may have made valuable contributions to their EHC plans if they had been more deeply involved in the process. Indeed, Carlos, the child who was least involved in the EHCNA process explicitly wished that he had more influence over the type of support he received in school.

One of the barriers to involving children of all ages and levels of need was SENCOs' knowledge and skills of how to facilitate children's participation. This was noted by the EPs and the SENCOs themselves as an area for further development. SENCOs did not feel that they had sufficient knowledge about children's needs and preferences or adequate training in the skill of adapting methods to be accessible to all children. However, SENCOs attempted to overcome this barrier by delegating the task to those whom they considered to be more knowledgeable or skilled, such as TAs or EPs. This will be revisited subsequently in this chapter. Previous research on the

barriers to children's involvement in the EHCNA process has primarily focussed on 'within-child' factors, such as age and needs, and located the problem within children (Adams et al., 2017). By drawing out barriers that affected adults' capacity to actively promote children's involvement, the current study makes a unique contribution to the existing literature.

The SENCOs and EPs also identified another barrier which affected their ability to involve children in the EHCNA process. Both groups described systemic challenges that resulted from competing demands, time pressures, and heavy workloads. In particular, SENCOs described the difficulties of managing the various roles they played in schools against the significant responsibility of 'holding' the EHCNA process. This has been reported in previous research with SENCOs, who similarly described feeling overwhelmed by the weight of their responsibilities with regards to the EHCNA process (Gore, 2016). Given the high demands placed on SENCOs, they often prioritised other work over involving children in the EHCNA process. EPs also reported that they were impacted by these systemic challenges. In addition to these, EPs were also hindered by their lack of regular contact with children. As professionals who work outside school systems, EPs often only interacted with children on one or two occasions during the EHCNA process. They felt this was insufficient to build a relationship with children, which they viewed as an important factor in meaningfully engaging with children. In recognition of these shortcomings, EPs and SENCOs both valued opportunities to collaborate with each other and with school staff and children's parents to develop a dynamic and holistic understanding of the child.

The importance of a good relationship between children and the adults who seek to involve them in the EHCNA process has been reported in previous research (Redwood, 2015) and was also a prominent theme in the experiences of the children

who participated in this study. Indeed, one of the barriers to participation identified by the children related to the presence of unfamiliar adults in meetings and feelings of anxiety that this generated.

5.4.3 How Is Children's Involvement in the EHCNA process Supported?

From the children's perspective, the most important factor that facilitated their participation was having agency. They valued having choice and control over different aspects of their involvement. This finding has been reported previously in the literature (Persson et al., 2017; Redwood, 2015) and in an earlier research project by the researcher, which was described in Chapter 1. Although SENCOs recognised that children valued their agency, children were rarely given significant control over the process. The SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) advises that children should be involved in making the decision to request an EHC plan, but children in this study were not involved in this decision and had no control over it. Additionally, even though SENCOs gave children the choice to attend meetings, the opportunity to choose was only offered to the two children who were judged to have the capacity to engage in the process. This raises important questions about children's equal access to opportunities and ignores their Article 12 rights. Despite acknowledging that children valued agency, all children were not offered choice and control to the same extent.

Although most children had little control over decision-making, they did report having some control over other aspects of their involvement such as choosing snacks and seating arrangements. This was also described by the participants in an earlier project by the researcher. Children in the current study valued even these relatively trivial forms of agency and felt that they were crucial in facilitating their participation.

Children also valued the presence of a familiar adult to facilitate their involvement. This has been widely reported in the literature (Cochrane, 2016; Pearlman & Michaels, 2019; Redwood, 2015) and was also acknowledged by the

SENCOs and EPs in this study. SENCOs and EPs recognised that familiar adults knew more about children's needs and preferences, knew how to engage them meaningfully, and had trusting relationships with children which enabled them to facilitate children's involvement. This was described as a part of making the process child-centred, which is one of the aims of the EHCNA process as stated in the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015).

The need to adapt methods and tools to facilitate children's involvement was noted by the SENCOs and the EPs. The SENCOs felt that they lacked these skills, but that school staff who knew children well were sometimes able to use their knowledge to make opportunities for involvement accessible to children. EPs noted that their knowledge and skilful use of a range of tools, including visual communication aids, and psychological frameworks to elicit children's views facilitated children's involvement. This contrasts the findings of Adams et al.'s (2017) survey, which reported that visual communication tools were not commonly used to facilitate children's participation, and indicates an area of strength in the practice of these EPs. The EPs further described what they perceived to be their unique role in supporting children to develop their voice by helping them to know and understand their needs and preferences and by engaging children in expressing their views. This role was also noted in Adams et al.'s (2017) survey as a key facilitator of children's participation. The EPs also stressed the importance of their role in promoting children's involvement by encouraging schools to create an ethos that values children's voices. This was noted to be an important prerequisite to prioritising children's involvement (Lundy, 2007; Redwood, 2015). Although the importance of the right ethos for children's involvement has been noted in previous research, the unique role of EPs in promoting this constitutes a contribution of the current study.

5.5 Reflections on the Data Collection Tool

The data collection tool was designed specifically for use in the children's interviews to accommodate any needs in receptive or expressive language skills that may have impacted children's ability to engage meaningfully in the study. With this aim in mind, the researcher reflected on the effectiveness of the tool in facilitating children's participation. None of the children had significant language needs but most had some language and communication needs. Most of the children readily used the pictorial communication aid cards that were available to supplement their verbal communication and enthusiastically used the blank cards to draw their own responses. The availability of the cards is believed to have also been helpful to children who did not have language difficulties, as displaying the questions in visual and written format served as a reminder of the question that helped children to focus. Finally, the diamond ranking activity helped the researcher to check understanding of children's responses and served to deepen the discussion by revealing some of the motivations behind children's choices and the reasons for their preferences. Overall, the researcher felt that the visual communication tool was valuable in supporting children's participation in this study.

5.6 Unique Contributions

There were a number of unique contributions from the current study. First, it is one of few studies in the existing literature to gain children's perspective on their own participation in the EHCNA process. Previous research gathers views from adult participants or consists of single or small case studies. For example, Cochrane's study (2016) did not directly gain children's views and while Redwood's study (2015) included a child's perspective, this was gathered from just one child. Although the experiences of the children in the current study were vastly different, which limited the number of themes that could be drawn from the interviews, the original contribution of

perspectives from a small but diverse group of children is significant in the context of the existing literature.

Previous research on the barriers to children's participation (Adams et al., 2017) focused on 'within-child' factors, such as age and capacity to engage, which located the problem within the child. However, the current study highlighted several barriers to children's involvement that related to adults' limitations and systemic challenges, such as a lack of knowledge and skills in involving children in the EHCNA process and the absence of an ethos that values children's participation. This invites SENCOs and EPs to take a strengths-based view of children's capacities and work collaboratively with each other to value and enable children's participation.

Finally, the study also identified two additional areas of interest in relation to the topic of children's involvement. First, it highlighted the importance of children's emotional coping skills and emotional readiness to be involved in the EHCNA process. SENCOs and EPs recognised the risks to children's emotional and mental wellbeing posed by involving them in the EHCNA process beyond the capacity of their emotional coping skills or their readiness to know and understand the impact of their needs. This must be taken into account to keep children's best interests in mind. Second, no other previous research has highlighted the extent of EPs' unique role in promoting children's involvement in the EHCNA process. EPs saw themselves as responsible for encouraging schools to prioritise children's involvement as well as directly facilitating children's understanding and expression of their views and preferences. EPs also felt that they had unique skills in using a range of tools and psychological frameworks to elicit children's views. These areas have not been reported in previous research and warrant further exploration.

5.7 Implications

The practical implications of the key findings of the current study are considered separately for SENCOs or schools, EPs, and for children.

5.7.1 For SENCOs and Schools

The value that children placed on their participation and the utility of their views in creating personal and effective plans emphasises the importance of seeking the views of all children. Schools and SENCOs are encouraged to have a generous and empowering view of children's capacity to engage. It is important to note that special tools or tests are not essential- simply being curious about children's views and engaging in conversation with children through their preferred form of communication can be sufficient to capture children's views.

The children in the current study greatly valued their agency over decisions that were made. Schools and SENCOs are advised to give children as much choice and control over the EHCNA process as possible. This may include giving all children the choice to participate, allowing children to choose how they would like to participate and choosing what kind of support they would like to have to facilitate their participation. Control over the venue, time, attendance list, and seating arrangements of any meetings that children may attend would also be valued.

5.7.2 For EPs

EPs' knowledge and skills in using a range of psychological frameworks and tools to elicit children's views was considered to be a unique contribution of their role to the EHCNA process. SENCOs felt that they lacked this knowledge and the skills to facilitate children's participation. EPs are, therefore, in a unique position to offer support to upskill schools and SENCOs through training, workshops, and supervision. This could include sharing resources for gaining the views of children of different ages and levels of need. EPs can also offer support by modelling the use of tools and

techniques to engage children in reflecting on and sharing their views. Finally, EPs can offer SENCOs opportunities for supervision to discuss how to promote individual children's participation in decision-making.

EPs, in their role as professionals who support school systems, are also well placed to take on systemic work to promote an ethos that values and prioritises children's participation in the schools that they are linked to. The value that systems and cultures placed on children's voices was found to be crucial in sustaining practices which seek to involve children. The belief system of the EP team is equally important in achieving this, so EPs as a group must also prioritise this type of systemic work.

5.7.3 For Children

In recognition of children's agency and its importance to children, the researcher felt it was important to also highlight the implications of this study for children. The SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) acknowledges that children's capacities evolve as they grow. It gives children more autonomy when they reach the age of sixteen and EHC plans may continue until children reach twenty-five years of age. This means that most children will eventually be able to have a more influential role in decision-making as they grow, and it will be important that they have access to research to inform their decisions. If children have access to the findings of this study, which will be disseminated in a child-friendly format, children could be empowered to take on more active roles with regard to the Annual Reviews of their EHC plans. This would allow children to continue to influence decision-making about their plans and the support they receive.

5.8 Limitations

An obvious limitation of the current study is that it was carried out on a small sample of participants from the same London LA. Therefore, the transferability of the findings of this study is limited. During the data analysis phase, the researcher

considered grouping together the adult participants in order to achieve an acceptable sample size, as defined by Yin (2014). However, the researcher decided against this in recognition of the unique perspectives and roles of EPs and SENCOs and in order to preserve any differences between the groups. This was considered appropriate as the purpose of the study was not to generalise the findings across the broad population but to gain practical wisdom to develop personal hypotheses that could guide EPs and SENCOs in involving children in the EHCNA process.

One limitation of the study is that the children's interview schedule did not include any direct questions about children's views on their participation, as the adult participants' interview schedule did. This meant that information relating to children's views about participation had to be inferred from their responses to other questions. Furthermore, children tended to interpret questions about support as referring to the support they received in class. While this is expected to be in line with the provision stipulated in their EHC plan, the current study could be improved by making this question clearer.

As all but one of the children were completely unaware of the EHCNA process prior to the study, it raises the question of whether their perception of their level of involvement reflected the extent to which they were truly involved in the EHCNA process. The perspectives of the SENCOs and EPs provided some corroboration to the children's views, but this was not the intended purpose of including adult participants in this study. The epistemological stance that the study took was social constructionism, therefore, it must be accepted that the children's subjective realities may be different but are no less valid.

5.9 Future Research

A key finding of this study was the importance of familiar adults, typically TAs or class teachers, who facilitated children's involvement in the EHCNA process. An

interesting avenue for future research could be to gain the perspectives of TAs and class teachers on their views and experiences of this role. This would further understanding of the barriers that adults face in facilitating children's involvement.

The current study was solely concerned with qualitative data gathered through interviews as the aim was to build a rich picture of experiences of children's involvement in the EHCNA process. However, examining children's EHC plans to identify how children's involvement is reflected in them and how their views influence the plan in addition to conducting interviews could add an interesting dimension to the research and would increase the trustworthiness of the study.

Another possibility for a future study could be to apply the findings of this study and the existing literature to a real EHC assessment using action research methodology. This could provide feedback about the utility of the implications of this study to SENCOs and EPs in their practice and allow the contributions to be tested in a real-world context.

Finally, future research could focus on a single setting and explore how children with different needs are supported to participate in the EHCNA process. Alternatively, studies could focus on a particular type of SEND and evaluate different methods to facilitate children's involvement. This would contribute towards building an evidence base for different tools and approaches which could be readily accessed by adults who are seeking to involve children in the EHCNA process.

5.10 Conclusion

In the years since the EHC plan was introduced as the new form of statutory assessment of SEND, researchers have been engaged in evaluating its implementation. In particular, there is interest in understanding how schools and professionals involve children and their families in the process. A number of studies have explored this through the perspectives of adults, including SENCOs, school staff,

EPs, and parents, but the experiences of children have been largely overlooked by research. This study adds to a limited literature on children's experiences of involvement in the EHCNA process. It found that there is a divide between the theoretical intentions of the EHCNA process and the policy that guides it, and the way it is currently implemented in practice by SENCOs and EPs and experienced by children. Nonetheless, the key findings and implications of the study indicate how SENCOs and EPs can work together to empower children to use their voice to exert increasing influence over decisions that impact their lives.

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Appendix A

Overview of the EHCNA Process

EHC plans aim to support children with SEND to achieve well at school and to prepare children for adulthood from a young age. LAs must issue a plan for any child whose needs cannot be met from the expected budget in mainstream schools or settings. Schools, parents, and children over the age of sixteen can request the LA to assess a child's need for an EHC plan. This is the EHC Needs Assessment (EHCNA).

Once a request has been received, the LA must decide whether to undertake an EHCNA. The EHCNA explores children's strengths and needs by gathering information and views from children themselves and from children's parents and teachers. If the LA agrees to conduct an EHCNA, professionals from education, health, and social care teams submit advice to the LA about children's needs, goals and aspirations, and provision that is expected to be required to support them. The LA considers this advice and decides whether it is necessary to issue an EHC plan.

If the LA agrees to issue an EHC plan, a draft plan is sent to parents and children. The LA then consults with parents, children, and educational settings to amend the draft plan as needed and issue a final EHC plan. The entire EHCNA process, from receipt of the request for an EHCNA to the issuing of a final EHC plan must be completed in twenty weeks.

The final EHC plan is reviewed annually at an Annual Review meeting to monitor children's development and progress, until children reach the age of twenty-five or until it is agreed that the EHC plan is no longer required.

Appendix B

The Twelve Sections of an EHC Plan

Section	Content
Section A	The child's and his/her parents' views
Section B	Description of the child's SEND
Section C	Description of the child's health needs related to his/her SEND
Section D	Description of the child's social care needs related to his/her SEND
Section E	The outcomes sought for the child, including short-term targets and long-term goals for adult life
Section F	The special educational provision required to support the child to achieve his/her outcomes
Section G	The health provision required to meet the child's needs
Section H1	The social care provision that must be provided for the child in relation to section 2 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970
Section H2	The social care provision required to meet the child's needs
Section I	The name and type of the school that the child should attend
Section J	Details of how the Personal Budget will be used, where applicable
Section K	A list of the advice and information gathered during the EHC needs assessment, which must be attached as appendices

Appendix C

Pupil Profile Document Template

<p>My name is</p>	<p>What people like and admire about me...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bullet point list of the positive qualities, strengths and talents• A child may find it difficult to identify these things. Use feedback from previous assessments, or ask a range of people that know the child well including family, friends, staff working with the person
<p><i>A current photo of the person</i></p>	
<p>What's important to me...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bullet point list of what really matters to the person - from their perspective where possible even if others disagree• Aspirations, dreams or plans for the future• Important routines	<p>How best to support me...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A list of how to support the person• What is helpful and what is not• What people need to know and what people need to do <p>Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some of the information for Part A Pupil Profile will already be in the eCAF. This should be used to complete a draft of the profile before you meet the person and their family.• Tips on writing one page profiles can be found at: http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/reading-room/how/person-centred-thinking/one-page-profiles.aspx• The one page profile must fit onto one page. It should be a brief summary of the other pages in the pupil profile. The size of the boxes and the size of the text can be changed to make text fit.
<p>I like...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bullet point list of what the person likes• Favourite foods, toys, TV programmes• Activities and when they do them• People they admire• Sports teams <p>I do not like...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bullet point list of what the person does not like from their perspective	

Appendix D

Approach Letter for Headteachers

Institute of Education



Head Teacher Information Letter

Dear _____,

My name is Aditi Rao and I am a doctoral student training to become an Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education. I am undertaking research to explore key stakeholders' views of young people's involvement in decision-making during the Education, Health, and Care (EHC) process. I am writing to you because I would very much like to involve your school in this research.

I'm interested to find out about ways in which children and young people participate in the EHC process by talking to SENCos and young people about their experiences of the process. I would like to invite your SENCo and children in Key Stage 2 at your school who have been through the EHC process in the last 6-12 months to participate in this study. With your permission, I would like to send information letters and consent forms to the SENCo and parents/carers of these children.

The research involves an interview that will take up to 30 minutes and will be conducted at school, with your consent. This may be an opportunity for your SENCo and the young people to reflect on their experiences of the EHC process and their thoughts on factors that can facilitate or act as barriers to young people's participation. Through this research, my goal is to collate information about best practices to facilitate young people's involvement that will be helpful for adults, including school staff, who support young people during the EHC process.

I hope that you will consider involving your school in this research. I will arrange to call you next week to know if you are interested in participating, to provide more information and to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

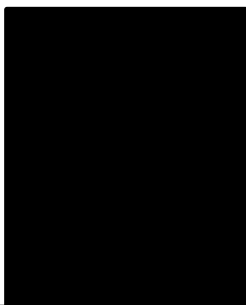
Kind regards,



Aditi Rao

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Email:



Appendix E

Approach Letter for EPs and SENCoS

Institute of Education



EP/SENCo Information Letter

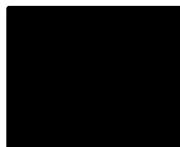
Dear _____,

My name is Aditi Rao and I am a doctoral student training to become an Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education. I am undertaking research to explore key stakeholders' views of young people's involvement in decision-making during the Education, Health, and Care (EHC) process. I am writing to you because I would very much like to involve you in this research.

I'm interested to find out about ways in which children and young people participate in the EHC process. As EPs and SENCoS work closely with young people during the EHC process, I would like to gain your views about young people's involvement. I will arrange a time to meet with you for an interview that will take approximately 30 minutes. This may be an opportunity for you to reflect on your experiences of involving young people in the EHC process and your thoughts on factors that can facilitate or act as barriers to their participation. Through this research, my goal is to collate information about best practices to facilitate young people's involvement that will be helpful for EPs and SENCoS who support young people during the EHC process.

I hope that you will consider participating in this study. I will arrange to call you next week to know if you are interested in participating, to provide more information and to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Kind regards,



Aditi Rao

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Email: _____

Appendix F

Consent Form for EPs and SENCOs

<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> Institute of Education </div>										
<h3 style="margin: 0;">EP/SENCO Consent Form</h3>										
<p>Title of Project: Exploring stakeholders' views of young people's involvement in the Education, Health, and Care process: Best practices to facilitate young people's participation in decision-making.</p>										
<p>Name of Researcher: Aditi Rao</p>										
<p>Institution: Institute of Education, University College London</p>										
<p><i>Please read the statements below and tick the boxes alongside. I will arrange to collect the complete form from you.</i></p>										
<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 80%;">1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information letter provided and have had the opportunity to ask questions.</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; vertical-align: middle;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.</td> <td style="text-align: center; vertical-align: middle;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed anonymously, and included in the research report.</td> <td style="text-align: center; vertical-align: middle;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>4. I understand that data collected during the interview may be kept electronically in a secure file for up to 6 months since it was collected.</td> <td style="text-align: center; vertical-align: middle;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>5. I consent to take part in the research project.</td> <td style="text-align: center; vertical-align: middle;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>	1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information letter provided and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed anonymously, and included in the research report.	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. I understand that data collected during the interview may be kept electronically in a secure file for up to 6 months since it was collected.	<input type="checkbox"/>	5. I consent to take part in the research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information letter provided and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>									
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>									
3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed anonymously, and included in the research report.	<input type="checkbox"/>									
4. I understand that data collected during the interview may be kept electronically in a secure file for up to 6 months since it was collected.	<input type="checkbox"/>									
5. I consent to take part in the research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>									
<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td> <td style="width: 33%; border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td> <td style="width: 33%; border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Name of EP/SENCO</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Date</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Signature</td> </tr> </table>				Name of EP/SENCO	Date	Signature				
Name of EP/SENCO	Date	Signature								
<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td> <td style="width: 33%; border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td> <td style="width: 33%; border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Name of Researcher</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Date</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Signature</td> </tr> </table>				Name of Researcher	Date	Signature				
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature								

Appendix G

Approach Letter for Parents or Carers

Institute of Education



Parent/Carer Information Letter

Dear _____

My name is Aditi Rao and I am a doctoral student training to become an Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education. I am undertaking research to explore children's views of their own involvement in decision-making during the Education, Health, and Care (EHC) process. I am writing to you because I would very much like to involve your child in this research.

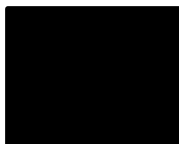
I'm interested to find out about ways in which children participate in the EHC process. I would like to meet with your child at school to talk about his or her experiences of the EHC process. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes. This may be an opportunity for your child to reflect on his or her experiences of being involved in the EHC process. The goal of this research is to understand how school staff and Educational Psychologists can better support children to be involved in the EHC process.

The interview will be anonymous and confidential. It will be audio recorded and then transcribed. This information will be stored safely in a password protected file for 6 months, after which it will be destroyed. The transcripts will appear in my thesis. I will take care to make the interview a relaxed and comfortable experience for your child to avoid causing anxiety, however, your child has the right to withdraw from the study if they wish to without having to give a reason.

If you would like your child to participate in the research please complete the consent form and return it to the SENCo. I will then arrange to meet with him or her at school to seek his or her consent.

Thank you for reading this letter and for considering your child's participation. If you have any questions I would be happy to answer them via email or phone.

Kind regards,



Aditi Rao

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Email

Phone



Appendix H

Consent Form for Parents or Carers

Institute of Education



Parent/Carer Consent Form

Title of Project: Exploring children's views of their own involvement in the Education, Health, and Care process: Best practices to facilitate young people's participation in decision-making.

Name of Researcher: Aditi Rao

Institution: Institute of Education, University College London

Please read the statements below and tick the boxes next to them. Please return the completed form to the school office.

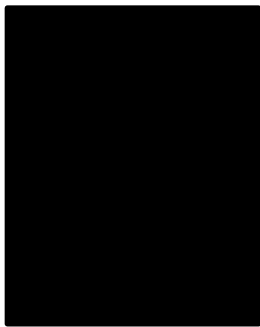
1. I have read and understood the information letter and have had the chance to ask questions.
2. I understand that I can choose if I want my son/daughter to participate and that I/they can stop at any time without giving a reason.
3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded, written down without their names, and used in the research report.
4. I understand that data collected during the interview may be kept on a computer in a locked file for up to 6 months since it was collected.
5. I will let my son/daughter to take part in the research project.

Name of Parent/Guardian Signature Date

Name of Researcher Signature Date

Appendix I

Information Sheet for Children



Hello! My name is Aditi Rao and I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I'm doing a project and I'd like to talk you about it.

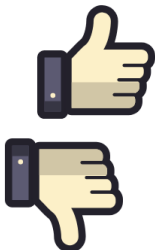
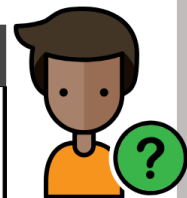


WHAT'S THE PROJECT ABOUT?

I'm interested to know what you think about the Education, Health, and Care (EHC) process.

WHY HAVE I BEEN CHOSEN?

You've been chosen because you were given an EHC plan in the last year.



DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

You can choose if you want to take part. If you say yes but then change your mind later, you can stop taking part at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART?

If you want to take part I will come back to school to meet you on another day. We'll talk about what you think about the EHC process and how you took part in it. I will record what you say and then write it up. No one will know what you've said because your name won't be on it.


Everything we talk about will be between us, unless you tell me something that suggests that you may be in danger. If this happens, I will have to tell a staff member at your school for your safety.











Thank you for reading this and for thinking carefully about taking part.
I hope I get to hear what you have to say!
If you have any questions later or want know more about the project,
you can ask Mr./Ms.-----










Appendix J





Consent Form for Children











 =
I am


    = =  →  
I understand that I am being asked to take part in



 ?
research







      →   
I understand what Aditi would like to talk to me about




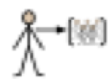
 =   → 
It is my choice to take part





  ...     →  =   → 
I can choose if I want my words to be used in the

 ?
research

 
I can change my mind

     
I can stop taking part when I want to

   
Yes I want to take part

   → 
No I do not want to take part

Name:

Appendix K

Interview Schedule for EP and SENCo Interviews

Introductory Script

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today about your views on children’s involvement in decision-making during the EHCNA process. I’m really interested to hear what you think. I will ask you some questions but there are no right or wrong answers as I’m interested in your thoughts and perspectives. The questions are only to help you think. I will record our conversation using this audio recorder but I will write some notes as we speak as well.

Interview Schedule

<u>Focus area</u>	<u>Questions and probes</u>
Operationalisation of children’s involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did [child’s] involvement look like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did [child] become involved? • In what ways was [child] involved? • Who initiated [child’s] involvement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you decide whether or not to involve [child]? • Who played a part in involving [child]? • When did [child] become involved?
Views on children’s involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about [child’s] involvement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were there any benefits of involving [child]? • Were there any drawbacks of involving [child]? • What was the impact of involving [child]? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did [child’s] involvement affect the EHC plan? • How did [child’s] involvement affect him/her personally?
Factors that facilitate or act as barriers to children’s involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the barriers to [child’s] involvement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What made it difficult to involve [child]? • What problems did you face in the process? • What facilitated [child’s] involvement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who played a part in involving [child]? • How was [child’s] involvement supported? • How were [child’s] views elicited? • What is your top tip for other EPs/SENcos who want to facilitate children’s participation in the EHCNA process?

Appendix L

Children's Interview Schedule

-  Before  I  told  you,  did you  know  you  have an EHC




plan?





-  Did you  know  that  you  get  extra  help  in school?








-  What  do you  remember  about  getting  your  EHC  plan/extra

-  When  did you  first  hear  about  your  EHC  plan/extra  help?

-  How  did you  find out  about it?

-  Who  talked to  you  about it?

-  How  did  he/she  explain it?

-  Did  someone  ask  you  what  you  thought about it?

• What did he/she ask you?

• How did you share your thoughts and feelings?

• Did you take part in making your EHC plan/extra help

plan?

• How did you take part?

• Did someone help you?





• Did you want to take part?

• Did you get to choose if you wanted to take part?

• On a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best), what was it

like to take part?

• Why was it   response  to take  part?

• What  did you  think about  taking part? 






• How  did you  feel  about taking part? 

• What  made  it  difficult for you to take  part?

• What  made  you  feel  uncomfortable? 

• What  helped  you to take  part?

• What  made  you  feel  comfortable? 





• What  would  have  made  it  easier for you to take


part?







 What
  could
  other
  people
  do
 to
  help
  you
  take


 part?

Prompts

 Can
  you
  say
  more?

 What
  else
  can
  you
  say?

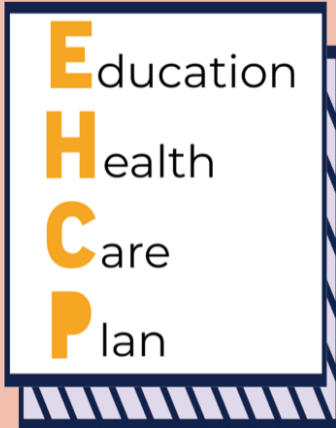
 Is
  there
  anything
  else
  you can
  tell
  me?

Appendix M

Information About EHC Plans for Children

What is an EHCP?

Some children have an Education, Health, and Care Plan or EHCP.



Everyone's EHCP is different.

Your EHCP is all about

YOU

Your EHCP describes...

...what you like

...what you don't like

...what you're good at

...things that you need help with

...what you would like to be able to do

...how people can help you

...your targets or goals



To make your EHCP, adults may ask you to say what you think and feel about...

...home

...family

...school

...friends

...learning

...yourself



Some ways that you can share what you think and feel are...

...telling an adult you trust

...writing

...drawing

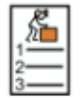
...making a video

...making a project with pictures

Appendix N

Children's Interview Excerpt

AR (Researcher):



plan?

A (Child):

No.

AR:



A:

Yes.

AR:

Okay, great.



When did you first hear that you were going to get extra help?

A:

I don't know.

AR:

Okay.



About getting extra help?

A:

Because Andy [TA] sits next to me in class and he helps me more. Like this.



AR:
Okay.



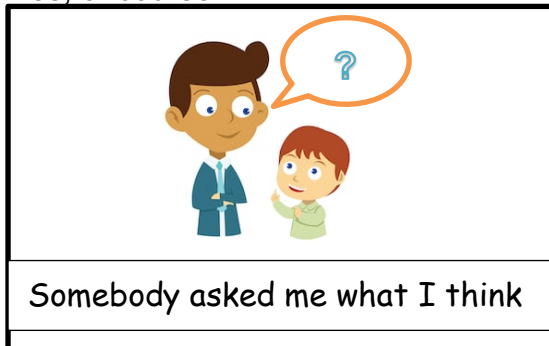
About having extra help?

A:
Yes. Andy. And Miss K [classteacher]. What does this say?

AR:
Somebody asked me what I think

A:
It has a bubble like in cartoons. I can choose it?

AR:
Yes, of course.



AR:
So Andy and Miss K asked you what you think?

A:
Yes.

Appendix O

Visual Communication Aid Cards Used in Children's Interviews



I went to a meeting



Somebody helped me



I got to say what I think



I didn't understand what was going on



I understood what was going on



I could share my ideas



Everybody listened to me



Somebody said I did a good job



Using pictures



Drawing



I felt scared/worried



I felt happy/excited



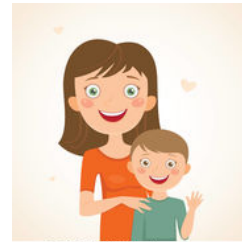
Somebody said "you can do it!"



I had time to think



My mum helped me



My mum helped me



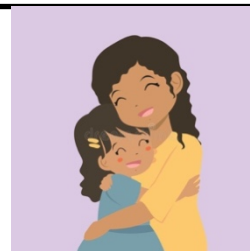
My dad helped me



My dad helped me



My mum helped me



My mum helped me



My teacher helped me



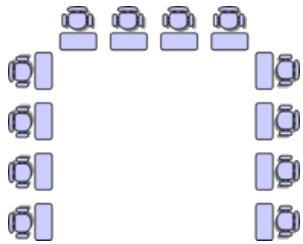
My dad helped me



My teacher helped me



My teacher helped me



I choose where everyone sits



My dad helped me



My teacher helped me



Somebody asked me what I think



Talking to lots of people



Meeting a new person

Appendix P

Excerpt of Coded Transcript

Transcript	Initial Code	Refined Code
<p>AR: Alright. How did Percy and Huck get involved, then, in the process?</p> <p>N: Umm here in [LA] there is a sort of template for capturing the views of children...it's this sort of profile document with loads of questions on...what are some of the child's likes and dislikes, what does the child enjoy about school, what are some of the things they find difficult, friendships, people and things that are important to them...that sort of thing...and we use that profile template with all of the children who are having an EHC assessment. So we did that with both Percy and Huck just to get their views on that.</p> <p>AR: Okay. And was there any other way in which Percy and Huck were involved, at all?</p> <p>N: Uhh to be honest, I'm not sure...it's actually difficult to think about this, really, because I'm aware that we probably don't do as much to include children as we should. I mean, Huck did have some clear ideas about his aspirations and how he would like to be supported and we made sure to include that...to take that into consideration in planning for him.</p> <p>AR: Okay. So who would you say it was who sort of initiated Percy and Huck's involvement...to gain their views?</p> <p>N: Oh, that would generally be my role as SENCo. I'm the one who does the paperwork around requesting the assessment...well, I suppose it could be a parental request but that's very rarely the case. It is usually me who initiates that process. I wouldn't...I try to have someone who knows the child well gain their views so for Percy that was [TA] and for Huck that was [class teacher]. They are the staff members that they have the best relationships with and I find that, rather than being asked these quite personal questions by someone like me, who they don't necessarily interact with everyday, they're more likely to be open...to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts with someone that they know very well. And also, you know, [Percy's TA] knows Percy so well that she knows how to get the most out of him. She knows how he communicates and she could adapt the questions so that what they're asking is more accessible to him and she could help him express what he was thinking and feeling in a clearer way.</p>	<p>-Pupil profile document</p> <p>-Lack of knowledge -Involvement is overlooked -Plan reflects child's views -Sharing views</p> <p>-SENCo as driver</p> <p>-Class teacher as facilitator -TA as facilitator -Willingness to share -Comfort with facilitator -Knowing how to involve children -Adapting to needs</p>	<p>-Knowledge & skills (Ways to involve children)</p> <p>-Knowledge & skills (Process & purpose) -Outcomes (Understanding & representation)</p> <p>-Roles (Drivers)</p> <p>-Roles (Facilitators)</p> <p>-Child-centredness (Readiness) -Child-centredness (Relationship with facilitator) -Knowledge & skills (Ways, to involve children; adapting to needs)</p>