

Knowing me, Knowing you: How School Educators Cope with the Challenges of Inclusion in Deprived and Non-Deprived Areas

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Abstract

Inclusive classrooms have become a focus in mainstream education in recent years. However, challenges for educators are often overlooked. This study utilised an exploratory, qualitative research approach following Strauss and Corbin's variant of Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to investigate this; semi-structured interview data was collected from 19 educational professionals, utilising theoretical sampling techniques. Participants were working in deprived and non-deprived areas and were interviewed about their experiences of facilitating inclusion. Data was analysed using Grounded Theory; 'Knowing': yourself and your students emerged as the core category, with main categories of attitudes, sacrifices, student empowerment, meeting needs and barriers. Boundaries around time and emotional investment were paramount, as was available non-judgemental support. Student empowerment alleviated pressure on educators. Deprivation exacerbated challenges such as workload, student emotional and social needs, and emotional toll on educators.

Key words: Educators, grounded theory, inclusion, deprivation, coping strategies, boundaries

Knowing me, Knowing you: How School Educators Cope with the Challenges of Inclusion in Deprived and Non-Deprived Areas

In the UK, the population of children and young people with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP)¹, has risen considerably since 2010 to reach 430,700 in 2021. Simultaneously, numbers of EHCPs in special schools have been reduced due to a surge in the enrolment of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream settings (DfE, 2021). This has rendered the need for inclusive education more imperative and correspondingly led to an increased number of students eligible for free school meals (DfE, 2022). Consequently, economically deprived schools are more likely to have more students with EHCPs, which can lead to additional challenges, including behavioural problems and higher staff turnover rates (Potter et al., 2002). In the UK, the deprivation level of a school is commonly identified utilising the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 (IMD). IMD are datasets that serve as the official measure of the relative deprivation of small areas in the UK. Various facets of deprivation, such as income, employment, and crime, are assigned varying weights and compiled to generate a single deprivation score. However, it should be noted that the deprivation score assigned to a school may not always provide an accurate representation of relative deprivation experienced by each individual student within the school, as it may not fully capture the diversity presented among the students (McLennan et al., 2019; Noble et al., 2019).

Inclusion entails equal opportunities to quality education for all learners regardless of any difficulties and differences (UNESCO, 2017), guiding pedagogical practices that promote increased participation and address marginalization, inequalities, disparities and exclusion (Booth, 2009). A learner-centred approach is employed, involving modification of the

¹An EHCP supports individuals aged up to 25 years with unmet educational, health and social needs, identifying and ensuring necessary interventions.

environment to meet diverse learner needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). While, SEND have historically been prioritised, the needs of socially disadvantaged learners have been neglected, despite UK policy stipulating that exclusion on these grounds is unacceptable in education (DfE, National Curriculum, 2014) and disparities in children's educational performance being explained through differences in economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In addition to the academic advantages of accessing a more robust curriculum (Szumski et al., 2017), inclusion can substantially benefit students' social development (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). For example, it helps combat prejudice, encourage empathy, foster compassion, value respect, and overall dissipate perceived differences between atypical and neurotypical children (Altay & Demirkan, 2014). For the adults in the classroom these benefits can be experienced when the students cultivate more inclusive views, stimulated by enhanced awareness of differences (Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007).

However, inclusive education incurs costs, such as negative impact on neurotypical students due to disruptive behaviours and reduced teacher attention, resulting in lower academic performance (Blank & Shavit, 2016). Consequently, teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) may feel guilty and uncertain about how to handle difficult behaviours (Macmillan & Meyer, 2006). Teachers and TAs often experience a sense of helplessness and conflicting priorities, as they struggle to balance the needs of students with SEND and neurotypical students (Paju et al., 2018). Emotional exhaustion, triggered by the stress of addressing pupils' learning difficulties, hinders effective job performance and contributes to burnout symptoms (Farber, 2000; Paju et al., 2018). Additionally, SEND teachers, given the nature of their job, are more susceptible to challenging situations compared to mainstream teachers, and thus more prone to experiencing burnout (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

Burnout, resulting from prolonged occupational stress (Schaufeli et al., 2009), is characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout adversely affects educators' physical and psychological health, confidence, work performance and teaching quality (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021), ultimately impeding inclusive practices (Nistor & Chilling, 2012), and is higher among both teachers in socioeconomically deprived areas (Bottiani et al., 2019), and teachers with high numbers of pupils with SEND in their classroom (Brunsting et al., 2014). Special education teachers are particularly likely to experience emotional exhaustion, cynicism and poor pupil-teacher interactions (Soini et al., 2019) due to low job satisfaction (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Existing evidence highlights the impact of teacher burnout on inclusive classrooms, emphasizing the need for further research on inclusive education challenges.

A recurring theme is the exploration of stress and burnout associated with the implementation of inclusive strategies. Some teachers view inclusion as a stress-inducing task, leading to increased workload, additional expectations, and excessive personal commitment (Pülschen & Pülschen, 2015). New or special inclusion programs are not always accompanied by adequate resources (Engelbrecht et al., 2001), or support in the classroom or training, meaning teachers feel unprepared for the implementation of such programmes (Brackenreed, 2011; Lancaster & Bain, 2007). In particular, anxiety and doubt arise for teachers lacking experience in inclusive education (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Similarly, non-specialist teachers in inclusive schools are more susceptible to stress and burnout symptoms due to new demands that necessitate new professional skills and resources (Candeias et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers with higher levels of academic and professional training demonstrate lower vulnerability to stress and burnout, highlighting the importance of adequate training in addressing the challenges of inclusive education (Candeias et al., 2020). On the other hand, teachers characterised by a strong sense of self-efficacy, good knowledge of various teaching

methods, and effective relationships with parents and colleagues are more likely to navigate the challenges of inclusion practices successfully and thus experience reduced burnout symptoms (Gaudreau et al., 2012; Talmor et al., 2004).

Despite a growing body of research on the determinants of stress and burnout among teachers in inclusive settings, there is a paucity of studies exploring the role of teachers' coping strategies in ameliorating such challenges and their detrimental consequences, specifically among teachers working in deprived areas. Coping, a crucial aspect of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984,) is embedded in the notion of a “work-life” balance, which many educators report lacking, yet accept as a part of their job (van der Want et al., 2018). However, relatively little is known about the coping strategies teachers utilise when confronted with the challenges of inclusion practices.

Research on coping strategies in inclusive classrooms has mainly focused on teachers' experience and training as predictors of successful adaptation (Brackenreed, 2011). Such research has predominantly utilised self-report questionnaires to examine the correlation between stress and coping strategies (i.e., Kebbi, 2018), identify the primary stressors and coping strategies in relation to the difficulties of teaching in special educational needs schools (i.e., Antoniou et al., 2009), or assess the value of different coping strategies (Brackenreed, 2011; Forlin, 2001). Some studies investigated the role of personal characteristics in coping strategy use and their predictor power for teachers' burnout (Pavlidou et al., 2022). However, these studies adopted varying definitions and classifications of coping strategies. Further, the difficulties of inclusion practices in relation to deprivation have not been adequately addressed.

Given the heightened risk of occupational stress and burnout for teachers involved in inclusion practices, particularly in deprived areas with increasing numbers of students with EHCPs, it becomes particularly pertinent to investigate teachers' experiences of managing the challenges of inclusion practices, and whether these challenges differ depending on levels of

deprivation. Understanding the barriers faced by educators in implementing inclusion practices can enable modification of school policies and interventions to provide sufficient support and reduce the risk of burnout. Additionally, understanding their coping strategies can inform career longevity and guide necessary training for future staff. Therefore, this research aims to explore the following question: “What are educational professionals’ experiences of managing inclusion in schools?”

Method

Participants

Theoretical sampling was used to recruit participants working in both deprived and non-deprived areas, until saturation was attained (Charmaz, 2006). Our participants were mainly teachers (60%, $n = 12$), working in secondary schools (68.42%, $n = 13$) (only two worked in specialist schools) and working in deprived areas (57.89%, $n = 11$) teaching a range of subjects. Experience ranged from 9 months to 25 years ($M = 12.41$; $SD = 8.12$).

Table 1 presents demographic data.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Area worked in (deprived/ non- deprived)	Years in educational role	Current occupation	Subject taught (main)	School characteristics
P1	Non- deprived	11	Teacher	Science	Catholic Secondary School
P2	Deprived	3	Teacher	English	Secondary School
P3	Non-deprived	15	SENDSCO	N/A	Secondary School
P4	Non-deprived	9 months	Teaching Assistant	All	Specialist school

P5	Non- deprived	18	Teaching Assistant	All	Primary School
P6	Deprived	17	SENDSCO	All	Primary School
P7	Both	7	Teacher	Maths	Secondary School
P8	Deprived	20	Learning Support Assistant	All (as support)	Specialist College
P9	Deprived	4	Teacher	Science	Secondary School
P10	Deprived	25	Teacher	DT	Secondary School
P11	Deprived	14	Teacher	Maths	Secondary School
P12	Deprived	10	Teacher	History	Catholic Secondary School
P13	Both	3	Teacher	English	Secondary School
P14	Deprived	20	Teacher	Maths	Secondary School
P15	Deprived	4	Teacher	English	Secondary School
P16	Deprived	12	Teacher	English	Secondary School
P17	Non-deprived	25	Teaching Assistant	Primary KS1	Primary School
P18	Non-deprived	20	Retired teacher/ SENDSCO	Primary KS1	Primary School
P19	Deprived	22	Teacher	History	Catholic Secondary School

Procedure

The topic selection was influenced by the researchers' work experience in education. One researcher (TW) had six years' experience as a language teacher in private language academies. The other researcher (EB) was a secondary school tutor in a deprived area (two years) and in a language school (three months). These experiences provided valuable insight

into the hidden aspects of the profession which likely facilitated more honest interviews. This enhanced data collection, subsequently producing a more robust theory.

A 10-question semi-structured interview on inclusion management was conducted. Interviews explored the definition of inclusion, positive aspects and challenges of inclusion, staff support, and strategies for students and professionals. Open-ended questions facilitated a wider breadth of information, aligning with Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Additional exploratory questions were included as required to maintain focus or explore interesting concepts in more depth.

Ethics approval was provided by the Ethics Committee at Bournemouth University (IDs: 29843 and 33685). Participants received information about the project, assurance about anonymity, and the right to withdraw, then signed a consent form. Audio-data was collected through interviews conducted face-to-face (n = 4), via telephone (n = 2), or Zoom (n = 13) between January 2020 and April 2021 lasting 50-60 minutes. Participants were free to decline questions they did not wish to answer. Post interview, participants were debriefed and provided information about support services for teachers and mental well-being. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, then deleted. Anonymised transcriptions were analysed using Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Data analysis

Following Strauss and Corbin's variant of Grounded Theory (GT) (2015), open coding involved using a word or phrase to describe each line and organising those codes into concepts. Concept cards were created to detail all instances of each concept. Throughout, constant comparative analysis was conducted to compare each instance of a concept to previous instances. Axial coding was then conducted to develop relationships between the concepts. Each step of the process was documented using generic and theoretical memos. Once concepts were saturated, definitions were written to encompass the qualitative variety of the concepts.

The core concept of ‘Knowing’ was identified, and the model created, outlining the relationships between the core category and other concepts.

Results

KNOWING was identified as the core category. There were five main categories: ATTITUDES, SACRIFICES, MEETING NEEDS, BARRIERS, AND STUDENT EMPOWERMENT. See Figure 1 for a model of the data, detailing categories and sub-categories.

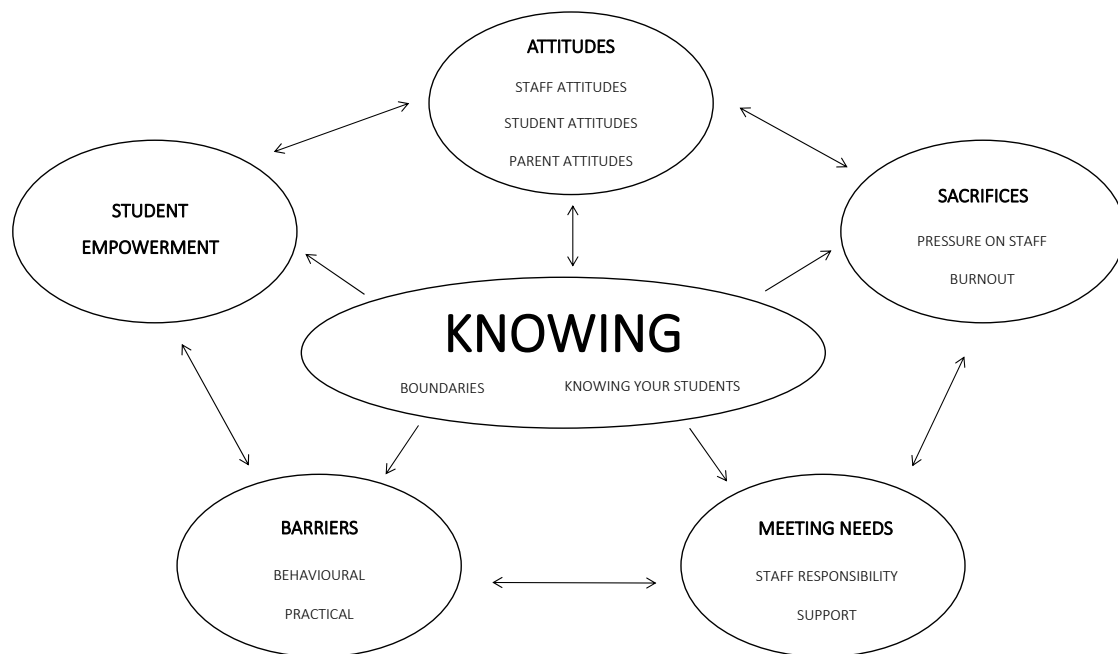


Figure 1

Conceptual Model of how Inclusion is Managed in Schools, Across Deprived and Non-Deprived Areas

The core category of *knowing* was derived from the overall importance and impact of *knowing your students* and *knowing yourself*. Participants addressed the importance of *knowing your students*. This encompassed knowing their needs emotionally, in terms of SEND, and how these affect their behaviour overall: “...you have to be very mindful ... that what you do for one child is not going to work for another.” (P4, non-deprived). Participants state that working with children does not allow for a ‘one size fits all’ approach “...there is a policy but most of the time I just judge it on the situation, use professional discretion...” (P2, deprived), and staff must be adaptable and vigilant to draw out good behaviours and notice signs of arising distress. Participants also highlight staff members’ responsibilities “I think it depends on the person working there, [who] will decide how severe it is...” (P2, deprived) and how individual differences may alter a situation. Participants felt that background and home life significantly impacted students: “they behave the way they do because [their] parents are living a bad life” (P18, non-deprived). Teachers discovered this information about students by getting to know them over time, building positive relationships, and in some cases having student passports that detailed specific SEN or emotional needs.

Knowing yourself is interpreted as awareness of one’s boundaries, and how reaching limits can be avoided. Participants mentioned the importance of being firm about personal boundaries in terms of workload to maintain a healthy work-life balance in order to manage stress: “work-life balance usually tends to be where the stress comes in” (P11, deprived), which they achieved by refusing to bring work home or email out of hours. They showcased how lack of balance can adversely affect careers “...I would advise people to make sure they are achieving a very reasonable balance. ..., if they actually want teaching as a forever career, then they need to put that in place quickly because people really do burnout...” (P3, non-deprived). Implementing boundaries was seen as staff members’ responsibility, as the nature of education means more can always be done and it is easy to take on more work than is

manageable. As P6 (deprived) states: “...*learn to say no when someone asks you to do something.*”. Inclusion, which participants found challenging to implement, upset this balance, especially in deprived areas, due to schools having multiple areas of focus “*[the schools are] trying to work on many things, almost too many... I don’t think [inclusion] gets looked at very well*” (P7, both). It took up a significant amount of educators’ time leading to a poor work-life balance “*inclusive classrooms, that's something that you really want to spend time on. But it becomes an afterthought when the message you’re getting from the school is you have these deadlines that you have to meet for marking and stuff.*” (P9, deprived).

Knowing influences *sacrifices* through implementing *boundaries* to avoid *burnout* and alleviate *pressure on staff*. Knowing influences *barriers* through awareness and the ability to adjust for potential barriers once known. Knowing influences *student empowerment* through knowing and utilising students’ strengths. Knowing has a cyclical relationship with *meeting needs*, due to enhancing ability to meet needs and vice versa. Knowing has a cyclical relationship with *attitudes*: knowledge of SEND and implementing boundaries changes students’, staff, and parents’ attitudes; and *attitudes* can impact success of getting to *know students* and implementing *boundaries*.

Attitudes has a cyclical relationship with *student empowerment* through determining whether the student can be empowered. That empowerment in turn impacts on attitudes. *Attitudes* has a cyclical relationship with *sacrifices* as attitude determines how much sacrifice education professionals are willing to make, and how making such sacrifices influences those attitudes, the amount of *pressure on staff*, and subsequent *burnout* risk. *Sacrifices* has a cyclical relationship with *barriers*, as the *barriers* of time and lack of resources lead to *sacrifices*, which in turn mean that staff have less time and energy to dedicate to overcoming *barriers*. *Barriers* influence *meeting needs* by barriers impacting education professionals’ ability to meet needs. If needs are not met, this can lead to further barriers being introduced. *Meeting needs* has a

cyclical relationship with *student empowerment* as student empowerment both depends on how successfully needs are met, and affects levels of *staff responsibility* and *support* required either for the student or staff.

Attitudes

Knowing yourself and your students influences **attitudes** of staff, students, and parents, which in turn mould their experiences of education. Teacher attitudes towards students significantly influence students' self-esteem and self-belief: *"Because they can tell when a teacher is like, [INT: like clocked out] yeah, exactly, they're not interested in the fact I need extra help."* (P2, deprived), *"kids pick up on unfair behaviour so quickly and you just lose them"* (P15, both). Student perceptions of their teachers' attitudes in turn affect parent perceptions of the school's inclusive practice: *"...people feel like they're focusing more on that child than on the rest of the class sometimes ... that can make [teachers] feel uncomfortable because they feel like they are prioritising that child's needs over the rest of the class."* (P3, non-deprived). This also referred to ensuring higher level students were getting the attention needed to succeed: *"If you're really focusing on a group of three students that have SEN that you need to check you're catering for, your high on entry students at the back aren't getting ... the level of challenge they need to develop their learning"* (P12, deprived). Some participants believed their schools facilitated inclusion effectively, however others noted inclusion is difficult in deprived areas due to the number of issues to tackle: *"[the schools are] trying to work on many things, almost too many... I don't think [inclusion] gets looked at very well"* (P7, both).

Teachers referred to a *"society ... of collective tolerance and acceptance of everybody"* (P10, deprived) throughout the school to facilitate inclusion. Some participants noted that children appear to be very accepting of differences: *"...what I really notice is actually kids don't give a monkey's about differences, ...kids accept everybody for who they are"* (P3, non-

deprived). However, this is not always the case: *“...it’s more the overt, obvious things that people can see and maybe don’t feel quite ok with, especially when you’re like 12/13, you don’t really understand.”* (P5, non-deprived). Participants mentioned that not understanding bigger classroom behaviours, such as shouting out of turn (P3, non-deprived), can lead to discomfort, which participants felt schools need to improve on to facilitate a sense of belonging and equality. P2 (deprived) mentions that: *“...children [with a diagnosis] can be, they’re obviously smart but they may play up to it [the diagnosis], or not really understand what it is...”*, again suggesting that more awareness is needed between the students. Although P7 (both) noted that in their school students maintained a sense of acceptance: *“there [are] generally very positive relationships with the students between each other ... everything is just put aside, it is just them as a person and they all get on”*. Some parents were described as having *“more of a problem with children with special needs than the children do.”* (P6, deprived). Teachers noted that parental involvement (and thus influence on attitude towards school) seemed lacking in deprived areas *“[effect of parental influence was] less [impactful] when I was calling home in deprived areas”* (P13, both). However, sometimes parents *“desperately wanted their child ... [to be] in mainstream ... [but] a specialised school ... was the right place for that child”* (P17, non-deprived).

Sacrifices

All participants allude to **sacrifices** they have made in their personal and professional life. These sacrifices have led to colleagues leaving the profession, sometimes permanently: *“...people have either left school, or they’ve left teaching completely, or they’ve left thinking they’d come back and they haven’t, because they’ve found that actually they have a much better quality of life outside of education.”* (P1, non-deprived). With a common attitude towards challenging behaviours of *“...it’s like ‘ah it’s just teaching, you just gotta get on with it’.”* (P2, deprived), participants are expected to cope with high levels of stress - *“...sometimes it feels*

like the job is too much for anyone, and it's sad..." (P1, non-deprived), sacrificing their personal and family time: *"...my emotional capacity to be present and be with my children... up against all the complex needs that all of my students... so my own resource has been seriously challenged, in terms of being able to detach myself sufficiently to focus well enough on my family..."* (P3, non-deprived). Participants cited emotional labour and demands on time: *"arguably... your job can't really support your life if you've got anything else going on"* (P1, non-deprived) as the main reasons for burnout. Teachers also mentioned the stresses they encountered, including following up on behaviour, administration, telephone calls home, planning (making lessons inclusive) and the "constant need for results". Burnout does not seem to be predictable from outside: *"...I know people that have gone off, I mean people that you never think it'll happen to, you think this person is an amazing teacher, they've got it all together."* (P1, non-deprived) which suggests that teachers and TAs going off sick is a significant problem. Opening up about struggling also seems difficult: *"I think a lot of it is taken as sick leave, in terms of like I'm stressed but I'm going to cover it up... there's only so many times you can say "I can't handle it, I need a day off here, I need a day off there"* (P4, non-deprived), which is likely exacerbated by the accountability and lack of support. However, participants reflected that they were able to reach out to their colleagues *"the support from staff, generally, is great"* (P19, deprived) with some schools actively encouraging staff to talk to each other *"the principal... made it very clear [saying] please do not feel like this [challenging behaviour] is only happening to you, talk to the rest of the staff... I feel like that was a very important strategy [for coping]"* (P9, deprived). The support staff received from each other helped to mitigate against barriers *"it can be very stressful [teaching], luckily ... we all help each other"* (P17, non-deprived). Relationships with other teachers allowed them to feel understood *"if you have had a challenging day ... to know that it is happening around the school [to] multiple teachers it does make you feel better"* (P9, deprived).

Barriers

Barriers affected ability to meet staff needs due to lack of resources to assist staff. Participants emphasised how lack of funding led to lack of support staff “*hardly any of them [SEN students] have a learning plan. Therefore, there is no funding to seat a person with them*” (P14, deprived). Training was also seen as a barrier. Participants felt ill-equipped to deal with being fully inclusive “*I do not think I am trained to teach kids with exceptional special needs*” (P14, deprived). Some commented that training focuses on the curriculum. Furthermore, participants felt inclusion was not prioritised, especially in deprived schools, so difficult to implement effectively. Thus, dedicating time to inclusion was tricky “*marking and [managing] the behaviours... that was the priority... it took priority over inclusive classrooms*” (P9, deprived).

Participants highlighted that students could present barriers due to their behaviour which often resulted from their significant needs. Some students were considered to require more provision than the school/teacher could reasonably provide. This could lead to more challenging behaviour “*someone with more needs, if their needs are not being met, cause more disruption*” (P7, both). Furthermore, in deprived areas, students could be emotionally immature, potentially leading to unpredictable behaviour. Students were also noted as struggling with reading, particularly in deprived areas. Many had a lower reading age than their chronological age, “*students in year 11 have the reading age of seven years old*” (P16, deprived). Poor reading comprehension limited their understanding of lessons and exams, hence creating barriers that unintentionally excluded them.

Meeting needs

Meeting staff needs refers to both in-class assistance (TAs) given to staff members and colleague support outside of class. On one hand, participants mentioned lacking support in-class: “*Yeah, they culled them. (TAs) ... they got rid of a lot of them because they didn't see it*

as useful in the budget...” (P2, deprived). The emotive use of ‘culled’ suggests the cut-throat nature of the way the TAs were made redundant, highlighting that the budget holders saw them as a luxury. The main reason given for lack of TAs is financial, another catalyst of pressure for teachers: *“one of the biggest things [barriers] over the last few years is funding ... [resulting in] a real lack of teaching assistants”* (P16, deprived). TA's, despite being highlighted as integral to inclusion, often reported being unsupported within their role and felt they did not receive enough training. Most teachers condemned the lack of support TAs receive as “terrible.” Regarding expert support, P18 (non-deprived) remarked *“educational psychologists are gold dust”*. However, participants also noted that not all expert support was valuable, especially in deprived areas: *“unfortunately, there is a culture of bringing in a specialist ...[who] do not know the kids and the culture they come from. They [the specialist] come in with good intention but unfortunately it does not work because they misread what is happening”* (P11, deprived)

Colleague support was consistently raised throughout the interviews: *“...we support each other as colleagues...”* (P6, deprived). Teachers felt their colleagues understood their issues, e.g., *“[having] a head teacher who is fair and reasonable, then the staff will feel supported”* (P14, deprived). Relationships with colleagues involved *“shar[ing] practice[s] with them and strategies that could work”* (P11, deprived). Teachers felt that relationships with TAs enhanced their effectiveness within the classroom *“if you do not have that relationship with them [TAs] I do not know how beneficial they are in your classroom”* (P15, deprived). This is also reflected in advice for newly qualified staff: *“Don’t be afraid to ask people for their advice or their support...”* (P1, non-deprived). However, the words “Don’t be afraid to...” suggest an inherent fear of asking for help, as P2 (deprived) states *“I think it’s rare for someone to come out and say that they’re struggling”*.

Student empowerment

Student empowerment refers to the responsibility put upon students to help them accept the consequences of their actions: “...*about supporting people in their application of their own strategies to regulate themselves, and to develop the independence to do that.*” (P3, non-deprived). This fosters independence, which will give students control, better preparing them for their future. For students with emotional regulation difficulties, it gives them the confidence to cope independently outside school. Emotionally, having the option of leaving class in a way that suits them gives the student the responsibility to self-regulate: “...*if they feel like things are getting too much, and they can use that option to go and spend some time in the nurture room...*” (P1, non-deprived). The intended outcome of this being “...*that child can now recognise her own body and her own feelings and will ask for time out as well...*” (P6, deprived), which relieves some pressure from staff as they can focus on other students.

Discussion

The main factor influencing experiences of managing inclusion in schools was knowing, identified as the core category. Knowing encompassed knowing your students and knowing yourself. This influenced student empowerment, barriers, and sacrifices, and both influenced and was influenced by attitudes and meeting needs. The findings are discussed in relation to relevant research.

Participants identified the importance of being firm about boundaries in terms of workload. Similarly, research on school-level initiatives (Brady & Wilson, 2021) found that teachers favoured policies focused on reasonable workloads, as opposed to well-being activities that they saw as taking away their autonomy. Government initiatives were also cited as increasing teacher workloads, which participants felt should be reduced, in line with previous research showing that workload issues need addressing to increase job satisfaction and thus facilitate teacher retention (Lam & Yan, 2011).

Participants addressed the importance of differentiating between needs and behaviours. This has been reported in previous studies on teacher perceptions of differentiation practices (Civitillo et al., 2016), highlighting the diversity of inclusive techniques used with the same students. As Tomlinson (2014) notes in their model of differentiation, teachers must adjust their curriculum and resources to their students as every learner is different, even without SEND. Teaching groups of students, for example in secondary schools, requires clear communication between staff members regarding what works for each student to ensure consistency.

Participants identified that teachers' attitudes towards students influences staff, students' and parents' attitudes, and in turn their experiences of education. This is in line with Savolainen et al.'s (2022) findings that teacher self-efficacy positively impacts attitudes to inclusion, showing how the value of self-belief can impact successful inclusion and the importance of sufficient training. This is consistent with previous correlational research demonstrating that teachers with SEN training are more positive about inclusion than those without (Pit-Ten Cate et al., 2018). Teachers also reported being more positive about inclusion if they had strong support networks and access to sufficient resources such as TAs, and more negative if they felt an inclusive environment would cause more work without access to further resources (Saloviita, 2020).

While some participants reported students accepting differences in SEND students, others reported that students were less accepting. Some suggested that students may be less accepting in secondary school relative to primary, but further research is required to explore this. Teachers noted that parental involvement, and influence on attitude towards school seemed to be lacking in deprived areas. This could be related to the greater levels of stress and higher demands on parents in deprived areas (Spijkers et al., 2012).

A key finding was that deprivation brings extra challenges for educational professionals, who need to consider the student's home life, which is more likely to be disrupted if the area is more deprived, and the impact that might have on emotions and behaviours. Deprivation exacerbates issues around tackling inclusion, due to lack of resources, funding, and availability of expert support. This is linked to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *capital* that provides a sociological explanation of the relationship between social privilege and educational inequalities.

All participants alluded to sacrifices they had made in their personal and professional life, which had led to colleagues leaving the teaching profession. Teachers commented on the wide range of stressors they experienced, often leading to sick leave and burnout. Speaking openly about suffering appears difficult. Similar findings regarding stigma around discussing mental health have been reported in other high-demand professions, such as healthcare workers (Søvold et al., 2021) and police officers (Bell et al., 2022), as well as previous studies of teachers (Jerrim et al., 2021; Perryman & Calvert, 2019).

Participants mentioned lacking support in class, often caused by funding cuts (House of Commons, 2021). They were particularly concerned about losing TA support, which they saw as integral to inclusion. Similar findings have been reported by Haycock and Smith (2011). On the other hand, participants mentioned colleague support facilitated managing their roles (Shah, 2012).

Participants also underscored the importance of supporting students to help them accept the consequences of their actions, which fosters independence. Similar findings have been reported in studies of children with SEND, including Reinecke et al. (2018) who posit self-management training improves targeted behaviours across social, work, and academic domains.

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first study to address teachers' perceptions of managing inclusion specifically in relation to deprivation. It draws from a wide sample of education professionals, including teachers, teaching assistants and SENDCOs, working within primary, secondary and special state education in the UK. Participants were recruited from areas with varying levels of deprivation.

The sample was recruited through purposive sampling, meaning the participants may be more likely to have similar views to the researchers. However, participants were recruited (and interviews conducted) by two researchers from different backgrounds, which mitigated this limitation somewhat. One researcher has experience teaching in English Language Academies where inclusion is not common but general teaching challenges remain. The other researcher has experience teaching (and tutoring) in Primary, Secondary and English Language Schools. Thus, both researchers were able to build rapport with the participants due to their shared experiences. We recruited only three SENDCOs, meaning limited insight could be obtained into the experiences of teachers in positions of responsibility.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Any issues experienced by teachers appeared to be exacerbated in areas of deprivation. Deprived areas experience lack of resources, funding, and availability of expert support. This study highlights the importance of providing further support in terms of funding, resources and expert support to schools in deprived areas. Further, it is important that such support is provided by individuals with sufficient understanding of the context in which they are working.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of educational professionals stating and maintaining clear boundaries in terms of workload and emotional investment when working in an inclusive environment to achieve longevity in their careers. The heterogeneous nature of inclusive classrooms calls for more training, support, and resources, as well as taking the time

to know one's students and adapt appropriately. All educational professionals should feel able to voice concerns and challenges, with clear and non-judgemental support avenues available.

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