



The experiences of Black African parents on partnership working with education professionals in the English SEND system (2022)

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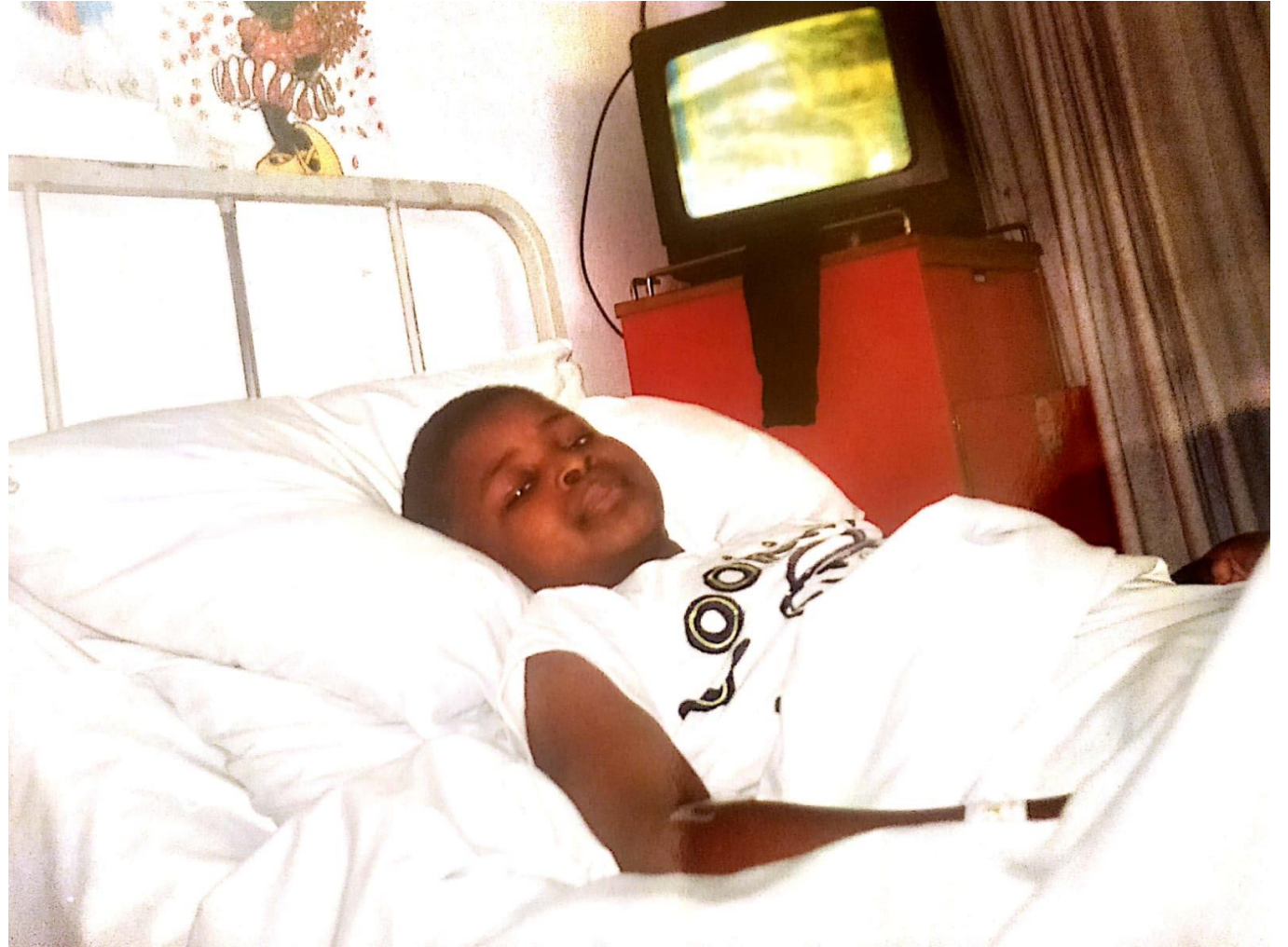


All about 'Chike'

- Born Chikeluba Ekwoba Nnalue to proud first-generation Nigerian parents
- Complicated birth – led to diagnosis of left-sided hemiplegia & associated mobility difficulties
- 5 corrective surgeries between birth and 16
- Stated from 6 to 15 years old – mostly mainstream, with a brief stint at specialist and a splatter of hospital schools
- My relationship with the word 'disability' is a funny one...

Disability

- Limiting e.g. fear that you're not good enough
- Handy e.g. fob at secondary school
- Confusing e.g. being disabled 'sometimes'
- Taboo – fear of being judged e.g. TFL badge
- Misunderstood – just because I walk funny, doesn't mean I'm not capable
- Lonely – not everyone understands you
- Motivating: always want to prove you can



Intersectionality

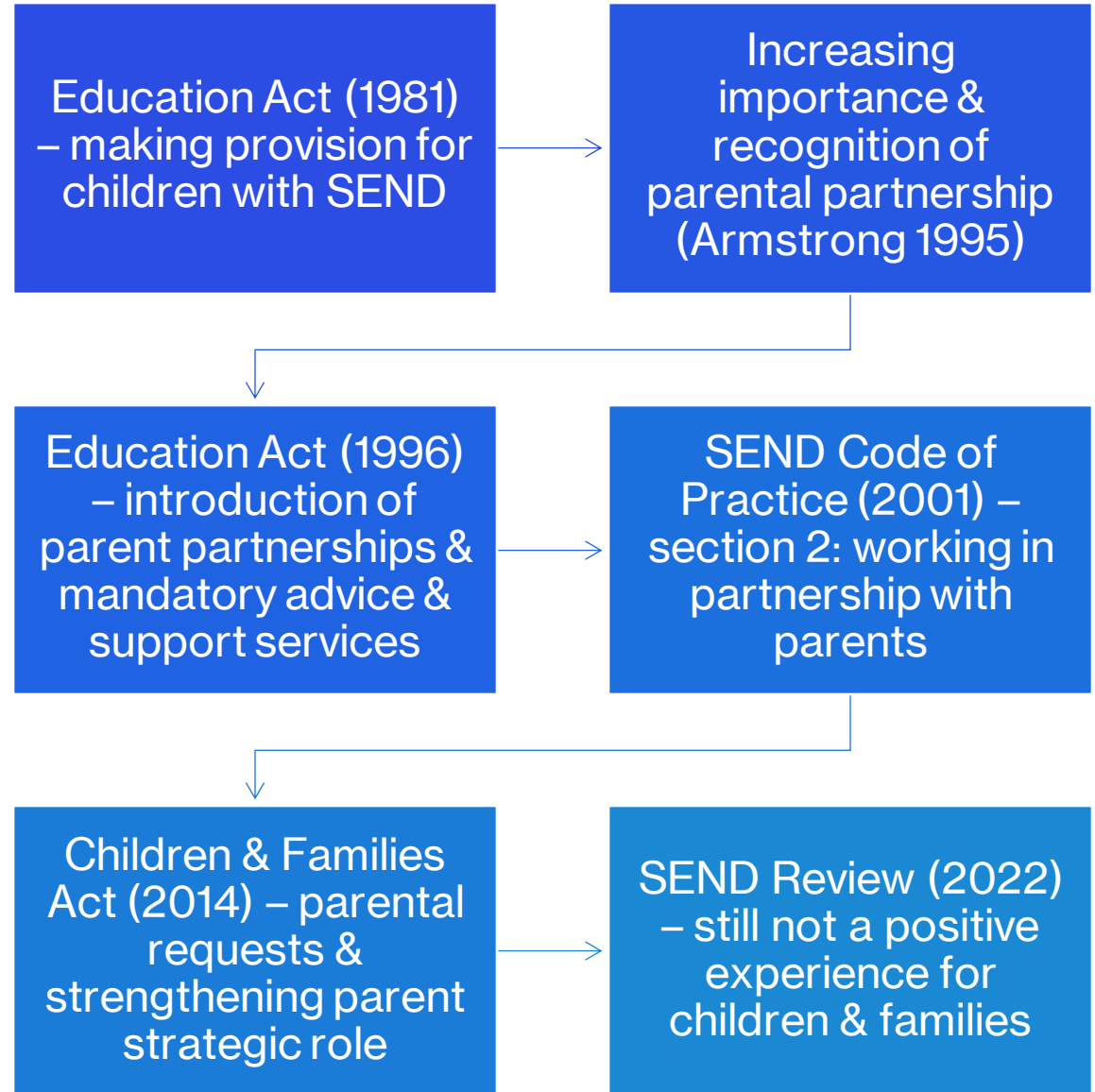
- Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) – Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race & Sex – being Black and Female
- Multidimensionality of experiences from social constructs
- Being Black, African descent, having a child with additional needs and residing in England – must have been difficult



A photograph of a single red pawn on the left and a group of five yellow pawns on the right, all on a dark wooden surface. The background is a light, neutral gradient. The text "Are all experiences equal?" is overlaid in white, bold font across the bottom of the image.

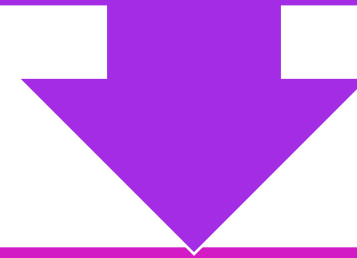
Are all experiences equal?

Special education policy in England



What did I want to find out?

What were the experiences of Black African parents when discussing services or support for their child(ren) with SEND in England?



What were the main barriers to effective partnership between Black African parents and education professionals when discussing services or support for their child(ren) with SEND in England?



Disability & Inclusion in Africa

- Interpretation & implementation of 'inclusive education' in Africa – global North concept (Kamenopolou 2018)
- The dominance of maternal views & female caregiving in disability research in Africa (Bannink, Nalugya and van Hove (2020)
- Perception of disability in African communities – religion/spirituality & medical model – force for good and bad
- All impacts the parental perspective

A young Black African student is shown from a side profile, focused on writing in a notebook. He is holding a white pen with a black grip. The background is a blurred classroom setting with other students and desks. A pink vertical bar is visible on the left side of the white text box.

Black African parents accessing SEND services in the UK

- Lawrence (2014) – Black African experiences of EP service
- Munroe et al (2013) – Black parental experience of Autism diagnostic process
- Stigma associated with their child
- ‘Acculturation’ – assimilating new culture: the good and the bad (Berry, 2005)
- The diagnostic/assessment heavy process (Munroe et al. 2013)
- Unclear professional roles (Lawrence 2014)
- Unconscious professional assumptions about terminology



Parental participation in education

- Positive correlation between parental engagement & pupil outcomes
- Natural variation study of engagement and confidence among parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) - Barlow & Humphrey, 2012
- Social capital: building positive links with professionals – Cleland & Lumsdon 2021
- Black African children do relatively well in the English Education system
- Contributory factors include parental participation in education (Demie, 2013)

Methodology



Qualitative design



Critical approach – power
& social justice



Semi-structured interviews
via Zoom



8 open-ended questions



Transcribed & thematically
analysed using Braun &
Clarke's (2006) step-by-
step approach

Participants

- 4 participants
- Pseudonyms used to protect anonymity
- All participants were between 40 and 55 years old (mean=49) and;
- lived in England for between 5 and 30 years.

Parent Name	Country of origin	Child's name	Age	Main presenting need
Mary	Ghana	Kojo	18	Autism
		Benji	5	Speech, language and communication
Masimba	Zimbabwe	Tendai	11	Autism
Shola	Nigeria	Tosin	12	Speech, language and communication
Adama	Nigeria	Daniel	19	Autism

Reflections on methodology

Finding a sample was hard

Interviews brought up emotions for parents

Parental anxiety about being recorded





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Findings & Discussion

Themes

Overarching theme

Communication

Sub theme

- Language and articulation
- Communication styles

Cultural Barriers

- The African Journey
- Importance of education in African communities

Parent-professional relationship

- Parental mistrust in assessing professionals
- Fear of a perceived battle

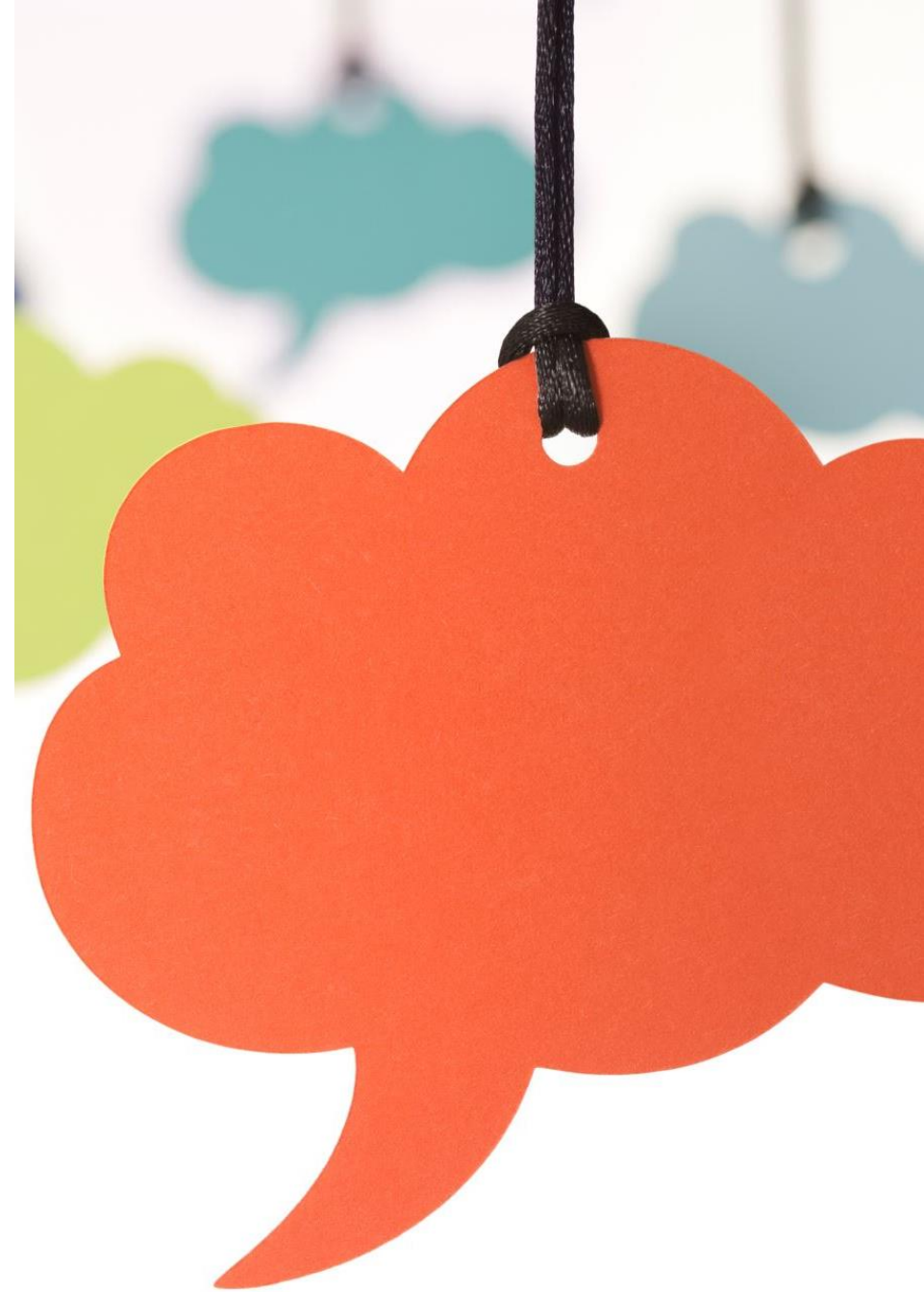
Communication





Language/articulation

- The parents had different levels of English and subsequent confidence in their ability to articulate their views which affected their experiences.
- *“The terms [terminologies] they were using confused me more, so I couldn't even understand anything they were talking about.” [Mary]*
- *“She [the SENCO] had never heard me speak that way [...] something tells me that she didn't even know that I was intelligent or educated [...] she [the SENCO] realised I was not on the retreat.” [Shola]*



Communication Styles

All parents reflected that their communication styles had influenced the way that professionals viewed them.

Some were passive and others were assertive

“I’m from one of those docile African communities [...] they [professionals] hold a preposition that if you don’t ask, you don’t get.” [Masimba]

“If you're black, then you're seen as aggressive, but [if] you're someone else and you stand your ground, then you're assertive.” [Adama]

Discussion: communication

- Generating social capital for parents through positive communication (Cleland & Lumsdon, 2021)
- Are parents 'hard to reach' or are we (professionals) 'hard to access'? (Crozier & Davies, 2007)
- Jargon heavy field of special education – is it necessary?
- English as an additional language (EAL)
- Stereotype of 'Angry black woman' or 'angry black man' (Ashley 2014; Wingfield 2007) – feelings of pre-judgement

Are parents ‘hard to reach’ or are we (professionals) ‘hard to access?’



Cultural Barriers

The African Journey

Complex journey of denial to acceptance of their child's needs



"All my support network had zero understanding [...] they have no clue about special needs [...] I was so frustrated; I have nobody to talk [to] about my son." [Mary]



Process of acculturation:
African education vs British education



"I have had to adjust my cultural orientation to the school and the demands of the processes." [Masimba]

The importance of education in African communities

- All parents expressed that education was highly regarded in their communities
- *“Education is at the very forefront of our value, our culture [...] for us, it’s not a ‘nice to have’ it is a necessity.” [Shola]*
- *“My cultural view of education is actually one where I do respect education. I hold it in high regard from my African heritage.” [Masimba]*
- *“I thought she would understand but what she said to me rocked me to my very core. She said, ‘I don’t know why you place so much value and importance on attainment. What is most important is that your child finds a place where he can have friends and be happy.’ [...] I walked away with the understanding that I was going to have to fight [...] because we were not seeing things from the same perspective.” [Shola]*

Discussion: cultural barriers

Absent/limited local support network impacts their confidence levels (particularly for single African mothers like Mary)

Reliance on own understanding derived from childhood experiences

High aspiration & not compatible with professional expectations

Black Africans traditionally uphold a sense of respect for their elders or people in positions of authority (Logan, 2013)

Process of acculturation should not be underestimated



Have you ever taken time to understand the family's journey?

**“We form the bridge
between who Tosin
is, and the school’s
ability to see him for
who he really is.”
[Shola]**

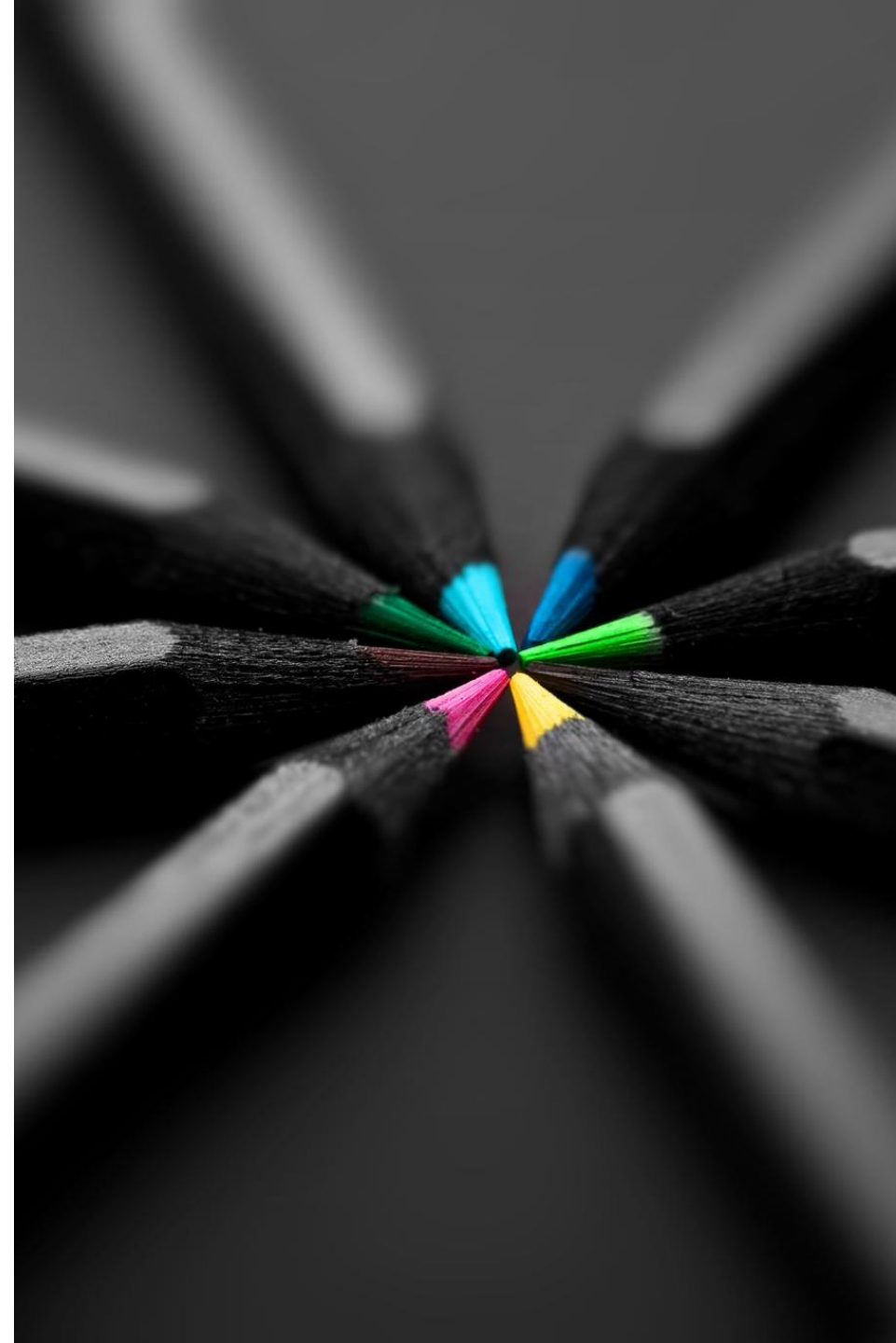


Parent- professional relationship



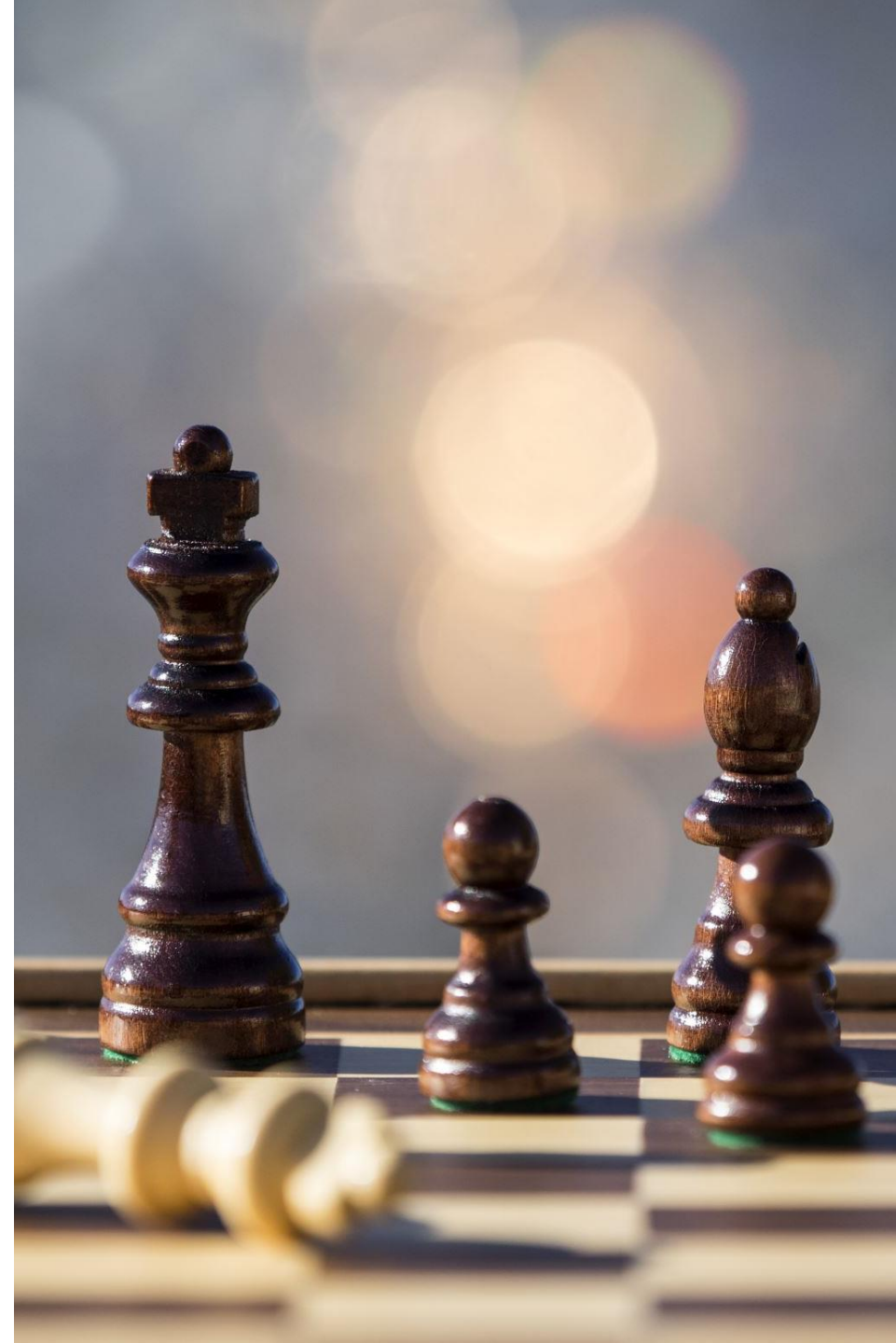
Unequal power

- All understood what the concept of partnership working
- *“Working together, me as a parent, working with the teachers, social workers and everybody [...] to ensure the child develops.” [Mary]*
- None felt they had achieved true partnership in their child’s education, but all had varying levels
- *“A parent’s view sometimes can be diluted by professionals and processes, it is not really respected or considered that much.” [Masimba]*



Fear of a perceived battle

- Fight/battle mentality vs erosion of professional trust
- *“My experience of trying to get him into [primary] school really affected me psychologically. And what I found is subsequently is I have tried to minimise my interactions, so that I toe the line of least resistance.” [Shola]*
- Parent: fight or flight response
- *“They weren’t following the advice of their educational psychologist [...] I became a mother bear, or a lion [...] that was not intentional, they [the school] pulled that out of me, it was the battle that pulled it out of me. [Adama]*



Discussion: Parent- professional relationship

- 'Diagnostic language' and fear of cultural stereotyping – feelings of White professionals hold ideologies about their Black children (Lawrence, 2014)
- Inclusion in 'theory' vs reality: African Collectivism (Ubuntu) – more important for some parents that their child belongs like Shola
- Education policy reform and teacher practice has arguably segregated children with SEND in England from their peers: special school vs mainstream schools (Daniels, et al., 2019)
- Racial tensions: could not disaggregate their feelings from anyone in a place of power, including professionals



**Have we really got
'inclusion' right or could we
be wrong?**

Cultural competence

Cultural competence recognizes that the culture in which the service is being provided (by education professionals) differs from the culture of the service user (parent) in receipt of that service (Parrott, 2009).

Much research in this area is related to health services but applicable to SEND

Recognizing and respecting the individuality of the parent and adapt the way we deliver their services

Implications for professional practice

- Written information in advance please and minimize jargon where possible.
- Invest time in understanding the family and their background if you want to reshape their view
- Local authorities should consider diversity of population when commissioning advice & support services
- Political landscape - unequal experiences of system access: gatekeeping professionals & assessment heavy system


Limitations

Only four parents -
their experiences are
therefore unlikely to be
representative of all
Black Africans

Researcher
positionality may have
affected my
interpretation/analysis
of the data

Opportunities for further research

Comparative study of Black African parental experiences across different types of SEND or school types would be interesting.



Experiences of Black Caribbean parents, who have a child identified with SEMH needs - disproportionately in exclusion & SEMH over-identification



Food for thought

This was my reality