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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Working in partnership to support children and young people with selective mutism: A reflexive thematic analysis from parent and teacher perspectives

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Abstract

Selective mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder where children can speak in some situations but are unable to do so in others, despite having age-appropriate language skills. There is limited awareness and understanding of SM in both school settings and society, often leading to misunderstandings of affected children. Early intervention is crucial to alleviating the anxiety associated with SM, helping children find their voice. Given the significant challenges children with SM face in school, it is vital that schools play a central role in reducing anxiety and creating a supportive environment. Research shows that outcomes improve when parents and schools collaborate to provide consistent support. This study used semi-structured interviews and a critical realist approach to explore the experiences of parents and teachers supporting children with SM, focussing on effective partnership working. Reflexive thematic analysis of data from four parents and three teachers revealed that while parents' experiences were predominantly negative, teachers reported more positive experiences. Effective partnerships were marked by teachers and settings that actively listen, engage with parents and value their expertise. Shared priorities and mutual trust were also identified as crucial elements.

KEYWORDS

anxiety, children and young people (CYP), parent, partnerships, school, selective mutism (SM), teacher

Key points

- There is limited awareness and understanding of selective mutism (SM) as an anxiety disorder within schools and wider society, which affects the support provided to children and young people (CYP) with the condition.
- Effective partnership working between schools and parents is essential for supporting CYP with SM.
- Parents' and teachers' experiences in supporting children with SM can vary significantly.
- Education settings and teachers would benefit from targeted training on effective partnership working.

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INTRODUCTION

Selective mutism (SM) is characterised by a child or young person's (CYP) inability to speak within select situations, despite being able to talk at an age-appropriate level in other contexts. Additional behaviours may include reduced facial expression, gaze aversion, a stiff posture and limited or robotic movement, with some CYP speaking in an altered voice. Shutdown or freeze responses are also common (Melfsen et al., 2022). SM presents with a high degree of heterogeneity, and the frequency of co-occurring challenges, such as social anxiety, can make treatment more complex (Mulligan et al., 2015; Muris & Ollendick, 2021).

Unfortunately, SM is frequently underdiagnosed, and CYP often receive inadequate support due to a lack of awareness among parents, schools and professionals (Pereira et al., 2020; White & Bond, 2022). Prevalence rates are estimated at around 0.71% (Bergman et al., 2002), indicating that while it is not a common condition, it is more prevalent than previously thought. Despite this, understanding of SM remains poor, particularly among educational professionals, who may mistakenly perceive CYP with SM as simply shy or, worse, as manipulative or stubborn (Kearney & Rede, 2021).

There is a critical need for early intervention to reduce anxiety and support CYP with SM in finding their voice (Johnson & Wintgens, 2016; Mulligan et al., 2015; Muris & Ollendick, 2021; Oerbeck et al., 2018). While research on treatment options and interventions for SM is abundant, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the experiences of CYP with SM, as well as those of the parents and teachers who support them. A recent review by White and Bond (2022) highlighted that teacher training, information sharing and collaboration with parents are essential for improving outcomes for CYP with SM. However, there is limited research exploring the dynamics of the parent–teacher partnership in this context, and how best to support CYP within educational settings. Furthermore, many teachers report feeling underprepared to address the needs of children with SM, with teacher training in the UK often lacking targeted content on the condition. As a result, teachers may struggle to identify SM early and provide appropriate support, leading to delays in intervention.

The importance of parental involvement in CYP's education has long been known and is today a central part of educational frameworks and policy (Department for Education [DfE], 2021; DfE, 2011; DfE & Department for Health and Social Care, 2020). For this research, a partnership is defined as a 'collaborative relationship characterised by shared decision-making, mutual respect, equality, dignity, trust and honesty' (Rouse, 2012 p.15). However, in practice, parent–teacher partnerships are complex with practice often failing to meet the ideal standard set. Studies have highlighted the many issues present in parent–teacher partnerships, not least the fact

that very often these partnerships are usually conceptualised by the school without consulting parent voices at all. Parents are viewed as a resource and are allowed to support schools only if this is based on the school's decisions (Devlieghere et al., 2022). Parents are reduced to being informants about their CYP with the decision-making power remaining with the 'professionals' leading to an unequal balance of control and parents being disempowered (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). From the teachers' perspective, those interviewed in White et al.'s (2022) study speak of the difficulties in engaging parents and reaching a shared understanding with them. The need for more support and training for teachers in how to work in partnership is raised by both White et al. (2022) and Kambouri et al. (2022).

There have been various models of home–school partnerships developed from the Family-Centred Partnership Model (Dunst et al., 1988), and the Family–School Relationship Model (Ryan & Adams, 1995) to the Model of Parental Involvement (Epstein et al., 2018), all attempting to bring the separate spheres of home and school together. However, such models often set home and school within a hierarchy with teachers as experts and parents as those needing to be supported and guided to learn how to work with schools, this imbalance of power is problematic for fostering trusting partnerships. There is also a tendency of such models to focus on a cause-and-effect account of how family relationship processes impact school outcomes without really accounting for how family and school can work together most effectively; therefore, the roles of parents and teachers are maintained as two separate units rather than two units working synchronously. This separation of home and school, parents and teachers in practice extends into the work of researchers in education and CYP development theory with studies focussing primarily on one or the other (Ryan & Adams, 1995). This is very evident within the SM literature, which focusses on family or school. While some studies have referred to the importance of parent–teacher partnerships (Omdal, 2008; White et al., 2022; White & Bond, 2022), they have not explored the underlying characteristics of partnership working in any great detail. In a study exploring a team approach to SM, Ponzurick (2012) describes the role of the school nurse acting as the 'expert' mediating the relationship between parents and teachers. This approach potentially evens out any possible power imbalance between parents and teachers; however, it is an American-based study meaning that the school processes and services accessed are not readily available or applicable to most UK schools. A series of case studies outlined four examples of how home–school partnerships have worked effectively to support CYP with SM (Sluckin and SMIRA parents, 2015). These case studies illustrate how parents have upskilled themselves to be able to advocate for their child's needs in school and have worked with their children's schools to develop step by step programmes to meet the needs of their child. However, these are presented as

illustrative case studies and do not reflect on the characteristics underpinning effective partnership working.

A recent CAFE Partnership Model (Kambouri et al., 2022) attempts to address the gaps between theory, policy and practice concerning parent–practitioner partnership working. They identified four areas of importance: Collaborative/communicative, Active, Friendly and Environment, and argue that this model can be used as a reflective framework on which to build parent–practitioner relationships and partnerships. While this model does indeed appear to have succeeded in unpicking the complex mediators involved in building strong partnerships based on trust, understanding and equality, it has not yet been evaluated for its adaptability into practice. It was also developed within the Early Years context; therefore, it cannot be assumed that the model will hold across Primary and Secondary school contexts.

With the gap between theory and practice in mind and given the lack of research exploring parent–teacher partnerships to support CYP with SM, the current research will explore the roles and experiences of both parents and teachers to answer the research question: How do parents and teachers experience supporting a child or young person (CYP) with selective mutism (SM), and what characteristics define effective parent–teacher partnerships in this context? It is hoped that these research questions will help shed light on the experiences of those adults who are supporting a CYP with selective mutism and help inform future educational practices around parent–teacher partnerships to best support these CYP.

METHODS

Positionality

Transparency of author positionality is vital as it can impact data analysis and interpretation. Lead author RA is a mother of a CYP who has had SM and has previously worked as a school teacher. Where co-author LP does not have experience of SM but is a lived experience researcher as a late-diagnosed autistic woman with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and therefore understands and appreciates the need to amplify voices of lived experience in research. All authors share values around the benefits of social justice and equality. Such perspectives are considered of value as they enable unique insights into data collection and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Procedures

Participants were eligible to take part in this research if they were the parent or carer of a school-aged CYP who has or has had selective mutism and attends a mainstream school in the UK. Teachers within the UK who are teaching or

have taught CYP with SM were also eligible and recruited via the research team's existing contacts. Parents were recruited through Facebook pages of the Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMiRA). Full permission was sought and granted from gatekeepers.

Ethics approval was gained (reference: 051992). Participants who expressed an interest in taking part in the research were sent an information sheet, for those who wished to take part were invited to an online meeting and informed consent was taken remotely via secure online software. Interviews took place remotely and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 23 and 49 min with an average length of 38 min. Participants were aware that the researcher had a background as a teacher, which could have influenced some responses. Although reassurance was given that no offence would be taken, it is possible that participants may have censored their responses or withheld certain details due to this awareness. Questioning began with more contextual-based and closed questions towards the beginning such as, 'Has your child been diagnosed with SM?' moving on to more open questions requiring introspection and thought around the topic, such as, 'How would you describe your overall experience of working with the school to support CYP?' Questions such as, 'Were you aware of SM before encountering it with your child/the CYP in your class?' were developed from ideas within the literature, while other questions such as, 'What have you found to be most supportive in helping you to help your child/the CYP in your class?' came from my personal experiences of SM. As this was a semi-structured approach, further questions came up during the interview process such as, 'What difference do you think having a diagnosis has made, if any?'

Data analysis

Participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts before analysis. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following an inductive approach with themes identified by a single coder (lead author RA). In line with RTA's philosophy, themes were actively interpreted rather than 'emerging' from the data, with positionality shaping their identification. Given this interpretative nature, the use of a single coder aligns with RTA's approach.

To ensure rigour, the lead author engaged in ongoing discussions with co-authors throughout the analysis, deepening interpretative insights rather than seeking a singular 'truth' (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process was iterative, involving repeated engagement with the data to refine themes. In keeping with RTA, we do not claim to have 'audited' the data in a positivist sense but emphasise depth of interpretation and theoretical coherence. Transparency was maintained through detailed descriptions of our analytical process.

Analysis followed RTA's flexible, six-step iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Familiarisation began with repeated transcript review and re-listening to audio recordings, ensuring immersion in participants' experiences. Initial coding involved assigning short phrases to relevant text segments, with codes continuously revisited and refined as patterns emerged. Related codes were then clustered into potential themes, capturing both shared and divergent perspectives of parents and teachers. Early groupings included 'communication and relationships,' 'trust' and 'school systems', with continued refinement leading to new themes such as 'parental loneliness and guilt' and 'the CYP is the third partner'. Ultimately, six themes were developed, supported by 27 codes and 146 illustrative data extracts.

Themes were further refined to ensure clarity, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research question. Differences and similarities between parents' and teachers' perspectives were examined within themes, highlighting areas of agreement and contrast while maintaining a cohesive structure. During writing up, themes were described in detail, supported by participant quotations to represent diverse voices. Findings were reported holistically, noting where perspectives aligned or diverged, ensuring an authentic reflection of the breadth of experiences captured.

RESULTS

Four parents and three teachers were recruited (Table 1). Four themes were identified across the data: (1) Parental feelings of guilt, relentlessness and loneliness, (2) Poor knowledge and understanding, (3) Parents can be experts but they are not heard and (4) Barriers to partnership.

Parental feelings of guilt, relentlessness and loneliness

Across the data, all parents expressed feeling guilt in some way, whether this was because they felt they had not realised or acted soon enough, fought hard enough or believed maybe their parenting had caused challenges for their CYP. Similarly, all parents spoke in some way about the relentlessness and loneliness of trying to support their CYP:

I think it took me a long while before I realised that there was a genuine issue where I think, looking back now, I could have been a better parent and better-managed situations.—Lauren
(Mother, 14-year old daughter with SM)

TABLE 1 Participant characteristic information.

Pseudonym	Simon	Lauren	Isabelle	Sarah	Anna and jo	Julie
Adult sex assigned at birth	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Relation to child with SM	Father	Mother	Mother	Mother	Teacher (job share)	Teacher
Child Age (years)	12	14	9	4	4	8
Child sex assigned at birth	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Child School Year	SI (Year 8)	Year 9	Year 4	Pre school	Pre school	Year 4
SM Formal Diagnosis	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Unsure
English as Additional Language	No	No	Child—No Parents—Yes	No	No	Yes
Overcome SM ^a	Yes	No	No	No	Yes—although transition concerns	Within that class but historically regressed at transitions
Co-occurring Conditions	None reported	On ASD pathway	None reported	None reported	Wider Speech and language concerns	None reported

^aOvercome SM refers to if the child had been able to overcome their anxieties about talking and now speak freely within the situations they were previously unable to speak.

...so this is something I would never—kind of forgive myself as well—that I didn't push harder.—Isabelle

(Mother, 9-year old daughter with SM)

I burst into tears and the speech and language therapist said, "Oh I'm so sorry." I said, 'No, I'm relieved because I think I have felt like I was going mad' [...] so I felt relieved and I thought, okay, it's not in my head, I'm not going mad, it's not something—it's not my parenting—Sarah

(Mother, 4-year old daughter with SM)

Parent's feelings of guilt appeared to be exacerbated by the relentlessness of coping with their child's mutism. Sarah stated, *'I know I bang on about it to them (nursery)'*. Similarly, Isabelle said, *'So I've been nagging the nursery'* while Lauren explained, *'I think it's a constant battle. It's erm, it feels like you are constantly fighting for what you feel is actually something we're entitled to'*. There is a feeling from the parents interviewed that they are having to have the same conversations repeatedly with the educational settings their CYP attend.

Teachers reported very different experiences from parents. When asked about their overall experiences of working in partnership to support a CYP with SM, teachers described this as 'rewarding', a stark contrast to the parental responses of 'frustrating' or 'challenging'. Anna and Jo, teachers of a 4-year-old boy with SM, talk about their job share and how they can use each other as support, no one person is solely responsible for the whole week so they can take turns and have time away:

Anna: I think we do tag with each other.

Jo: Yeah.

Anna: Yeah. And Ginny's good as well actually.

Jo: Yeah.

Anna: she's really good to bounce ideas off of, our manager, owner-manager.

They also describe utilising the help of more senior colleagues:

I had lots of conversations with the SENDCo (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator) about the child and which strategies she thought were best to suit him because obviously, she'd known him since he was in Reception [...] I just felt like I needed more support and it felt like it was too big a thing for me to do on my own, so I would always just go straight to the SENDCo—Julie

(Teacher, 8-year old boy with SM)

Even when teachers were struggling with how to support the CYP, they had colleagues they could turn to for support. In contrast, parents appeared to have very little support. Isabelle explained, *'I was—very stressful, and not to have that support and the understanding'*, while Sarah said, *'so basically it's on me. To do the kind of graded exposure in her, all the rest of it...'* Parents are seemingly left to fight alone leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness as expressed by Sarah: *'I think I've felt very on my own'*. (Mother, 4-year-old daughter with SM).

Poor knowledge and understanding

The lack of awareness and understanding of SM among both parents and teachers was a consistent theme across all participants. This poor knowledge often led to misinterpretations of children's behaviours, which in turn affected the quality of support offered to children with SM:

...there's a lot of inconsistencies in terms of, you know, different teachers and what they believe is SM and how it affects kids. Erm, it's almost like, well, if it's selective therefore they're choosing not to do this.—Lauren

(Mother, 14-year-old daughter with SM)

Teachers' limited understanding of the condition meant they were often unable to identify the subtle signs of SM, such as freeze responses or avoidance of basic tasks, and instead, they mistook these behaviours for typical shyness or poor behaviour:

(referring to other staff comments to him) *'oh, you know, don't worry about it, lots of kids are really shy'*.—Simon

(Father, 12-year-old daughter with SM)

I said to her I just wanted to check she is on the SEND list... ..she said, she's not, why would she be on the SEND list? I said because she's been mute for 9 months! ... it involves things like she—she freezes if—if she—she needs to get up and get a drink, she can't do it. Erm, if she needs to go to the toilet, she won't ask, she won't get up and take herself, she'll wait to be asked or taken. Erm, so they—and—and I mean they have said to me, we've just got a very shy little girl. That's the issue.—Sarah

(Mother, 4-year old daughter with SM)

The misconception that children with SM are just quiet was also noted, with some teachers stating that

such children were simply 'perfect' because they did not disrupt the class (Isabelle):

unless you're a child that's fairly disruptive and, you know, and you're loud and you can't sit still etc, because it's almost in their interest to—to try and sort of fix the problem. Whereas a child that's very quiet is almost the golden child, because, you know, they're quiet.—Lauren

(Mother of 14-year-old daughter with SM)

For example, Sarah described how her daughter's failure to ask for basic needs such as a drink or toilet break was dismissed by nursery staff as shyness, rather than recognising it as part of her SM. These misinterpretations can delay early interventions and fail to address the child's underlying anxiety.

Importantly, parents also voiced frustration about the lack of proactive training or knowledge-seeking behaviour in schools. Some teachers waited for formal training to be provided to them, rather than proactively seeking out information or strategies to support children with SM:

they (the school) didn't do their homework basically, to read about it or just observe a bit more [...] so basically they didn't do any research on that.—Isabelle

(Mother, 9-year-old daughter with SM)

I think just, it's really helpful if schools could just buy into the established techniques that are on the shelf for helping [...] It's not—no one should be starting from ground zero with this, you know, and it's really sad that some people—some people have to. —Simon

(Father, 12-year-old daughter with SM)

Isabelle and Simon highlighted how a teacher's willingness to engage with existing resources and strategies had a profound positive impact on their child's progress. Simon recalled how his daughter made significant progress when a teacher took the initiative to research the condition and implement known strategies to support SM (Simon). This demonstrates the critical role that proactive training and self-education play in improving outcomes for children with SM;

...that made a huge difference to Nikki, was just having a teacher who was willing to do some reading on the condition, who is sort of thinking, okay, what part can I play in this? Erm, and who was willing to kind of adopt what I recognised as the formal

strategies, or even the most successful strategies for dealing with SM. So that was really—that was really the thing that made the breakthrough.—Simon

(Father, 12-year-old daughter with SM)

Parents can be experts but they are not heard

All of the parents spoke about finding information themselves to help their child while three of the four parents went on to describe how they felt dismissed by schools when trying to share what they had learned. However, all teachers articulated the importance of listening to parents, with their focus largely being on reassuring them:

It is evident throughout the parents' stories that they have spent time researching SM:

from what research I did, I think it was that Maggie Johnson—that—the manual—I kind of got hold of it in erm—in the library. I—okay—I said it looks like it's, err, selective mutism, and then I started to read about it and I found out, okay, this is the very useful handbook. So I got it from the library and I found out about sliding in.—Isabelle

(Mother, 9-year old daughter with SM)

Parents seem to be highly motivated to find out about SM and research approaches they could use to support their child. They also report a wish to share this information with their child's schools and nurseries:

their (SMiRA) website actually as well, erm—the handouts and things they do—because I was looking at them again the other day and there's quite a lot on there for transitions and starting primary school and things. So—which I'm going to take with me to the meeting (with school)—print it out and take it with me.—Sarah

(Mother of 4-year-old daughter with SM)

However, Sarah and Isabelle described feelings of dismissal when trying to share their learning with schools and nurseries. Sarah shared that she 'felt like a fraud', while Isabelle explained, 'I felt like, er, they just didn't believe me'. Simon also described an interaction with his daughter's school:

there was a meeting that we had in primary two with the head teacher. He was a real control freak to the extent where the class teacher was there and was kind of wanting

to talk and help, I mean it's ironic because we were talking about selective mutism but the class teacher wasn't allowed to talk, and we went and the head teacher delivered a monologue that lasted ...30 minutes and then almost implied that was the meeting over, and I pretty much exploded. ...and said, we've not had the opportunity to talk at all, we've not had the opportunity to discuss anything.—Simon

(Father, 12-year old daughter with SM)

The interaction described by Simon points to the power imbalance that is present between parents and educational professionals, which directly impacts their ability to collaborate.

In contrast, teachers placed value on listening to and reassuring parents:

I think just making them (parents) feel valued and listened to was the main thing—Julie
(Teacher of 8-year old boy with SM)

so allowing the time to give them time to express their concerns. I think people like to feel heard, don't they? ... I was trying to reassure her—Anna

(Teacher of a 4-year-old boy with SM)

However, parents indicated that perhaps this reassurance does not translate as intended:

They were very reassuring that they see this all the time with kids, she's just shy, she's fine.—Simon

(Father, 12-year-old daughter with SM)

The nursery's reassurance, while well meant, did not address his concerns. As in Simon's case, the nursery did not address his concerns; there could be a danger that teacher reassurances are perceived by parents as their concerns being dismissed, rather than the reassurance that is intended.

Barriers to partnership

All parents spoke about the willingness and ability of schools to work in partnership as being important. Similarly, two teachers spoke about the importance of parents engaging with them and being available for discussions. Three of the four parents described differing priorities of parents and teachers as being a barrier to partnership working, while one parent spoke about a lack of trust in working with the school:

The early years (working with school) were very difficult and predominantly they were very difficult because there was a—there was a real unwillingness from the school, particularly from the head teacher to engage with us and to accept that this was selective mutism.—Simon

(Father, 12-year-old daughter with SM)

Isabelle describes the difference it makes when teachers and settings engage:

...that was the first teacher who actually asked me, er, okay, thank you, thank you for letting me know and can you tell me what works? How can I help? And that was the first time ever that someone said that.—Isabelle

(Mother, 9-year-old daughter with SM)

When teachers acknowledge the expertise that parents hold and are open to working with them, parents feel that they are being heard and that the school wants to support them. However, parents report that this is not without its challenges:

It's a lot harder when you realise that actually you start year 7 with perhaps 12 teachers, because ...you find that there's 12 formal sort of teachers, but actually there's maybe 18, 20 different members of staff that are constantly in communication with your child. Erm and you don't get to speak to all of them [...] there's—there's a lot of adults involved and if you were to manage that, that would be a full-time job.—Lauren

(Mother, 14-year-old daughter with SM)

At secondary level, the sheer volume of staff involved in the teaching of just one CYP makes partnerships challenging:

your main point of contact in secondary is with the SENDCo.—Lauren

(Mother, 14-year-old daughter with SM)

However, the SENDCo is generally someone who never teaches the child. Conversely, teachers also report challenges of communicating with parents:

she's (Mum) really hard to get hold of. She doesn't answer the phone [...] she works in a hospital, so isn't allowed her phone on her, erm, and I don't know what Dad does, but he's quite hard to get hold of.—Anna

(Teacher, a 4-year-old boy with SM)

Differing priorities between parents and teachers also seem to be prevalent across participants, and these differing priorities can act as a barrier to partnership working. All the parent participants spoke about how the academic progress of their CYP was prioritised above all else:

for her (the teacher) it was most important that she's doing very well, erm, academically and therefore she's not eligible for any help, she even said that to me.—Isabelle

(Mother, 9-year-old daughter with SM)

you know, we weren't—we've never really been concerned about her academically, but I think we were quite worried about the situation with her not speaking and not forming friendships.—Simon

(Father, 12-year-old daughter with SM)

Parents would appear to be looking for more holistic approaches to their child's schooling, where parental priorities of mental health and social-emotional well-being are met alongside the academic priorities of school:

we purposefully picked that school, erm, because their focus is on rights of the child and emotional well-being, to the point that they've even got a therapy dog.—Sarah

(Mother, 4-year-old daughter with SM)

Parental lack of trust in settings also appeared to act as a barrier to successful partnerships. Isabelle describes the lack of trust she had in school and the perception that she was being lied to:

she was a very weird case that teacher. That to my face she would show me like she knows what she is doing [...] that she understands and that she wants what is best for her (Isabelle's daughter) And then what Ophelia was telling me was completely different and I don't know, like she was hoping she's not going to tell me. I don't know, it's very, very weird—Isabelle

(Mother, 9-year-old daughter with SM)

Anna and Julie shared that when a teacher's words do not match their actions, this leads to a parental lack of trust:

...she's contacted us a few times in regards to—in regards to transition because she's worried that he's going to take a massive step back.—Anna

(Teacher, a 4-year-old boy with SM)

...she would come and stand and watch him at playtime. She'd hide behind bushes and things and watch him at playtime and then she'd come in at the end of the day and say, I saw that he was stood on his own for 5 minutes.—Julie

(Teacher, 8-year-old boy with SM)

The actions of these parents could be interpreted as not trusting the setting, needing to repeatedly follow up on discussions due to a lack of trust that the setting has its transition under control or feeling the need to see what is happening for themselves due to a lack of trust that what teachers are telling them is true.

DISCUSSION

This research sought to answer the research question: How do parents and teachers experience supporting a child or young person (CYP) with SM, and what characteristics define effective parent-teacher partnerships in this context? Four themes were identified from interviews with four parents and three teachers.

Parental feelings of guilt, relentlessness, and loneliness

The feelings of guilt and self-blame expressed by parents in this study reflect findings across the broader literature on parenting CYP with additional needs (Broomhead, 2013; Holland & Pell, 2018). Lutenbacher et al. (2005) identified a parental 'fighter' role, in which parents, feeling trapped, experienced guilt and inadequacy when unable to secure timely support. Similarly, Anderson (2009) described parents of CYP with special healthcare needs as engaged in 'intense,' '24/7' and 'non-stop' advocacy, while Omdal (2008) highlighted the need for repeated meetings with schools.

Parental guilt, particularly linked to perceived failures in advocating for their CYP, is widely documented. While parents of CYP with SEND commonly experience guilt, this is especially pronounced in those supporting CYP with behavioural, emotional and social differences. These parents often feel judged, as if 'guilty until proven innocent' through formal diagnosis (Broomhead, 2013).

The positive teacher responses in this study contrast with prior research. Williams et al. (2021) found teachers expressed helplessness, frustration and failure—mirroring the parental experiences reported here. This discrepancy may stem from the smaller teacher sample or reflect variability in teacher experiences. A larger sample might have revealed a broader range of perspectives. Notably, in this study, CYP made progress during their time with

participating teachers, which may have shaped more positive responses. In contrast, Williams et al. (2021) found teachers relied heavily on colleagues and SENDCo support to mitigate negative feelings, a factor that may also have influenced the findings here.

The lack of parental support reported in this study aligns with Holland and Pell (2018), who surveyed 240 parents of CYP with SEND in the Hull and East Riding areas of the UK. They identified key stressors, including difficulties obtaining support, emotional strain during diagnosis and stigma from family and society. Their study found that 38% of parents felt support was inadequate, highlighting systemic challenges. Our qualitative findings add depth to these concerns, capturing the emotional and logistical burdens parents face due to inadequate support structures.

Poor knowledge and understanding

A lack of awareness about SM is well-documented, with nearly two-thirds of teachers unaware that SM is an anxiety disorder (White & Bond, 2022). Harwood and Bork (2011) found that 53% of teachers had little or no knowledge of SM, and 73% felt unprepared to support a CYP with SM.

While this study's parents suggested that teachers lack motivation to address internalising behaviours, the literature more commonly highlights teachers' difficulty in recognising such behaviours (Collins & Holmshaw, 2008; Kovac & Furr, 2019; Lawrence, 2017; White & Bond, 2022). Signs of SM—such as reduced eye contact, limited speech, avoidance of social interaction and physical signs of anxiety (e.g., tense posture, fidgeting)—are frequently misinterpreted as shyness, disinterest or even defiance. For instance, teachers may view a child's reluctance to speak, ask for a drink or use the toilet as stubbornness rather than recognising these behaviours as part of SM's freeze response (Simon; Sarah).

This lack of recognition can delay interventions and strain parent–teacher relationships (Collins & Holmshaw, 2008; Kovac & Furr, 2019; Lawrence, 2017; White & Bond, 2022). Training improves teachers' ability to identify and support CYP with SM (Harwood & Bork, 2011; White et al., 2022), yet findings remain inconsistent. Some settings remain unresponsive despite training (Albrigtsen et al., 2016; Lawrence, 2017). Teachers who proactively seek knowledge engage in more effective communication with parents, fostering stronger partnerships (Keyes, 2002).

However, some teachers perceive parent partnerships as an additional burden (Keyes, 2002; Lazar & Slostad, 1999), potentially impacting their willingness to independently research SM. While formal training is crucial, proactive self-directed learning is equally important to ensure effective collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting CYP with SM.

Parents can Be experts but they are not heard

Parents in this study described becoming experts on SM, independently researching and compiling resources to support their CYP in school. This aligns with existing literature, where parents report feeling the need to advocate for their CYP and proactively provide resources (Siddiqua & Janus, 2017; Sluckin & SMiRA parents, 2015). However, taking on this expert role adds to their burden, particularly given the limited support available (Lutenbacher et al., 2005). While parents value having their expertise recognised, schools do not always acknowledge it (Anderson, 2009), and many parents report feeling unheard (Garwick et al., 1998; Holland & Pell, 2018), with over a quarter identifying 'being listened to' as an unmet need.

This lack of recognition can be understood within the hierarchical structure of parent–teacher relationships, rooted in historical, cultural and social traditions within education (Lazar & Slostad, 1999). Schools have traditionally operated within a home-deficit model, where professionals are positioned as the experts who educate parents about their CYP (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). While the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & Department for Health and Social Care, 2020) promotes collaboration, in practice, partnerships remain shaped by power dynamics rather than mutual respect (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). This reinforces parental disempowerment and devalues their knowledge (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

Kersey and Masterson (2009) highlight that parents seek reassurance from teachers. However, our findings align more closely with Bang (2018), who found that parental concerns were often dismissed when teachers reassured them their CYP was 'fine', leading parents to feel unheard. This underscores the need for teachers to develop nuanced communication skills to ensure parents feel understood. Despite the importance of parent–teacher collaboration, explicit training on working with parents remains absent from initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2022; D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Epstein, 2018; Lazar & Slostad, 1999).

Barriers to partnership

The importance of school engagement when working with CYP with SM is found within the wider literature (Lawrence, 2017; Omdal, 2008). Camposano (2011) states that studies show that the willingness of teachers to collaborate with parents of CYP with SM directly affects the outcome of treatment for these CYP. However, Lazar and Slostad (1999) discuss the decline in parental involvement as CYP become older and move through the school system, something they describe as being pervasive within school culture. They

highlight that adolescents are extremely vulnerable to the stresses involved as they move up the school system and are therefore most in need of support from parents and teachers. It would seem then that secondary schools perhaps have the most work to do to improve partnership working; however, to do so, there needs to be a huge shift in the systems and structures that secondary schools work under.

Difficulties with engaging parents have been widely documented (Rouse, 2012; White et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021), highlighting the need for teachers and school leaders to take an active role in fostering parent-teacher partnerships. Lazar and Slostad (1999) argue that this requires explicit training, as many educators are not adequately prepared to navigate these relationships effectively. This challenge is particularly pressing in secondary schools, where parental involvement tends to decline (Lazar & Slostad, 1999) despite the increasing need for support as students face greater academic and social pressures. Without intentional efforts to build collaboration, the systemic barriers that impede effective partnerships may persist, ultimately limiting the support available to CYP with SM. These difficulties also intersect with issues of trust, as explored in the following section, further underscoring the need for schools to take a proactive approach to partnership-building.

Parental lack of trust in settings also appeared to act as a barrier to successful partnerships. Tschannen-Moran (2001) found there to be a correlation between trust and effective collaboration, while Rouse (2012) found that trust was the most highly ranked factor by families and professionals when it came to partnership working. Similarly, Keyes (2002) ranked mutual trust as an essential feature of partnership working. Therefore, when parents do not feel that they can trust a setting, this impacts negatively on their ability to work in partnership with the setting and its teachers.

Strengths and limitations

The recommendations in this study reflect the experiences of parents and teachers who support CYP with SM, ensuring their voices are central in addressing their needs. The reflexive nature of the research strengthens the interpretation by making the researcher's positionality explicit (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The critical realist approach is another strength, as it captures the complexity of parental experiences without claiming a singular 'true' understanding. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their subjective experiences, particularly of parental guilt and challenges.

However, there are limitations. The study did not include CYP with selective mutism, leaving their perspectives out of the findings. Future research should

address this gap by exploring their lived experiences. Additionally, the study lacked detailed demographic data beyond gender and English as an additional language, limiting the ability to assess the diversity of participants. Future research should collect broader demographic information to explore experiences across different socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Despite a small sample (four parents and three teachers), this study offers in-depth and nuanced insights into the challenges of supporting children with SM. While the results may not be widely generalisable, qualitative research like this is valuable for identifying context-specific themes. Future research with a larger, more diverse sample could expand on these findings.

The study contributes to the existing literature by focussing on parent-teacher partnerships in SM, an underexplored area. It provides practical recommendations for improving collaboration, an essential aspect of supporting CYP with SM. However, the parent sample was sourced from SMiRA Facebook groups, meaning participants were proactive and well-informed, which may not reflect the experiences of less aware parents. The small number of teacher participants and the absence of secondary teachers limit the representativeness of teacher perspectives.

Lastly, participants knew the researcher was a teacher, which may have influenced their responses. For example, one participant, Simon, refrained from commenting on teachers after realising the researcher's background, which suggests that others may have similarly censored their answers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Future research would benefit from recruiting parent-teacher dyads to explore how parent-teacher partnerships are experienced by both sides of the same partnership. Perspectives of parents and teachers who are working with the same CYP, within the same structures and systems, would give a greater insight into how partnerships are experienced from both sides and what characterises an effective partnership.

Also salient within the data set of this research was the role and voice of the CYP within these partnerships. While the current research did not have the scope to include this, the idea that the CYP is the third partner and the importance of psychoeducation for CYP with SM was prevalent, as was the importance of CYP's autonomy over how their support progresses in school. Therefore, further research exploring the CYP's voice and place within home-school partnerships is warranted.

The findings of this research could be useful for school leaders and SENDCos as well as those working in Educational Psychology, Child and Adolescent

Mental Health, and Speech and Language services. It highlights the need for greater awareness of SM throughout the school system. It supports the existing literature that calls for more and better training for teachers and school leaders on SM, wider internalising behaviours in general, and an explicit focus on teaching school staff how to work and communicate with parents to facilitate partnership working. This includes the need for policy-makers, school leaders, and teachers to be consciously aware of, and reflect on, how the wider structures and systems of school, as well as the historical, social, cultural and political practices within it, inform how teachers interact and respond to parents.

CONCLUSION

The current study suggests that, in this sample, parents reported predominantly negative experiences when trying to support their CYP with SM. These challenges were largely attributed to a lack of awareness and understanding of the condition, as well as limited support structures. Many parents described feeling they had to advocate intensely to secure the support their child needed, which led to feelings of frustration, failure, guilt and self-blame. In contrast, teachers in this study often described their experiences as more positive, citing a sense of reward from working with CYP with SM and satisfaction in seeing progress during their care.

Effective partnerships between parents and teachers appeared to be characterised by teachers who actively listen, engage, and value the expertise parents bring—both about their child and SM itself. The need for a shared understanding of priorities and mutual trust between parents and teachers was also emphasised as crucial for the success of these partnerships.

However, these positive elements are often undermined by the systemic barriers inherent in the structures and policies of schools, which can hinder effective collaboration. Achieving the ideal of parent–teacher partnership, as envisioned in SEND policy, may require significant systemic change. The findings of this study suggest that a starting point for improvement could be enhancing societal awareness and understanding of selective mutism, as well as fostering environments where parents are treated as equal partners by schools. This shift could pave the way for more effective support for CYP with SM and their families.

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The idea of this review was author RA's. She also conducted the search, analysis and draft of the article. Authors MC and LP critically revised the work and contributed towards the writing of the article.

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None declared.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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ETHICS STATEMENT

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