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Contact

Research on the experiences of education of London families with disabled children from black and minority ethnic groups

Interim report - Year 1

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1. Introduction

There is growing concern about provision for children with special educational needs (SEND) in England. In 2023, over 1.5 million pupils in England were identified as having SEND (an increase of 87,000 from 2022), and the types of needs are increasingly complex with around four per cent of pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)¹. In London alone, over 200,000 children and young people have some level of SEND and the number of pupils with EHCPs is increasing at a faster rate in London than in the rest of England – in the last ten years there has been a 20 per cent increase in the number of children with high-level needs, compared to four per cent nationally (London Assembly Education Panel, 2018). However, the provision of high-quality SEND support is becoming increasingly challenging in London and across England as a whole, and provision is highly variable, with some describing it as a ‘lottery’ (e.g., Hutchison, 2021).

Despite significant reforms to the SEND system in the Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014, the current system is widely considered to be in crisis. In 2019, the Education Select Committee described the SEND system as fraught with *‘confusion and at times unlawful practice, bureaucratic nightmares, buck-passing and a lack of accountability’*. More recently, in 2022, the Government’s SEND review identified several key challenges with the current system that are contributing to this crisis, including the system being financially unsustainable, despite substantial additional investment. The growing tension across the system is causing delays in accessing support and increasing financial challenges for local government. Other recent research (e.g., Wheeler et al., 2024) has emphasised the lack of SEND-trained professionals and the rapid turnover of SEND staff, as well as the lack of joined-up care among services.

The 2014 SEND reforms were meant to put children and parents at the heart of the system, enabling parents to input into their child’s SEND support. However, as the SEND Green Paper highlighted, many parents have lost faith in the system – they view it as too complex to navigate, increasingly adversarial, and they are frustrated with long waiting times to access information and support for their children. In response to these challenges, in 2023, the Government published a new plan for the SEND and alternative provision systems. These reforms reinforce the importance of children and young people and their families being central to decision-making around SEND support.

Contact research project

Contact is a leading charity supporting families with disabled children through the challenging SEND system. In December 2023, Contact commissioned a 3-year research project around families’ experiences of SEND, funded by City Bridge Foundation. The overall aim of this research is to explore the experiences of education for London families with disabled children (in particular, Contact service users), with a specific focus on different ethnic and community

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>

groups. The research is being carried out by an independent researcher, in partnership with a Project Group involving key frontline staff from Contact and parents with lived experience of SEND, which has been set up to co-produce and guide the project.

This first interim report summarises the findings from Year 1 of the project.

1.1 Research design

A series of research questions have been developed in partnership with, and agreed by, the Project Group. These are presented in Appendix 1.

The Contact research will provide an overview of the experiences of education for London families with children with a suspected or diagnosed special educational need or disability, focusing on children and young people aged 5-19 years. The research will specifically focus on families from minority ethnic groups and examine the extent of similarities and differences in experience between different ethnic groups. The specific ethnic groups to be included will be agreed as the research project develops, and will depend, to some extent, on the ability of the project to engage families from different ethnic groups. There is increasing ethnic diversity in UK, and specifically London, and it is important to understand the diverse experiences of different communities to ensure that SEND provision is equitable. Furthermore, given the evidence that children and young people from different minority ethnic groups² have different educational outcomes (for example, in terms of attainment and exclusion rates), it is important to explore whether there is evidence of ethnic disparities in the experiences of families with SEND.

This mixed-methods research project, which will be conducted between January 2024 and March 2026, will involve four complementary strands of research:

- **Strand 1: A review of existing literature and data** around the experiences of education for families with disabled children, with particular focus on those from black and minority ethnic groups.
- **Strand 2: Strategic interviews** with Contact staff to gain an overview of the support provided by Contact and the issues faced by families of disabled children concerning education.
- **Strand 3: An online survey of parents working with Contact.**
- **Strand 4: In-depth interviews with a sample of parents** from different ethnic backgrounds to explore their views and experiences around education in more detail.

A broad timeline for the research is included in Appendix 2.

² In line with the government's preferred style for writing about ethnicity, this research uses the term 'minority ethnic' to refer to all ethnic groups except the white British group. People from minority ethnic groups include white minorities, such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups.

2. Review of existing evidence

This report presents the findings from **Strand 1** of the research - **a review of existing literature and data** - summarising what is currently known about the experiences of education for families with a child with SEND. The aims of this evidence review were to:

- Review and summarise existing research and published data relating to the experiences of education for families with children with special educational needs (SEND) from black and ethnic minority groups.
- Identify gaps in knowledge and evidence in the research literature to date.
- Help inform the next stages of research.

At the outset of the review, inclusion and exclusion criteria were agreed (see Table 2.1) to focus the search strategy on the most relevant and robust evidence to answer the following research questions.

- What are the experiences of education for London families with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (aged 5-19 years) from black and ethnic minority groups?
- To what extent are there differences in the experiences of education for London families from different ethnic groups? What are the factors affecting this?
- To what extent are children with SEND from black and ethnic minority groups receiving the support they need/are entitled to? What are the factors facilitating/hindering this?
- How can statutory services/policymakers and community organisations/charities improve their support and help families to overcome barriers to accessing appropriate support for their child?

Table 2.1. Review parameters

Criteria	Include	Exclude	Rationale
Geographical location	England	Wider international/ rest of UK literature (unless summarised in reviews or widely cited)	Focuses on specific context of interest, focusing on England only
Phase of education	Primary, secondary and further education/training (5-19 years)	Early years Higher education	Statutory school age most relevant to the research
Date range	From 2014	Earlier than 2014 (unless summarised in reviews or widely cited)	Explores context since Children and Families Act 2014
Evidence type	Primary research studies, literature reviews, good practice guides, published data		Captures evidence relevant to the context
Language	English only	Other languages	Not cost or time effective in a rapid review

The search strategy included the following information sources:

- Bibliographic databases
- Peer-reviewed journal publisher websites & Google Scholar
- Grey literature published by major UK research organisations
- Websites of key organisations relevant to SEND, with specific focus on London.
- Published data and statistics.

Following a screening process of literature in line with the inclusion criteria above, 23 items of literature were included in the review.

2.1 What is the scope of the current research evidence?

While there is considerable public and political debate regarding the SEND system (particularly around the current reforms) and a large body of literature relating to SEND, there is limited UK research which explores the intersectionality of SEND and ethnicity, particularly concerning families' views and experiences. Much of the research literature exploring the experiences of SEND for different ethnic groups has been carried out in the USA. However, due to differences in the cultural, political, and educational context between the UK and the USA, caution must be taken when drawing conclusions from the US research about ethnic disparities in the UK. For this

reason, and due to the devolved nature of the education system in the UK, the evidence reviewed in this report focuses solely on research conducted in England.

The English research on ethnic minority pupils with SEND has largely focused on SEND identification and prevalence, and there have been several nationally representative population studies (e.g., Strand and Lindorff, 2018; Hutchison, 2021; Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021) that have revealed ethnic disparities in SEND identification. There is more limited research which explores the lived experiences of parents with a child with SEND, and even fewer studies which explore the impact of ethnicity on parental experience. Existing studies tend to involve small numbers of parents, limited to particular sub-groups of parents or areas of England, or limited to particular types of SEND, making it difficult to generalise to the wider SEND population. Similar gaps in existing evidence have previously been highlighted by the Inclusive Data Taskforce (2021), which noted the lack of evidence about children and young people's lived experience of SEND.

Given that this Contact research project concentrates on the experiences of SEND families in London, the review searched specifically for studies focused on London. However, very few studies were found that examined SEND provision in London, although a recently published study has explored the lived experiences of parents with black and mixed Black heritage children living in South London (Wheeler et al, 2024).

Challenges/limitations of conducting research around SEND and ethnicity

There is little published data around SEND which provides a breakdown by ethnicity, and there are recognised challenges with collecting data on ethnicity. The Inclusive Data Taskforce (2021), for example, reported relatively high levels of non-response on ethnic groups in some administrative data sources. In 2022/23, for example, ethnicity information was not completed for national data on SEND appeals or new EHCP assessments,³ making it impossible to undertake a national analysis exploring the relationship between ethnicity and these key aspects of SEND provision.

There are also some limitations with the ethnic classifications or groupings within data sources. Different groupings of ethnicity are suitable for different purposes; for example, while Black and Asian categories may be appropriate in some cases, a more granular breakdown of ethnic groups is often required. This was noted by The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities which emphasised that too much data is collected in terms of the 'big 5' ethnicity classifications: White, Black, Asian, Mixed and Other. Such classifications merge ethnic groups with vastly different experiences and outcomes which may misrepresent the issues and needs of smaller communities. There is often significant variation between and within ethnic groups in terms of

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunals-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2023/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2023#annual-special-educational-needs-and-disability-send-statistics>

education, financial status and social status, as well as differences in cultural and religious practices. However, it is worth noting that the small sample sizes of certain minority ethnic groups often make meaningful analysis at lower granularity unviable.

3. Key findings from the review

3.1 What are the experiences of education for London families with children with SEND (aged 5-19 years) from black and ethnic minority groups? To what extent are there differences in experience between different ethnic groups?

There is much commonality in the experiences of children, young people and their families in the SEND system, regardless of where they live, their socio-economic background or their ethnicity. In research carried out with parents in England (e.g. Wheeler et al., 2024; Sinclair and Zaidi, 2023), parents have highlighted the difficulties associated with navigating the SEND system, describing stressful, time-consuming, complex and inconsistent processes to accessing appropriate support. Services are reportedly working in isolation and there is poor communication between professionals, leading to extra administrative work, and lengthy delays for families. Indeed, the Government's own Green paper admits that the SEND system is not a positive experience for many children, young people and their families, and navigating the system is reportedly having a detrimental impact on the physical and mental well-being of both the child and the whole family (Starkie, 2024).

Children and young people with SEND also continue to achieve poorer outcomes than their peers. For example, they have lower school attendance rates, higher exclusion rates and lower GCSE outcomes (e.g., Timpson, 2019). Children and young people with SEND who have an EHCP are more than twice as likely to be excluded from school than those without SEND. This figure is even higher for young people with social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), or those with SEND who do not have an EHCP. These children and young people are five times more likely to be excluded than their peers (Lamrhari et al., 2022). There also appears to be intersectionality of SEND with other factors, such as the socio-economic background, race and ethnicity of the child, meaning that some children with SEND are further disadvantaged. Children from some ethnic groups, for instance (e.g., Gypsy/Roma, Traveller of Irish Heritage or Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean), are more likely to have other characteristics associated with higher rates of exclusion, such as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, giving them a multiplied risk of school exclusion (Timpson, 2019).

Although many of the challenges associated with the SEND system seem to be universal across all families, there is evidence that there are additional challenges for children and families with specific demographics. The focus of this current research is on ethnic disparities in SEND, and there is evidence that parents' experience of having a child with SEND can be compounded by racial and cultural factors (Akbar and Woods, 2020, Marku et al., 2022, Wheeler et al., 2024). This is explored further in Section 3.2.

The most notable area where ethnic inequalities have been evidenced is in relation to SEND identification. There has been concern for several decades about disparities in the prevalence of SEND among different ethnic groups in England. As far back as the 1970s, Coard (1971), for example, reported how the first generation of Black Caribbean children were misidentified with

SEND and labelled as 'educationally subnormal' by the British school system. As discussed in the following section, there is ongoing evidence of ethnic disproportionality in the identification of SEND in the current system.

3.1.1 SEND identification

Identification of SEND is a crucial first step to ensuring children get the support they need and are entitled to. As discussed in Wood et al. (2023), despite showing signs as an infant, many children and young people with SEND are not formally identified until later in their education. These delays can result in a range of negative outcomes, including disengagement from school, school exclusion and poor academic achievement, often leading to long-term physical and mental health issues. There is, therefore, an urgent need to identify children with SEND early and appropriately.

In recent years, there have been several large-scale, nationally representative studies examining the prevalence of SEND across England. The most widely referenced evidence comes from Strand and Lindorff's 2018 comprehensive analysis of national pupil data, which has shown significant ethnic disproportionality in the identification of SEND in England. Black Caribbean pupils were twice as likely to be identified as having SEMH needs as White British pupils, while pupils from all Asian Groups (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Other Asian) were substantially under-represented for SEMH and for Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Even after controlling for pupil factors such as sex, prior attainment, socio-economic background and parental income and education, some disparity remains.

More recent analysis by the Education Policy Institute confirmed that ethnic disproportionality in SEND identification still exists in England (Hutchison, 2021). Gypsy/Roma and Traveller, Black Caribbean, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean children were again found to be over-represented among children identified with SEND. In contrast, several Asian groups were under-represented in SEND identification after controlling for all individual child-level factors. The under-representation of Asian groups, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani children, was greatest for the most disadvantaged children.

However, it is important to highlight that Hutchison (2021) concluded that which primary school a child attends makes a greater difference to their chances of being identified with SEND than individual child-level factors (including ethnicity). More than half of the differences in SEND identification can be explained by the school that the child attends. Despite this complex picture, the implication for ethnic disproportionality in SEND identification is that some children and young people (mostly Asian pupils) may not be receiving the specialist support and resources that they need, while others (Gypsy/Roma and Traveller pupils, and Black Caribbean pupils) may be experiencing a narrowed or less challenging curriculum, or lowered expectations, due to inappropriate over-identification of SEND. Ultimately, this ethnic disproportionality may result in unequal outcomes for children and young people from different ethnic groups.

Possible reasons for differences in identification have been discussed in the research literature (e.g. Strand and Lindorff, 2018; Wheeler et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2017). These include:

- Teachers' perceptions and understanding of different cultures and low expectations of pupils from different ethnic groups.
- A lack of consideration of how SEND might present differently in children from different ethnic backgrounds.
- Lower awareness of SEND in families from certain ethnic groups, leading to lower access to support services.
- Lower utilisation of healthcare services among some ethnic groups.
- School composition factors.
- Variation in school disciplinary practices, which may unintentionally impact the behaviour of young people.

3.2 To what extent are children with SEND from black and ethnic minority groups receiving the support they need/are entitled to? What are the factors facilitating/hindering this?

As discussed in the previous section, early identification and intervention are key to ensuring that children with SEND and their parents/carers receive appropriate support. However, it is clear from the research literature and public discourse that many SEND children are not receiving the support that they need and are entitled to. Hutchison (2021) highlighted the huge variation in SEND support for children and young people nationally, describing it as a 'lottery', and concluded that such variation can be explained by inconsistent approaches to identifying children. This research emphasised that the chances of receiving SEND support from the school or local authority is largely determined by the school that a child attends, rather than their individual circumstances.

Other research has raised concerns about the reliance on parents to 'fight' for support for their child, as this will inevitably have an impact on the equality of access to SEND provision. This was summed up by The London Assembly Education Panel (2018) which stated: *"The new system relies heavily on parents being able to advocate for their children. This means the new system is inequitable as some parent/carers may not be able to advocate for their child due to numerous factors (e.g. unable to attend meetings, language barriers, confidence, their own support needs etc)."* This finding is supported by recent research into the experiences of Black and Mixed Black heritage families in London (Wheeler et al., 2024). The authors argued that the critical role of parents in accessing support for their child means that SEND support can be impacted by parental factors such as their knowledge, understanding and views of SEND, the relationships they have with educational professionals, and the time and skills they have to input into the process. Advocating for their child not only takes up a significant amount of time for parents, but for many, it requires learning new skills, systems and processes to ensure that their child receives the support they need.

According to the Department for Education (DfE) 2021 COVID-19 Parent and Pupil Panel, over 40% of parents or carers of pupils with SEND said they were unable to access the support they felt their child needed. The main reasons for this lack of access to support were support staff not being available or because their child was in the process of being assessed or awaiting a referral. However, a quarter of parents did not know why their child was currently unable to access the support they needed.

The increasing number of SEND appeals is a clear indicator of parents' dissatisfaction with the process of accessing support for their child, and London has more tribunal appeals than most other parts of the country (London Assembly Education Panel, 2018). In 2022/23, HM Courts and Tribunal Service recorded 14,000 registered SEND appeals in England, an increase of 24 per cent when compared to the previous year⁴. Furthermore, appeals against local authorities' EHCP decisions have increased by 152 per cent since 2014 (Ahad et al., 2022), although this could be explained to some extent by post-16 education being brought into the SEND appeal system through CFA 2014.

Socio-economic background also appears to play a role as parents in SEND support provision. Parents from less privileged backgrounds may face more barriers in accessing the SEND system than middle-class parents as they may have less awareness of their rights and the support services available (Ahad et al., 2022). They may also be less financially able to fund private assessments, which some parents feel they have to resort to in order to access support for their child. This disparity could lead to some children being further disadvantaged within the system (Starkie, 2024). Anecdotally, local authorities report that tribunal appeals are more likely to come from more affluent families, suggesting a potential lack of equity of access to dispute resolution (Bryant et al., 2022). However, no data is currently available on the characteristics of the families who raise appeals that would allow more detailed analysis.

Within the literature reviewed for this report, there was also evidence that ethnicity plays a role in determining access to SEND support, and that children and young people from minority ethnic groups are less likely to be able to access SEND support, despite the over-representation of SEND among some minority ethnic groups (as outlined in Section 3.1.1). The DfE COVID-19 Parent and Pupil panel (2021), for example, revealed that parents of Black and minority ethnic pupils were more likely to need, but be unable to access support from an educational psychologist or physiotherapist, compared with White pupils. Furthermore, several studies have highlighted the extra layer of complexity and challenge in accessing SEND support for parents from minority ethnic groups, particularly recent immigrants to this country.

It is worth noting that the main studies reviewed in this report were focused on parents from specific minority ethnic groups - Black and Mixed Black heritage (Wheeler et al., 2024); Pakistani (Akbar and Woods, 2020); South Asian (Heer et al., 2015) and Eastern European (Marku et al.,

⁴ Tribunal statistics quarterly: July to September 2023:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunals-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2023/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2023#annual-special-educational-needs-and-disability-send-statistics>

2022) – and tended to involve small sample sizes, so the findings may not reflect the experiences of all parents. However, the findings provide valuable insight into the specific barriers faced by minority ethnic parents in accessing SEND support for their children:

- **Religion, faith and cultural views about SEND** – Delayed access to SEND services can occur as families struggle to accept a diagnosis, influenced by factors like religion, faith, and cultural views. Although most cultures value education, their views towards the education of children with disability can vary considerably. For example, as Akbar and Woods (2020) described, in South Asian, Eastern and African countries, children with SEND may not be educated and their families may have limited aspirations for them. Similarly, Heer et al. (2015) described how the word ‘disability’ is loaded with negative connotations in the Asian community and refers to limited capabilities. Some parents also reportedly prioritise their faith over standard therapeutic interventions, relying on prayer to address their child's needs. Other parents reported being pressured by family members to seek out traditional remedies from their culture as a cure for their child's SEND, such as visiting religious leaders or holy sites. ‘Hidden disabilities’ without obvious physical impairments can be especially challenging to understand and explain, especially to older family and community members with historic views of SEND. Whilst it was felt that there was a lack of understanding about SEND in the general population, there was a perception that this is particularly evident within Black and minority ethnic communities and that parents were often blamed for their child's disability.
- **Issues of shame, guilt, stigma and denial about SEND** – Given the cultural views of SEND explained above, parents described the shame, guilt and stigma associated with having a child with SEND and how this can negatively impact a parent's place in their community. Professionals also explained how cultural views around disability could often lead to denial of needs and reluctance to obtain a formal diagnosis and accepting support. This also led to social isolation and limited support networks for parents, causing significant stress within families.
- **Language and communication barriers** – Language barriers are regarded as a major obstacle for many minority ethnic parents in being able to fully advocate for their child. The use of complex and technical vocabulary by professionals or within administrative paperwork, and a lack of information and resources in different languages further exacerbates this issue. Cultural variations in non-verbal communication, such as eye contact and facial and hand gestures were also considered to be barriers to effective communication and partnership working with professionals. Wheeler et al. (2024), for example, reported that Black mothers felt that they were perceived as ‘difficult’ or ‘aggressive’ by professionals, which made it more difficult for them to advocate for their children.
- **Limited knowledge of the English education system and SEND system, and of their rights as parents** – Navigating the SEND system and being fully informed of children's and parents' rights is complex and challenging for most parents. However, this can be even more difficult for parents who have English as an additional language or those who are new to the country,

as they may lack knowledge of statutory processes, and of their rights as parents. This may lead to them being less able to access appropriate support for their child.

- **Lack of trust in services** – In a study of Black and Mixed Black heritage parents in London (Wheeler et al., 2024), SEND professionals reported that many parents from minority ethnic communities are *'very anti-establishment unless they see someone they can relate to.'* Perceived power differentials (due to greater knowledge of SEND and perceived status), mistrust, and a lack of effort by professionals to provide culturally appropriate support were also seen as barriers to parents accessing support for their children.
- **Differential expectations of children's behaviour based on ethnicity** – Some parents felt that professionals often misinterpreted SEND as challenging behaviour, particularly among children from minority ethnic backgrounds, due to their limited knowledge of how SEND needs might present differently in children from different ethnic backgrounds.
- **Discrimination towards families** – There was some evidence that professionals failed to take account of families' cultural values and personal circumstances, and this was felt to be more common among Black and minority ethnic families (Wheeler et al., 2024).

3.3 How can statutory services/policymakers and community organisations/charities improve their support and help families to overcome barriers to accessing appropriate support for their child?

Given the acute challenges associated with navigating the SEND system and accessing support, particularly for families from minority ethnic groups, it is important to consider how families can be better supported, and how barriers to accessing support can be reduced. Parents and professionals within the research literature called for a range of improvements to the system including more funding, improved SEND training for school staff and other professionals in the social services and healthcare sectors, and better multi-agency working.

It is hoped that the Government's new SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan will go some way to improving access to support for children and young people. This plan aims to deliver a better experience for children and young people with SEND and to restore families' confidence in the system. New national standards aim to aid the early identification of children and young people's needs and clearly show the types of support necessary, which hopefully will result in fewer children needing an EHCP. In addition, £400 million will be allocated to local authorities in 2023-24 to help with the increasing costs of supporting individuals with SEND. The key elements of this plan are:

- A national system underpinned by National Standards
- Successful transitions and preparation for adulthood
- A skilled workforce and excellent leadership
- Strengthened accountabilities and clear routes of redress
- A financially sustainable system delivering improved outcomes.

This 3-year research project will be able to explore parents' and professionals' views on any changes to the system as a result of this improvement plan, through surveys, in-depth interviews and an updated review of the research literature.

Strategies for providing specific support to families from minority ethnic groups in accessing SEND support have also been considered within the research reviewed. It is important to highlight that there was a common view that while most schools, LAs and other service providers strive to provide equality of service to all clients regardless of ethnic background, and probably pride themselves on such universal provision, many parents felt that one-size-fits-all, or 'culturally blind' approach to support services may not be appropriate (e.g., Akbar and Woods, 2020). The specific needs of a diverse range of ethnic groups may vary, and services should take account of families' differing cultural and religious needs, with a more culturally competent approach.

Other suggestions for how families from minority ethnic groups could be better supported in the SEND system (e.g., Akbar and Woods, 2020; Heer et al., 2015; Wheeler et al., 2024) include:

- Having a workforce that reflects the diversity of local communities, with school staff and other professionals from the same culture who can build a rapport with families.
- Providing information and resources in different languages or providing an appropriate translation service.
- Taking a family-centred approach which responds to the individual circumstances of families and takes account of differences between (and within) cultures (including, for example, cultural and religious beliefs, educational expectations, languages spoken, length of time in the country).
- Cultural competency training for staff, and improved understanding and sensitivity regarding differing religious and cultural constructions of disability.
- Signposting/access to SEND support groups with individuals from the same culture going through a similar experience.
- Raising awareness of SEND within local communities. Wheeler et al. (2024) for example, suggest developing local SEND advocates, in collaboration with parents and families of SEND children from different ethnic groups and knowledgeable professionals.
- Providing extra support and guidance on statutory processes and parental rights.
- Improving staff understanding of the importance of building trusting relationships with parents, particularly those who may have previously had negative experiences with statutory services.

Such a culturally competent approach to provision does, however, have obvious staffing and resource implications, and needs to be done in collaboration with families from different ethnic groups.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The research literature reviewed provides a stark picture of the acute challenges for parents in navigating the complex and increasingly adversarial SEND system in England. Such challenges are compounded by the intersectionality of SEND with other factors such as ethnicity and socio-economic background, as well as the school attended. This suggests that the factors contributing to variation in the experiences of SEND for children, young people and their families are complex and multi-faceted.

4.1 Recommendations for future research

This literature review has identified several notable gaps within the evidence base regarding the experiences of SEND for families from different ethnic groups. While there is solid evidence of ethnic disproportionality in the identification of SEND, the reasons for such disparities remain unclear. There is also limited research which hears directly from children and young people with SEND, and their families (particularly those from minority ethnic groups), about their educational experiences, and which explores the factors contributing to variation in families' experiences.

There are several methodological challenges in conducting research about SEND and ethnicity:

- The collection of ethnicity data in relation to SEND (such as SEND appeals) is not comprehensive and needs to be improved to enable better statistical analysis of SEND intersectionality.
- The low prevalence of SEND in certain minority ethnic groups makes it difficult to conduct statistical analysis or draw generalisable conclusions from findings.
- It can be difficult to engage families from certain minority ethnic groups, such as those from Gypsy/Roma or Traveller of Irish heritage backgrounds. This means that research findings may not reflect the experiences of those who are more marginalised or not currently engaged with professionals.
- Recognition of the differences between, and within, ethnic groups requires a new and more granular approach to data and how it is collected and used. A range of factors may influence families' experiences, and further research is needed which explores the impact of a range of demographics (e.g., educational expectations, religion, place of birth, level of support from extended family).

4.2 Next steps for Contact research

The next phase of this research project will involve primary data collection with families with children with SEND and professionals from Contact who provide support to families. It will build on the literature review summarised in this report and will aim to fill some of the gaps in the evidence base relating to the experiences of families with disabled children from different ethnic groups. The planned research activities for Year 2 of the project are:

- Strategic interviews with Contact frontline staff supporting families (May 2024 and January/February 2025)
- An online survey of parents/carers with children with SEND in London (June-August 2024)

- In-depth interviews with parents/carers from different ethnic groups with children with SEND (October-November 2024)
- A review of new literature/data relating to SEND (December 2024).

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Appendix 1. Research questions

Over-arching research questions:

- What are the experiences of education for London families with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (aged 5-19 years) from black and ethnic minority groups?
- Specifically, what are parents' experiences of identification/diagnosis of SEND, participation in decision making, the EHCP process, SEND appeal/tribunal process, their children receiving the support they need/are entitled to, and support for transition between different phases of education?
- To what extent are there differences in the experiences of education for London families from different ethnic groups? What are the factors affecting this?

Specific research questions:

- To what extent are children with SEND from black and ethnic minority groups receiving the support they need/are entitled to? What are the factors facilitating/hindering this?
- To what extent are families with children with SEND from black and minority ethnic groups facing barriers in accessing appropriate support? What are these barriers and how can they be overcome?
- To what extent are barriers impacting some ethnic groups more than others? What are the factors affecting this?
- What does high-quality SEND provision/support look like for families? What factors do parents feel should be in place?
- What support around education and learning have London parents found helpful for their children (e.g., from local authorities, schools, community organisations and charities). What further support would families find helpful?
- What are London families' experiences of the support provided by Contact and what areas for improvement would they recommend?
- How can statutory services/policymakers and community organisations/charities improve their support and help families to overcome barriers to accessing appropriate support for their child?

Appendix 2. Research timeline

	Deliverables	Timing
Year 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope research in partnership with project group • Initial literature/evidence review • Interim report 1 	By 31 March 2024
Year 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic interviews with Contact staff • Survey of parents 1 • Interviews with parents 1 • Literature/evidence review • Interim report 2 	By 31 March 2025
Year 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey of parents 2 • Interviews with parents 2 • Strategic interviews with Contact staff • Literature/evidence review • Interim report 3 • Final report and recommendations 	By 31 March 2026