

# **Coherence as a Coordination Problem: The Coherence Navigation Framework for Multi-agency Support in Neurodivergent Children's Education**

Azibaolanari Okungbowa, Independent Scholar, United Kingdom

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## **Abstract**

When a child has additional support needs, their education does not happen in a classroom alone. It happens across a system: health appointments, local authority decisions, education plans, and third sector support, all of which are supposed to connect. In Scotland, they frequently do not. Families fill the gaps. Children wait. This paper argues that fragmentation in multi-agency educational support is not primarily a resource problem. It is a coherence problem. And coherence is something that can be built into systems, rather than left to families to construct alone under pressure. The Coherence Navigation Framework (CNF) was developed from independent qualitative research with 50 participants across Scotland: 30 family members and 20 professionals from NHS, local authority, education, and third sector settings. Thematic analysis identified three conditions that determine whether support pathways hold together for the children at their centre. Shared navigation, where coordination is distributed across the system rather than absorbed quietly by families. Visible navigation, where progress and gaps are transparent to all relevant parties. Supported navigation, where families receive structured guidance rather than repeated redirection. The CNF is an emerging, original contribution to understanding coordination failure in neurodivergent support systems, with implications for education, health, and social care policy. It responds directly to Scotland's Additional Support for Learning Review (McManus, 2026) and contributes to interdisciplinary literature on inclusive education, integrated support design, and the real conditions under which educational outcomes improve for neurodivergent children. Coherence is not a soft ambition. It is a design requirement.

*Keywords:* additional support needs, Coherence Navigation Framework, information fragmentation, multi-agency coordination, neurodivergent children

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## **Introduction**

Multi-agency education systems are built on the assumption that information will move between services. In practice, it frequently does not. That gap shifts coordination work onto children, families, and schools in ways that directly shape educational decisions and outcomes.

When a neurodivergent child's support requires input from education, health, and social care, those services rarely share what they know. Each agency holds a partial picture. Each operates within its own referral systems, assessment frameworks, and timelines. The child moves between them. The information largely does not. What this produces is not merely an administrative inconvenience. It produces a structural condition in which the professionals closest to a child, teachers, learning support staff, school coordinators, are routinely required to make decisions without the full picture of that child's needs, history, or current circumstances.

What I was carrying into that room was the story of everything that had happened before. The referrals. The assessments. The decisions. The promises. The professional in front of me often had none of that. I was not just there to discuss my child. I was there to reconstruct the entire journey so far.

The moment a child's support depends on more than one service, coordination becomes an education issue, not just a service issue.

This has consequences that reach into classrooms. Schools plan provision, allocate resources, and make placement decisions on the basis of information that is incomplete not because professionals are careless but because the system was never designed to move information coherently. A child who presents one way to an education authority may be understood quite differently by the health service that holds their diagnosis, or by the social care team that knows their home circumstances. Each professional sees a portion. No single actor is routinely required to hold the whole.

Scotland's experience is instructive here. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, as amended, established statutory duties for multi-agency coordination around children with additional support needs. The Scottish Government's (2022) *Getting It Right for Every Child* framework placed further duties on services to work together around children's wellbeing. The Named Person provision, introduced in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, went further still: it attempted to designate one professional as a coordination point for each child. The Supreme Court's ruling in *Christian Institute v Lord Advocate* (2016) ultimately limited the information-sharing provisions of that scheme. What the Named Person experience revealed, however, was not simply a legal problem. It revealed a design gap. Responsibility can be assigned by legislation. Coordination across information systems cannot be legislated into existence. It has to be built.

Scotland is not an outlier. The coordination problem it has attempted to address through legislation is a structural feature of multi-agency education and support systems in every jurisdiction where responsibility for children is distributed across agencies. Zurynski et al. (2025), in a scoping review of paediatric integrated care models across international contexts, found that even in formally integrated systems families described needing to coordinate the coordinators. Information barriers persisted. The picture no professional held in full was held instead by the family.

This paper draws on Phase 1 research with 50 participants across five stakeholder groups to propose the Coherence Navigation Framework (CNF) as a structural response to that problem. Its contribution to education research is precise. Schools cannot make consistently informed decisions about children when the information required for those decisions is fragmented across agencies. The CNF identifies the specific conditions under which that fragmentation is produced and the conditions under which it can be reduced.

Schools are being asked to make good decisions about children using information that is split across services that do not reliably share it. This paper names the structural conditions that determine whether that information ever arrives.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws on Phase 1 research conducted with 50 formally recruited participants across five stakeholder groups: 30 family members and 20 professionals drawn from NHS, local authority education, local authority social care, and third sector settings in Scotland. The qualitative dataset comprised over 85 interviews and focus group contributions, supported by 50 anonymous survey responses gathered separately through professional networks and community groups. The two datasets are distinct. Survey responses are used descriptively to contextualise qualitative findings. Percentage figures cited in this paper derive from the 30 formally recruited family participants, who completed a structured survey instrument as part of Phase 1 engagement.

The research used a mixed methods design. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Analysis was inductive. The framework presented in this paper emerged from patterns identified across all five stakeholder groups. It was not applied to the data from prior theory.

The lead researcher is also a parent of a child with additional support needs navigating Scotland's ASN system, a position that has directly informed both the lines of inquiry pursued and the interpretive lens applied throughout.

Phase 1 research was conducted by an independent researcher outside an institutional framework. No prospective ethics committee review was obtained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were anonymised before analysis and storage. Participation was voluntary. Data were handled in compliance with UK GDPR throughout. The researcher is a member of the Social Research Association and the research was conducted in accordance with SRA ethical guidelines.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the qualitative and survey data produced seven themes, organised into three clusters. Each cluster names a structural feature of multi-agency coordination failure as experienced by families and professionals in Scotland's ASN system. Together they provide the evidential foundation for the Coherence Navigation Framework.

### **Cluster One: Information Does Not Move**

Three themes emerged around the movement, or failure of movement, of information across agency boundaries.

The first theme identified information as structurally trapped within agencies rather than shared between them. Professionals across all four professional stakeholder groups described beginning assessments without access to records held by partner agencies. The child's history, diagnoses, and prior decisions were available in principle. In practice they did not travel. Each professional started again.

The second theme captured the burden this placed on family respondents. Ninety-seven percent of family respondents (n = 30, Phase 1 survey) reported difficulty navigating the system. Eighty-seven percent reported repeating the same information to professionals often or all the time. This was not occasional repetition. It was the condition under which every interaction took place.

The third theme identified the educational consequence directly. Schools described making provision decisions, placing children in support structures, and allocating learning support resources on the basis of information that was acknowledged by professionals to be incomplete. Decisions about what a child needed in the classroom were being made without knowledge of what health or social care had already established about that child.

More than one participant described the same experience: walking into a meeting and realising they were starting from the beginning again.

### **Cluster Two: No One Holds the Map**

Two themes emerged around coordination responsibility.

The fourth theme found that coordination responsibility in multi-agency systems was implicitly assumed to be held by someone, but was not explicitly assigned to anyone. When asked who was responsible for ensuring information moved between agencies, professionals across stakeholder groups described uncertainty. Each assumed another actor held that responsibility. In practice no one consistently did.

What stood out was not that people refused responsibility. It was that everyone assumed someone else was already carrying it. When I asked who was coordinating, the answer was often uncertain. The role existed in theory more clearly than it existed in practice.

The fifth theme documented what filled that gap. Families assumed the coordination role by default. They attended meetings across agencies, carried documentation, ensured professionals in one setting knew what had been decided in another, and maintained the continuity of their child's support history across transitions. This role was sustained, invisible, and unacknowledged in formal system design. Schools frequently reported coordinating across agencies as well, absorbing a function for which they had neither the resource nor the mandate.

### **Cluster Three: Support Ends Where It Is Most Needed**

Two themes addressed support across transitions.

The sixth theme found that professional support was consistently withdrawn at the precise points where the coordination demands on families were highest. When a child transitioned between stages of education, changed placement, or moved between services, the professional who had built understanding of that child closed the case. The incoming professional began

again. Families described these transition points as the moments when the system became most difficult to navigate.

Families described losing continuity. A case closed, a professional moved on, a service changed, and years of accumulated knowledge seemed to disappear with it. What followed was not a transition. It was a restart.

The seventh theme distinguished between signposting and staying. Families and professionals both identified a pattern in which available support took the form of directing families toward another service rather than remaining present to ensure handover produced continuity. Signposting discharged the professional's immediate responsibility. It did not produce coherent support for the family. The families who experienced something different described one thing consistently: a professional who stayed past the point where the system expected them to leave.

### **The Coherence Navigation Framework**

The findings across all three clusters point toward the same structural absence. Coordination is assumed. It is not designed. The Coherence Navigation Framework is proposed as a direct response to that gap.

The Coherence Navigation Framework identifies three structural conditions required for families to experience coherent support in multi-agency systems. It provides an analytical structure for assessing whether these conditions are present in contexts where responsibility, information, and decision-making are distributed across multiple actors, and where coordination is required but not explicitly designed.

The three conditions are Shared Navigation, Visible Navigation, and Supported Navigation.

Shared Navigation holds that coordination responsibility must be actively named and distributed. Someone must hold the map. Not assumed to hold it. Named, resourced, and accountable for holding it across agencies and across time.

Visible Navigation holds that pathway progress and decision history must be transparent to all parties, including families and the schools working with their children. The information a child's history contains must travel with the child, not remain with the agency that generated it.

Supported Navigation holds that families must receive structured, proactive guidance at points of need, and that professionals must remain present across transitions rather than withdrawing at the point where handover happens.

The three conditions are proposed as interdependent. Each amplifies the others. None operates at full effect alone. That claim is the subject of Phase 2 validation.

What the data showed was that none of these conditions failed on their own. When responsibility was unclear, visibility suffered. When visibility was absent, support became reactive. The same families and professionals were often describing all three problems at the same time. That was the clue that they were part of a single system rather than separate issues.

## **Discussion**

The three clusters of findings demonstrate precisely what the absence of each condition produces in educational settings.

Schools cannot make consistently informed decisions about children when the information required for those decisions is fragmented across agencies. The three clusters of findings demonstrate that this is not a failure of individual professionals. It is a failure of structural design.

Cluster One showed that information is not moving between agencies because no mechanism requires it to. Visible Navigation identifies the structural condition this absence represents and names what must be present for information to travel. When pathway progress and decision history are transparent across agencies, schools receive what they need to make informed decisions. When they are not, schools proceed without it.

Cluster Two showed that no one consistently holds coordination responsibility. Families absorb it by default. Schools absorb part of it too, without the resource or mandate to do so reliably. Shared Navigation addresses this directly. When coordination responsibility is named, the default does not fall to the family. It does not fall to the school either. It sits where it was always supposed to sit: within the system itself.

Cluster Three showed that support ends at transitions. The professional who understood the child left. The family navigated alone. Supported Navigation holds that continuity across transitions is a design requirement, not a matter of individual professional discretion.

The CNF's relevance to education is not peripheral. It is central. When Shared Navigation is absent, schools operate without a named coordination partner. When Visible Navigation is absent, teachers and learning support staff make decisions without the full picture. When Supported Navigation is absent, families arrive at key educational junctures, tribunal hearings (the formal process for challenging educational support and placement decisions), placement reviews, and transition planning meetings, carrying information no one else has held consistently on their behalf.

The Scottish experience of the Named Person provision is instructive here. In Scotland, the Named Person role was intended to ensure one identified professional held responsibility for a child's wellbeing across services. For an international audience, it represents the most sustained legislative attempt in any UK jurisdiction to address the coordination gap this research identifies. Its relevance to this paper is not political. It is analytical.

The CNF does not propose a new Named Person scheme or any equivalent legislative mandate. It proposes structural design standards that commissioners and practitioners can embed within existing frameworks without new legislation and without the information sharing provisions that led to the Supreme Court ruling in *Christian Institute v Lord Advocate* (2016). The CNF is not a repetition of Named Person. It is the structural response to what Named Person revealed about the limits of legislative mandating as a route to coordination.

What Named Person revealed was that assigning responsibility by law does not build the information architecture that coordination requires. The CNF proposes that the three conditions, Shared Navigation, Visible Navigation, and Supported Navigation, must be

designed into multi-agency systems regardless of the legislative framework in which those systems operate. They are not Scottish conditions. They describe what any multi-agency education and support system requires if it is to function coherently around a neurodivergent child.

The equity implication follows directly. Families with more resources, more confidence, and more capacity to advocate compensate more effectively when the system fails to coordinate. Families without those resources face the full structural weight of what the system never built. Schools serving children from families with fewer resources are therefore most exposed to the consequences of coordination failure. The CNF does not eliminate that inequity. It reduces the structural conditions that produce it.

One image stays with me. A parent sitting in yet another meeting with a folder full of reports, notes, emails, and assessments. The folder existed because the system had no equivalent. The parent had become the record, the navigator, and the coordinator all at once.

The Okungbowa and Lawani (in preparation) analysis of the Named Person gap in Scotland's ASN pathways provides further evidence of the resilience demands placed on families and informal leaders when structural coordination is absent. That analysis extends the argument developed here by examining how the gap created by incomplete legislative implementation was filled, and at what cost, by families, schools, and third sector workers operating without formal mandate or resource.

### **Limitations**

This study draws on 50 participants across a single national context, Scotland, and does not claim representativeness beyond that context. The findings are qualitative and context-specific, generated through reflexive thematic analysis rather than statistical generalisation. The Coherence Navigation Framework presented here has not yet been validated through the measurement instrument planned for Phase 2, and its three conditions should currently be read as an analytical structure grounded in this data rather than an empirically tested tool.

### **Conclusion**

Multi-agency education systems for neurodivergent children do not fail because the people in them stop caring. They fail because coherence was never designed in. This paper has argued that the failure is structural, that it is predictable, and that it can be named precisely enough to be addressed.

The three clusters of findings identify where structural coordination failure occurs. Information does not reliably move between agencies. No one consistently holds coordination responsibility. Support frequently withdraws at the transitions where it is most needed. These are not the products of individual shortcoming. They are the products of systems built on the assumption that coordination will happen without being explicitly designed.

The Coherence Navigation Framework proposes three structural conditions in response: Shared Navigation, Visible Navigation, and Supported Navigation. For education practitioners and commissioners, the CNF does not ask for more effort from already stretched professionals. It asks for different design. When coordination responsibility is named rather than assumed, when information follows the child rather than staying with the agency that generated it, and when

professional support is built to stay present across transitions, the school is no longer the last line of information management. It becomes what it was always meant to be: the place where education happens.

That claim rests not only on the research but on the researcher's own experience navigating the same system.

Yes, I believe it, because I have seen it happen, not everywhere and not consistently, but enough to know it is possible rather than aspirational. In my own experience of this work, including transitions I am still navigating for my own son, there have been moments when professionals had the information they needed, knew who was responsible, and stayed connected through a transition. In those moments the conversation changed. Less time was spent explaining the past. More time was spent thinking about the child and what happened next. I have also heard, just as clearly, from families for whom that was never true. Coherence is not the default. It is what happens when the conditions are deliberately in place.

For commissioners, the CNF provides a diagnostic structure. It identifies which of the three conditions is absent or partially present in any given multi-agency pathway. That is not a theoretical exercise. It is the difference between a school that receives a coherent picture of a child before a placement decision and a school that does not. It is the difference between a family that arrives at a tribunal hearing (the formal process for challenging educational support and placement decisions) carrying five years of documentation because no system held it, and a family that does not have to.

The CNF makes no claim that the structural conditions it identifies are sufficient on their own to eliminate inequity in educational outcomes for neurodivergent children. Resource, advocacy capacity, and family circumstance will continue to shape those outcomes. What the CNF addresses is the portion of that inequity that is structural in origin: the gap between what coordination was supposed to provide and what families and schools are left to provide instead.

This paper is one output from a research programme that is still developing. Phase 2 will test whether the three CNF conditions can be measured reliably, by developing an instrument designed to assess their presence or absence across different multi-agency systems and jurisdictions. The aim is a tool that practitioners and commissioners can use to identify where coordination is failing structurally, before that failure reaches the classroom, the placement decision, or the family that has run out of capacity to compensate for what the system will not hold.

Coordination failure in multi-agency systems supporting neurodivergent children is not inevitable. It is designed in. The CNF names what would have to be true for it to be designed out instead.

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### **Disclosure Statement**

This paper is based on research presented at the European Conference on Education, UCL and SOAS University of London, July 2026, and forms part of a programme developing and testing the Coherence Navigation Framework. Related manuscripts are under peer review at the International Journal of Integrated Care and Child and Family Social Work, Wiley.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The author used Claude, an AI language model developed by Anthropic, to assist with editing and improving the clarity of written expression in the preparation of this manuscript. All AI-assisted suggestions were reviewed, revised, and approved by the author. Claude was not used to generate research ideas, design methodology, collect or analyse data, develop the Coherence Navigation Framework, or produce any intellectual contribution. All research design, data collection, qualitative analysis, framework development, and conclusions are entirely the author's own independent work.

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**Contact email:** mzzolaobi@yahoo.com