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Parents' experiences of choosing a special school for their children

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about English parents' experiences of making decisions about special school placements in the national context of rising special school placements and more parental choice and school diversity. The aim of this research was to investigate whether the current legislative focus on optimising parent choice operates as intended from the parents' perspective. More specifically, it aimed to examine the views of parents of pupils in special schools in the South West of England: their reasons for choosing special school, the extent to which they felt they had an independent choice and their views on alternative provision. Fifty seven parents with children in special schools in three local authority special schools completed an online questionnaire that collected numerical and textual data. Analysis showed that the top three factors influencing decisions were school atmosphere, caring approach to pupils and class size, a finding that connected with their concepts of inclusive education. These and other findings point to the limitations of the choice-diversity model implemented over the last few decades in England. The research illustrates distinctive parental perspectives on schooling, inclusive education and the dilemmas they experience in choosing provision for their children.

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Special educational needs; parent choice; special schools; inclusive education

Introduction

This paper is about the decision-making of parents whose children go to special schools in England. This is in the context of the English school policy changes since the 1980s. These have involved the greater inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities in ordinary schools, on the one hand, with the introduction of market style principles into schooling, on the other. Tensions between these policy initiatives have been identified internationally (Barton and Slee 1999).

Changes in school governance in England to more autonomous state-funded schools (academies and free schools) have been influenced by international practices; for example, the free schools (*friskolor*) in Sweden (Magnússon 2020). And charter schools in the USA (Chubb and Moe 1990). It has been assumed that these changes will release more energy, creative teaching and so greater student learning (Dixon and Humble 2019).

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Though there are national differences in the specific school changes, they all involve a move away from local or community-controlled school governance, and offer parents greater school choice.

Over the last 30 years, there has been a reduction in the proportion of pupils going to English special schools following the 1981 legislation, which mandated ordinary school placements for pupils with SEN, subject to various conditions (Black and Norwich 2014). This trend has been framed in terms of social inclusion and the inclusive education, often seen as an international movement (Tomlinson 2015). However, the reduction in the proportion of all pupils with significant SEN in English special schools began to flatten out in the early 2000s. Then, from 2006 the proportion going to special schools started to increase and continues in this upward trend since then (Ofsted 2016).

Alongside these changes a National Curriculum with national assessment arrangements was introduced (Barker 2008), on the one hand, and English schools became more autonomous from local authorities, on the other (National Archives, 2021). Schools policy was driven by a greater emphasis on raising academic standards through the national curriculum and assessment changes and the use of market-type principles for greater school competition and more parental school choice. Since 2010 changes to the curriculum and assessment have led to a tighter and more rigorous model of knowledge (Steers 2014) and further school diversity with the introduction of academies and free schools, as independent state funded schools.

The focus on parents' special school choice will give some insights into the two key policy orientations in England; i. the extent to which and bases for parents believing that separate or mainstream-based provision is suitable for their children's SEN (inclusive education) and ii. how they experience the choices available to them (school choice and school market).

Context: English system and practices

The legislative system involves the parents in the special school decision-making process as a key stakeholder. Parents interact with professionals, both teachers and professionals involved in the statutory assessment process (educational psychologists, advisory teachers, health professionals, etc.) when local authorities decide or not to issue an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP; a legally binding document) for the child. When parents and professionals disagree about the child's needs, disagreements can be resolved informally, lead to mediation or go to formal SEND tribunals. The issuing of an EHC Plan is not the same as a special school placement, as many pupils with Plans are in ordinary school. It could be that a child has a Plan in the ordinary school and over time comes to go to a special school, in which case the Plan would be revised to reflect this changed placement.

Special schools in England before the Academies Act (2010) were predominantly managed by local education authorities) with some non-maintained (charities) and some independent (private organisations). Academies were either existing schools that were encouraged to convert to self-governing academies (converter academies) or were required because of poor performance to become an academy under the control of a sponsor organisation (sponsored academies). In addition, Free schools were new schools set up as academies under the initiative of parents, voluntary organisations or

religious groups. Since 2010 there has been a growth of Academy and Free School special schools alongside pre-existing special schools. Academisation represents a 'top-down' rather than a 'bottom up' version of school choice (Dixon and Humble 2019), in which the Government inserts elements of markets into state education, rather than markets arising from the spontaneous actions of entrepreneurs. It is also important to note that parental involvement in decision-making about their child's SEN provision goes back to the 1980s, well before the explicit focus on market policies of parent choice and provision diversity.

Previous research on parental choice and experiences

This brief review is based on the search of education research databases (e.g. ERC) for international sources related to parental perspectives/choice about special schools/provision. Jenkinson (1998) studied the motives of Australian parents with children with disabilities in mainstream or special schools. Parents of those in special schools valued smaller class sizes, better teacher qualifications and independent living programmes more than parents of children in the mainstream. Conversely, parents of children in mainstream valued academic skills and attendance at the school of the child's siblings and friends. Bagley, Woods and Woods (2001) illustrated how for many UK parents of children with SEN secondary school selection was about their child's needs and how schools meet these needs. Parental priorities were the school's caring approach to pupils, their child's happiness and the school's proximity. Other studies have also indicated that the severity of the child's disability affected parents' perceptions of the suitability of ordinary schools and classrooms (Byrne 2013).

There are different parental positions in Runswick-Cole's (2008) analysis: i. parents who accept nothing but mainstream schooling for their children; ii. those committed to mainstream schooling, but later change their minds and iii. those who want special schools and do not consider them mainstream. However, those accepting nothing but mainstream can become parents who, though still committed to the mainstream, will contemplate a special school. Those committed to special schools were found by Runswick–Cole to focus on their child's impairment and the need for specialist teaching and care as only available in specialised settings.

Studies indicate that parents' negative experience of primary schooling may incline them to prefer special schools when their child comes to secondary school age (Byrne 2013). Other studies point to how parents' placement choosing reflects others influences (e.g. teachers and advisory professionals) (Cole 2004; Runswick-Cole 2008). More recently, Mawene and Bal (2018) international reviews found that the most common factor for parents of children with disabilities was the availability of appropriate (specialist) education programmes to meet their child's needs. More recent Australian research on parental reasons to transfer from mainstream to special schools found these key reasons: child missing out on specialist teaching and resources, the difficulty of the work, lack of teacher aids, the need to provide input as a parent and missing out on learning life skills (Mann, Cuskelly, and Moni 2018). A small-scale Swedish study has also shown that parents of children with disabilities opt for a particular school (mainstream or special) based on their support systems, school flexibility and friendships for their child, while seeking information about the satisfaction of the school (Tah 2020). Parents also reported a lack of choice, inadequate information and support.

Byrne's (2013) international review showed that despite parents tending to favour their children having opportunities to learn alongside other children who did not have SEN, some had negative experiences in securing what they hoped for. Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2012) refer in a small-scale study to dilemmas of school choice for parents in terms of mainstream schools that were told not to cater for their children, with parents feeling they had no choice or having to struggle to support their choice. Runswick-Cole (2008) also refers to parental school choice in this area as involving dilemmas. Based on an international review of studies about parental perspectives on educational provision, Norwich (2013) concluded that there was some evidence of parents experiencing tensions over their children's educational provision, which were often experienced as dilemmas. From a similar perspective, in another smaller scale study of parents of children with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties, Male (1998) suggested that parents settled for separate provision rather than actively choosing it.

Factors bearing on parent choice

The last decade has been characterised by Government school policy in England to 'remove the bias towards inclusion' and to 'strengthen parental choice by improving the range and diversity of schools from which parents can choose' (Department for Education 2011, 5). This entailed expanding special school places, but with a shortage of state-funded special school places, local authorities had to fund a rising number of independent placements (National Audit Office. 2019: House of Commons Education Committee 2019). Although new state funded special school spending has been announced, these will be free special schools .

Whether parents have some choice over provision for their children with SEN has also been an issue. Mary Warnock, whose 1978 report underlies the UK's SEN system, referred some time ago to the absent or 'forced' nature of parent choice in Parliamentary evidence (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006, para 12). From a Norwegian perspective, Reindal (2010) suggested that the ineffectiveness of mainstream provision for children with complex needs results in a 'forced choice' favouring special schools. This is consistent with the conclusions of Mann, Cuskelly, and Moni (2018) that parental difficulties in the decision-making process are partly due to mainstream schools not being a 'real option' (191) for many parents.

Several factors can affect them making independent, informed decisions. Mann, Cuskelly, and Moni (2015) refer to 'selective information being provided by educators/professionals' (p. 1423), from analysis of Australian parents that showed that many felt that they were not supported. Mawene and Bal (2018) make the related point that some parents do not have the capacity to explore and choose among the many options of available schools (p. 326). UK studies also show that parents of children with SEN face a limited choice of school and do not receive enough help during the selection process (Parsons, Lewis, and Ellins 2009). However, a large-scale English research study (Department for Education 2017) showed that a majority of parents of children with SEN (82%) reported that the staff they were dealing with were knowledgeable, with a majority of parents (74%) also reporting that different services worked together to make the EHC plan. Yet, under half of the parents felt

that communication about the child or young person's EHCP was clear (most or all of the time) throughout the process. This latter finding is linked to other studies showing some professional pressure on parents and parental difficulties in accessing information (Mann, Cuskelly, and Moni 2015; Parsons, Lewis, and Ellins 2009).

Theoretical perspectives, research aims and questions

The introduction and literature review point to two related theoretical areas about which this study can provide useful evidence: i. choice and markets and ii. parental dilemmas about SEN and inclusive education. Tah (2019) identifies two perspectives on markets and choices relevant to SEN: the market affirmative perspective and the market-critical one. In the former, market forces lead to improved quality (service delivery, efficiency) with a competitive private sector leading to responsive schools meeting the needs of students and parents. The incentive to satisfy the needs of students and parents, means that resources will move from unresponsive to responsive schools, with unresponsive schools changing or closing. From a market-critical perspective, markets lead to an unfair and unjust outcomes for some learners. There will be systematic exclusion of certain groups of students in the education market as not all schools will accept the children when the parents/children choose the school. The other theoretical perspective – parental dilemmas about SEN – has been theorised in terms of 'dilemmas of difference' (Minow 1990). This assumes that parents experience tensions over treating their child differently by choosing a separate special school with the risk of stigma, on the one hand, and on the other, of treating their child as the same by choosing a mainstream school with the risk of not getting additional and learner-centred teaching.

The overall aim of this research was to investigate the views of parents of pupils in special schools in the South West of England about their reasons for special schools and alternatives considered, their concepts of inclusive education, the kind of choice they experienced and their feeling well-informed and listened to.

Alternatives considered and reasons for special school

1. Were alternative forms of education considered during the selection process including mainstream schools with support?
2. Why did parents choose a special school?

Concepts of inclusive education

3. What did parents consider high-quality inclusive education to be for their child?

Kinds of choice

4. To what extent did parents feel that: i. they had a 'real choice' of schools (i.e. more than one option that was good enough) and ii. experience a dilemma concerning school choice?

Feeling well-informed and listened to

5. Did parents feel well-informed in their decision and supported by professionals?
6. How were parents' views and preferences listened to and taken into consideration?

Methods

Participants and sampling

This survey was for parents of children who had been attending special school for at least 12 months. This timeframe was selected so that any placement issues would have been resolved. The initial sampling strategy was through direct contact with special schools within the three south-west English local authorities, representing a range of rural, semi-rural and urban areas. Headteachers from all listed special schools in these authorities were contacted by email, inviting them to discuss the project by phone/skype. Initially, 10 special schools were contacted with 6 agreeing to send questionnaires to parents. A second strategy was then applied to contact local groups and associations via social media in order to access a parent sample directly, e.g. local Parent Carer Forums, local advice/support services and groups.

Questionnaire design and analysis

The questions were formulated to reflect the above research questions, drawn from the Bagley et al (2001) questionnaire, and included closed- and open-ended questions. Background additional information was also collected: child's age, gender, school name, type of placement (residential or day) date started and previous school attended, main areas of SEN (including any diagnoses). Response formats included selecting from response options and 6-point rating scales (with descriptors, not at all to very much).

The questionnaire in its online format was piloted to ensure its clarity with three parents of children with additional needs. Their feedback was used to revise the questionnaire (see Note 1). Ethical clearance was given by the University Ethics Committee, with parents giving informed consent at the start of the questionnaire. The numerical data were analysed descriptively and through cross-tabulation using SPSS. Textual responses and comments were content analysed.

Findings

Demographic information

Fifty-seven parents completed the questionnaire, with their children having a mean age of 12.5 years (ranging from 5 to 20 years) with 77% male. Their children had been attending the special school for about five school years (mean years) with 47.4% starting their school within the last 3 years. All but two children had a day placement, with one in a residential and the other having a part-time placement. Almost all had previously been in a mainstream school or setting.

Participants indicated their child's additional needs and these were categorised according to the four-broad Codes of Practice areas of SEN (Department for Education 2015). Most children's SEN were identified in terms of two areas, with fewer identified in one or three areas. The most commonly reported area of need was cognition and learning (e.g. global delay, profound and severe learning difficulties; 44/57: 77.2%) followed by

communication and interaction (e.g. ASD, ASD high functioning: 42/57; 73.7%), sensory and physical (e.g. deafblind, cerebral palsy; 33/.57; 57.9%) and social, emotional and mental health (e.g. anxiety disorder; 12/57; 21.0%).

Why did parents choose special school

Analysis shows that the top three factors influencing their decision were the 'school atmosphere' (n = 34/57; 59.6%), 'school's caring approach to pupils' (33/57; 57.9%) and 'size of the classes' (26/57; 45.6%). The responses broadly suggest parents see the school itself and its staff as important factors in their decision-making. By contrast, factors about the standards of education and curriculum were not rated as highly by parents. No participants indicated that exam results or siblings currently attending the school influenced their decision. (See note 2 for the chart of these results).

Of the 20% of the parents giving qualitative responses, these reflected the school 'understanding the child's needs and/or conditions', the 'failure of mainstream school', the 'lack of choice' and 'facilities' and being 'recommended by others'.

Mainstream school could have been appropriate for their child with support

Almost half of the parents (28/57; 49.1%) did not believe that 'with the right level of support, a mainstream setting could have been appropriate'. However, slightly more (29/57) indicated that mainstream education could have been appropriate to some degree (ratings of 1–5, on the 0–5 scale). Most of those who considered that mainstream would have been appropriate with support (18/29) gave ratings in the higher ranges (3–5).

Parental reasons for their positions showed that very few (4) gave specific reasons for why mainstream schools could have been appropriate (e.g. positive previous experience and high-quality mainstream provision available). Most of the reasons were about why mainstream school was not appropriate. Here there were two key categories: the 'level of need/support required', 'previous negative experience of mainstream school', 'class size/environment', 'lack of training' and issues with 'funding' and 'curriculum/learning'.

Alternative forms of education considered during the selection process

The most frequent parent response was to not consider alternatives to special school (21/57; 36.8%). However, the remaining parents – a majority- (36/57: 63.2%) considered a range of alternatives to special school; either a mainstream school with or without a resource base (for both 15/57; 26.3%), home education (11/57;19.3%) split placement (10.57; 17.4%) or co-located special school (2/57; 3.5% – the latter had the lowest frequency). For the 12/57 (21%) who gave qualitative responses, parents' comments were about the 'failure of mainstream school'.

What parents consider high-quality inclusive education for their children

Over half the participants considered high-quality inclusive education provision meant a sense of belonging to class and school and social acceptance by peers, on the one hand, and a more individualised curriculum, on the other. The cross-tab analysis showed a high

level of selecting all three of these criteria (over 40/57; 70% selected 2 or more of them). The next most frequent selection (21/57: 37%) was special school provision only, implying as further crosstabulations showed, that for many parents the belonging, social acceptance and Individualised curriculum were found only in special schools.

By contrast, quality inclusive education less frequently meant a resource base/specialist unit attached to mainstream school (16/57; 28%), joint placement (12/57; 21%), co-located schools (11/57; 19%), a shared curriculum (same as others in child's class; 6/57; 10.5%) or mainstream provision only (5/57; 8.8%) (See note 2 for the chart of these results).

Almost 20% (11/57) gave qualitative responses too. Content analysis identified inclusive education as meaning – 'inclusion as meeting social needs' (e.g. 'being accepted for who he is') and 'inclusion as meeting academic needs' (e.g. 'relevant to the child in terms of needs and useful skills and knowledge base for them').

A 'real choice' of schools

About two-thirds of parents (39/57) did not feel that they had a 'real choice' between special school provision and other types of provision (more than one option that was good enough). Most of those reporting that they did not have a 'real choice' (34/39; 87.1%) gave reasons. These were that: 'mainstream/other provision was inappropriate' (e.g. 'due to his very complex needs I do not believe mainstream provision was an option to us'), lack of 'choice of schools' (e.g. 'I felt there was reluctance in giving me choices'), the 'decision was not theirs' (e.g. 'we were 'pushed' towards a special school placement by being told that there was no other option for our child') and 'travel/location as impediment to real choice'.

Parents also indicated the number of schools from which they had to choose. Where more than one number was reported, the highest was selected for analysis. Parents mostly had n one school to choose from (24/55; 43.6%), with most (31/55; 56.4%) having 2 or more schools to choose from. A cross-tabulation between whether parents felt that they had a real choice (yes/no) and the number of schools to choose from (1 versus 2 or more) showed a statistically significant association (Chi-squared = 6.8, n= 55, p = .009). Most of those who felt that they had a 'real choice' (14/17; 82%) reported having 2 or more schools to choose from. A small majority of those who felt that they had no 'real choice' reported having 1 school to choose from (21/38: 55.3%). Yet, about 17/38% or 44.7% of those who felt they had no 'real choice' reported having 2 or more schools to choose between.

Parents experience a dilemma concerning school choice

A large minority (22/57; 38.6%) of parents reported experiencing a 'hard choice when choosing appropriate provision' for they're your child, compared to the 35/57% or 61.4% who did not. The reasons for experiencing a 'hard choice' were mostly about 'no choice or limited choice' (e.g. 'I didn't believe there was a good enough school in our area and still don't but had to go for the best of what there was to offer'). Other reasons were about 'fighting to get provision', having a 'sense of urgency to find a school place' and having to 'accept difference' within their child (e.g. 'It was a very emotive process. There is a huge lack of understanding of how hard this is for parents).

A cross-tabulation analysis of the variables 'hard choice' (yes/no) and 'mainstream school could be appropriate' (rating ranges of 0–2 taken as 'broadly inappropriate'/3-5 as 'broadly appropriate') showed a significant relationship ($x^2 = 4.71$, df = 1, p = 0.03). This shows that most people not experiencing a 'hard choice' (27/34; 79.4%) saw mainstream school as 'broadly inappropriate'. This implies that parents' choices may have been considered as 'easier' when mainstream school was not considered to be an option for them. Of those who experienced a 'hard choice', about a half saw mainstream school as broadly appropriate (11/23; 47.8%), but slightly more parents who saw mainstream as broadly inappropriate (12/23; 52.2%) still experienced a 'hard choice'.

A cross-tabulation analysis of whether parents had a 'real choice' by whether they experienced a 'hard choice' was also significant ($x^2 = 6.1$, df = 1, p = .013). This showed that for those who experienced a 'hard choice' about 3 times as many experienced no 'real choice' compared to having experienced a 'real choice' (20/23; 51% to 3/23; 17%). For those who experienced no 'hard choice' slightly more reported having experienced no 'real choice' (19/34; 55.9%) than a 'real choice' (15/34; 44.1%).

Parents well-informed in their decision and supported by professionals

Most parents reported being well-informed, with 44/57% or 77.2% giving higher ratings (3–5 on 0–5 scale) and a mean response 3.25 (*SD* = 1.89). Only 12% reported not being well-informed at all (7 parents). Parents' explanation for being well-informed included being 'well-advised' by external professionals and by school staff. Many parents also 'carried out their own research/made their own decision'. Comments by the seven parents who were not well-informed included not being supported and in one case finding out that 'the information I had been given was completely wrong'

Most parents reported that they were very well-supported by professionals, with (39/56; 69%) giving the higher ratings (3–5 on 0–5 scale) and the mean response 3.25 (*SD* = 1.89). Only 16% reported not being supported by professionals (9 parents), but when taken with other lower ratings (1–2), 17/56% or 30.4% of the parents reported lower professional support. Explanations by these parents included a 'lack of any professional help' and when helped, the 'input has been very poor' and some professionals expecting parents to be 'told' rather than advised'. For parents who reported being well-supported, their a comment were about support from external professionals (e.g. psychologists), local authorities and support groups.

Correlational analysis of parental ratings on being well-informed in their decisions and well-supported by professionals showed a moderate coefficient (Spearman rho = 0.68, $p < 0.01$). There was a tendency for parents who reported being well-informed in their decisions also reported being well-supported.

Parents' views about their child facilitated and taken into consideration

Most parents reported that their views about their child were facilitated with 40/56% or 71.4% giving ratings between 3 and 5 (3–5 on 0–5 scale). However, 12/56 parents or 21.4% of the parents reported that their views were not at all facilitated. Those who felt that the expression of their views were well facilitated mentioned this being done by staff in mainstream and special school and by professional advisors. Parents not feeling that their

views were facilitated commented about that the 'lack of availability of placements/ choice of schools' impacted on the expression of views. Several parents also mentioned themes about 'fight/tribunal' and 'local authority not helpful'. Several parents also referred to a 'consensus' between school staff and professionals as a factor that supported and influenced parent decision-making.

Most parents reported that their views and preferences were listened to and taken into consideration, with 40/55% or 72.7% giving ratings between 3 and 5 (3–5 on 0–5 scales). However, 11/55% or 20% of the parents reported that their views and preferences were not listened to and taken into consideration at all. Many of the parents' comments were only in general terms. While only two parents mentioned their choice had been agreed, several others referred to there being a 'lack of choice' and this affected their preferences being listened to and taken into consideration.

Correlational analysis of parental ratings of the expression of their views being facilitated with their ratings for their views and preferences listened to/taken into consideration showed a very high coefficient (Spearman rho = 0.92, $p < 0.01$). There was a strong tendency for parents who felt that the expression of their views was facilitated also reporting that their views and preferences were listened to and taken into consideration.

Securing preferred school choice

Most parents reported that it was easy to get their preferred school choice once a decision was made, with 40/56% or 71.4% giving responses between-3-5 (3–5 on 0–5 scales). However, while 10/56% or 17.8% reported it was not easy at all, when taken with other lower ratings (0–2), a notable minority (18/56; 32.1%) of parents reported that it was not easy to get their preferred school choice. For those who had their preferred choices, comments included that this had been easy, that they were happy about this and professionals had been supportive. For those with low ratings for getting their preferred choices, some mentioned a 'lack of choice and/or lack of spaces' and others having a long wait to hear the outcome of their application.

Improving the system of parental choice for schools

Just over three-quarters of parents (43/55; 76.4%) said that there were ways to improve the system of parental choice of schools. Of the large majority who gave comments, the most common were about: having more school options available, greater availability of information/awareness of options and greater professional support and advice and/or expertise.

Discussion and conclusions

The results show that for the parents in this study the school's atmosphere, its caring approach to pupils and class size were the most-mentioned factors in choosing special schools. By contrast, factors like standards of education, examination results and siblings at school were not key factors. This shows a continuity of parental perspectives across two decades and national settings (Jenkinson 1998; Bagley, Woods and Woods, 2001; Byrne 2013; Tah 2020).

However, the sample was roughly split over the appropriateness of mainstream provision with the 'right level of support'. Just under half did not believe this at all, with reasons which were about the insufficient levels of support and funding required, lack of staff training and previous negative experiences in mainstream schools. These reasons are consistent with the conclusions of the recent Australian study by Mann, Cuskelly, and Moni (2018). The other half did believe to some extent that with the 'right level of support' mainstream provision could have been appropriate. Reasons given for this range of views were about previous positive experiences of mainstream schools and that high-quality mainstream provision could have been available. These differences are connected with parental differences identified by Runswick-Cole (2008) between i. a nothing but mainstream, ii. committed to the mainstream but later changed and iii. nothing but special school positions. It is notable that more parents did not consider an alternative to special schools than did consider an alternative, such as a co-located special school, split placement, mainstream school with specialist unit or with specialist support (no unit) or home education. This might be because in the areas covered in the survey there were fewer alternatives to special schools considered appropriate by these parents.

This study went beyond previous studies in showing how special school choice is linked with parental views about inclusive education. The dominant concept of inclusive education, as embodied in UN conventions and guidelines (UNESCO 2017) is of children with SEN and disabilities welcomed and accepted in mainstream/ordinary schools, what Warnock calls 'all under the same roof' (Warnock and Norwich 2010). The concept of inclusive education was promoted by Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD: UNICEF 2017). Assumes that an 'inclusive education system is one that accommodates all students whatever their abilities or requirements and at all levels' (page 3). This means that 'placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without these adaptations does not constitute inclusion' (page 3). For the parents in this study, whose children were at special schools, by contrast, inclusive education mostly meant a sense of belonging to class and school, social acceptance and a more individualised curriculum. For a majority of parents these features of inclusive education were connected with each other. What characterises this perspective is that it does not refer to placement, where provision is made. The split shown in responses to the question of whether mainstream school was appropriate or not with the 'right level of support', which is about the placement aspect, was also shown in response to this question. For a large minority of these parents the above three key features (belonging, social acceptance and individualised curriculum) were associated only with special schools and not mainstream schools. However, for a smaller minority inclusive education was associated with resource/special units in ordinary schools, spending most time in ordinary classes, joint special mainstream school placement or special school co-located with mainstream school.

This study also showed that the majority of these parents believed that they were well-informed when making decisions, which they explained in terms of being well advised and doing their research on provision. A slightly lower proportion believed they were well-supported by professionals, this showing in higher proportions reporting lower professional support than being well-informed. Those reporting being less well supported referred to a lack of any support or poor quality input. A similar pattern of positions was found for parents believing that their views about their children were

facilitated and taken into account, on the one hand, and their preferences listened to and taken into consideration, on the other. Parents' consistency on these aspects reflected a majority feeling about being facilitated and listened to, but a notable minority not feeling so. For this minority they referred to the non-availability of placements, a lack of choice, unhelpful local authorities and having to fight and use tribunals. The findings are consistent with those of a national government funded study of English parents' experiences of EHC Plans (Adams et al. 2017). Two-thirds of parents and young people in the study reported being informed about the information, advice and support available. A majority of parents also agreed that their wishes and opinions were included in the EHC plans. In a parallel national study of parent disagreement about EHC plans (Cullen et al. 2017), parental interviews illustrated several cases of disagreement. This involved parental perceptions of disrespect, injustice, 'even instances described as 'cruelty' to the child concerned' (page 25). These experiences led to distrust, which made disagreement more likely.

Despite these majority beliefs about being informed, advised and supported, most parents did not believe that they had a 'real choice' of schools because there was a lack of options relevant to their child's needs. This included mainstream school provision not being an option and feeling pushed towards special schools with location and travel also being factors. This was evident in the finding that those who felt they had a 'real choice' tending to report having more schools to choose from than those who felt they did not have a 'real choice'. This is consistent with the market-critical position of parental choice and school markets, which draws attention to supply side limits, especially for children with significant SEN (Tah 2019).

By contrast, only a large minority of parents (40%) reported experiencing a 'hard choice' when choosing an appropriate provision. Reasons for this were about having no or a limited choice of settings and fighting to get appropriate provision. In addition, some parents referred to the emotional difficulty of accepting that their child was different from other children. Analysis also indicated that those who did not experience a 'hard choice' saw mainstream provision as inappropriate, on the one hand and that they had no 'real choice', on the other. This seems to reflect few or no options other than a special school for these parents. So, these findings point to when parents might not experience 'dilemmas of difference', as discussed above, that is, when only a special school is appropriate or they are offered no relevant mainstream options. Also, three-quarters of the parents in this study believed that the system of parent choice could be improved by having more school options with greater availability of professional support and advice and information about these options. Having more mainstream options for these parents relate to the recent increases in English special school placements.

The sample represented a self-selected group of parents many of whose children had significant-learning difficulties and disabilities. This may have a bearing on the beliefs and experiences reported here. There is scope for a larger scale and more nationally representative sample to examine these issues. However, this study was informed by previous survey methods and the online questionnaire had been piloted. Though based only on anonymous remote self-reporting, the results are borne out by the follow-up in-depth interviews of some participating parents (not reportable here; see Satherley 2020). There is scope, too, for extending this kind of study to parents of children with significant SEN who did secure mainstream provision for their children. Though this is a small-scale study based in one

English region, the results do contribute to knowledge and understanding of key aspects of the decision-making process in choosing a special school for their children. In doing so, it points out the limitations of the choice-diversity model developed over the last few decades in England, consistent with the market-critical perspective. It also illustrates the distinctive parental perspectives on schooling and inclusive education and the dilemmas they experience in choosing provision for their children in this policy and organisational context.

Notes

Note 1: Contact the second author for details of the questionnaire content

Note 2: link to figures relevant to this section:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F4NI0KPWZ8rUrrd3wPsTh994iC9tkZslVqQz_pHdvv4/edit?usp=sharing

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