

**Parents' perceptions and experiences of the
decision making process when choosing secondary
school placement for children with statements of
special educational needs: An interpretative
phenomenological analysis**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the
degree of Doctor of Applied Educational Psychology

October 2016

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the parents for taking part in this research, for giving up their time and for sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Many thanks also go to my research supervisor, Neil Rylie, and placement supervisor, Nick Durbin, for their guidance throughout the process. I would also like to thank all of the staff at the EP Service where I have been on placement for supporting my research and assisting in the recruitment of participants. In addition, thank you to the Local Authority SEN team for supporting the project.

A special thanks to all of my family, especially my parents, Jean and John Booth, and husband-to-be, Benjamin Kay, for all of their patience, reassurance and support throughout the doctorate course. Also to my dear friend, Laura Radcliffe, for continuous encouragement and sharing her passion for qualitative research.

Abstract

Government legislation has promoted parental rights when choosing educational provision for children with statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN) over the past two decades (Department for Education, [DfE], 1994, 2014) and acknowledges the importance of this decision to parents (DfE, 2011). A review of relevant literature suggested that implementation of such reforms may not be straight forward for parents due to the political and economic dynamics within the wider education system (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Norwich, 2014). A review of research literature on parents' perceptions and experiences of the decision making process suggested that parents are significantly influenced by information available and their interactions with others, including the education providers and local authorities, through a process of decision making which they described as a 'struggle' and a 'fight' (Jessen, 2012; Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Lalvani, 2012). Therefore, the current study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of parents' experiences and perceptions of the decision making process when choosing secondary school for their child with a statement for SEN within a local authority in England. Six semi-structured interviews with eight parents, who had recently been through the process, were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the methodological approach. Master themes emerged, which highlighted the influence of emotional reactions when being shown round by staff in prospective secondary schools and the inconsistency of communication with professionals experienced by different parents. Implications are discussed for supporting parents in feeling that they are able to make more informed decisions and in achieving a more consistent approach across professionals to support a more positive experience for parents.

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1. Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Context and Rationale

Government legislation promotes parental rights when choosing educational provision for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DfE, 1994, 2011) and, despite a drive for inclusion over the last 30 years, recent government legislation states an aim to provide parents with a 'clear' and 'real' choice of schools when making what is described as 'one of the most significant decisions' a parent has to make for their child (Pp. 51, DfE, 2011). Parents have a right to request any maintained school or any form of academy or free school (mainstream or special), non-maintained school or independent school (where they are approved by the Secretary of State) (DfE, 2015). However, in a school market where schools have increasing autonomy and accountability through academic outcomes, it is suggested that the decision making and school allocation process may be complex for parents of children with SEN (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014).

Interest in supporting parental voice stemmed from working closely with parents of children with SEN in several roles, including working with parents of children with autism, as a class teacher and as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Listening to and promoting parents' views, was felt to be particularly important when working in a school where many parents and children spoke English as an additional language. These parents were often labelled as being disengaged or 'hard to reach' (Crozier and Davies, 2007). This led to master's degree research which explored parental involvement in learning at home from the perspective of Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents through gaining their perceptions of a range of home learning activities.

Personal experience of parents choosing a secondary school for their child with SEN was first encountered when working as a Year 5 class teacher in a different authority to the current study. This experience highlighted the dilemma that parents face when trying to choose the best setting to support their child's development. Experience from a different perspective was gained whilst working as a Trainee Educational Psychologist in the Local Authority where the

current study took place. This consisted of attending Year 5 annual reviews for children with statements of SEN and gathering information to inform the Local Authority SEN team of the child's needs and type of support which would be appropriate to promote their development. Through experience of attending several of these reviews with parents, it appeared that the process can be complex and highly emotive for parents of children with statements of SEN, with different information being provided from different sources at each review attended.

Within the Local Authority where the current study took place, the full range of schools is available as described in the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015), with maintained secondary schools, academies, free school and non-maintained or independent schools with a range of mainstream, mainstream with attached resourced provisions and special schools. Therefore, according to government legislation, parents have a right to request any of these schools when choosing a secondary school placement for their child with a statement of SEN.

According to a casework officer in the Local Authority SEN team (LA SEN team) where the current study took place, they support this process by identifying all children with statements or EHC plans when they are at the beginning of Year 5 and send a letter to the child's parents informing them that the Year 5 change of phase annual review is particularly important, suggesting that they speak to their school's SENCo for advice about their child's change of placement and they also enclose a booklet entitled 'Choosing a school', which provides information on visiting schools and possible questions to ask. They then expect the parents to state which school they would like their child to go to by the 30th November in the year that their child is in Year 6. If the parents have requested a place in their local mainstream school, the LA SEN team will consult with the requested school to make sure that they feel they can meet the child's needs by the 1st February when they are in Year 6.

If the parent has requested anything other than local mainstream school, then the request is passed onto senior casework officers and managers within the LA SEN team, who then contact the Educational Psychology service asking for

an EP to provide a report outlining the child's current special educational needs. They then gather all of the placement requests together and consult with the requested school settings, deciding placements based on demand and needs. They endeavour to inform parents if their child has a place in their requested school by the 15th February in the year when they are in Year 6. If the child is not offered a place in the school the parents requested, then they have the right to appeal the decision or request a different school. Although the LA SEN team felt that they have a clear set of procedures to support the process, they were not clear how this process was experienced from the parents' perspective.

The significance of the decision for parents is recognised by the EP service within the LA where the current research was carried out, with attendance at change of phase annual reviews and any subsequent casework and report writing, forming part of the increasingly limited core work offered by the EP service. Therefore, it was felt important by the EP service and LA SEN team to understand what is important to parents when making a decision and what their experiences of the process are like in order to play an effective role in supporting them through the process. To support this, the aim of the current study was to explore parents' experiences and perceptions of the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for their child with a statement or EHC plan for SEN.

The rationale for the current research was, therefore, threefold. Firstly, the DfE (2011) recognised that choosing a school for a child with SEN is one of the most significant decisions a parent has to make and recent legislation has promoted parents' rights and choice within the process of deciding school placement. However, within the wider socio-political climate of school choice markets, it is suggested this could be a contentious and complex process for parents and worth exploring further from the perspective of parents who have lived experience of this decision making process.

Secondly, from personal experience of attending meetings with parents in the role of a class teacher and a trainee EP, it was felt that parents were provided

with inconsistent information which may have made their decision making confusing and difficult. This reinforced the need to explore this from a parent's perspective, in order to develop a more supportive process.

Thirdly, further impetus for this research came from the local authority context where the study took place. The LA SEN team and the EP service value the importance of this decision for parents and have put provision in place to support parents through the process. However, how this is perceived by parents is not clear and research into this would ensure that support is provided in an effective way.

1.2 Overview of thesis

The literature review chapter of the study focuses on the social political context in more depth and a consideration of theoretical models from decision making theory to assist with interpretation of how emotions and interactions during decision making may impact on parents' perceptions and experiences. This is followed by a systematic review of the literature which has previously been carried out around how parents' experience the school choice process. This focuses on parents choosing placement for children with SEN at all ages due to the lack of research around the primary to secondary transition. A critique of research to date identifies a lack of in depth exploration of parents' experiences and perceptions, particularly in the context of England, and states a clear rationale for the research question explored in this study.

The methodology includes a discussion of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the research which leads to a rationale for the chosen methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and a detailed description of the procedures, ethical considerations and analysis, including consideration of quality and validity throughout the study. In order to gain a deeper understanding of experiences of the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for children with SEN from a parent's perspective, semi-structured interviews were carried out with parents who had recently experienced the process. Transcripts were then analysed using

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. IPA sits with individual experiences, but acknowledges that experiences do not occur in isolation and that they take place within a social context (Smith, 2011). Smith (2011) states that the individual and experiential should be the central focus of IPA studies, but that it is valuable to place this within the social and political context. Therefore, the wider socio-political context was considered through a review of literature in chapter 2. Smith (2011) also states that after a piece of IPA analysis is carried out it is incumbent on the researcher to relate it to the extent literature, which can include engaging in dialogue with theories and psychological models to make sense of the participants' stories. Therefore, theoretical models of decision making, which considered influences on people's decision making experiences, were explored in order to assist the interpretation and sense making of parents' thoughts and feelings during their experience of decision making.

The analysis chapter provides a detailed description of the themes which emerged through IPA, with illustrative verbatim quotes from interviews with parents in order to remain close to the parents own interpretation of their lived experiences.

The discussion continues the hermeneutic interpretative process and focuses on a deeper interpretation of the researcher making meaning of the parents' interpretations. The themes identified in the analysis are discussed in turn in relation to the research question and are related to the wider social context and theoretical models to aid the researcher's interpretation. From interpretation, implications for practice and further research are suggested. Considerations of the limitations of the research are also discussed.

1.3 Abbreviations

ASD	Autistic Spectrum Difficulties
CWO	Casework officer (LA SEN team)
DfE	Department for Education
EHC plan	Education, Health and Care plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
LA SEN team	Local Authority Special Educational Needs team
SALT	Speech and Language Therapy
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEN CoP	Special Educational Needs Code of Practice
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs

All names have been changed throughout the thesis. Pseudonyms are used for parents and children. All other person names, school names and geographical identifiers have been removed or substituted with a random initial.

2. Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following provides a review of the literature related to the topic of parental experiences of decision making in regard to educational placement for children with Special Education Needs (SEN) when choosing a secondary school placement. It outlines areas and themes of key importance.

Firstly, there is a consideration of legislation and political context focusing on the impact of a governmental drive for increased choice for parents of children with SEN, inclusive schooling and school choice markets in an accountability system of academic achievement. Literature and policy suggested that parents have a key decision to make in deciding where their child with a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) attends. Therefore, it was felt important to consider what parents' experiences and perceptions are of the decision making process for choosing school placement for children with a Statement of SEN.

Theoretical models of decision making, which focus on the role of emotions and social interactions, are considered in order to assist with interpretation of parents' thoughts and feelings during their experience of the decision making process. This is followed by a systematic element of the literature review, in which studies are selected and reviewed according to detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a clear account of the search strategy is provided in relation to the identified research question. Themes are identified through the analysis of the included studies.

Finally, the themes and reviewed literature is drawn together in describing the rationale for the current study and in presenting the subsequent research questions.

2.2 Legislation and Government Policy

2.2.1 Parent choice and inclusion

The 1981 Education Act introduced the requirement for Local Authorities (LAs) to identify and assess pupils who may require additional support and to issue a

statement, a legal guarantee of provision, to these children ensuring suitable provision and resources for them. When issuing a statement, a school could be 'named' as being appropriate for educating the child. The Education Act required LAs in issuing a statement to take into account parent wishes when naming a school and, wherever possible, to select a mainstream school as opposed to a special school. In this legislation, LAs need only 'take account' of the wishes of the child's parents. However, the LA made the decision of where a child would be educated. The Education Act did allow parents to appeal against decisions made about their child's special needs to the Local Authority and the Secretary of State, if they did not agree with the provisions in the statement or the 'named' school.

By 1994, the DfE published the 'Special educational needs guide for parents', which outlined the rights of parents with statemented children,

'The LEA must agree with your (school) preference as long as:

- The school you choose is suitable for your child's age, ability and special educational needs
- Your child's presence there will not affect the efficient education of other children at the school
- Placing your child in the school will be an efficient use of resources.'

(Pp. 24-25, DfE, 1994)

This was intended to give more weight to parental preferences. However, the LA had the final decision, which could then be appealed by parents.

Although worded differently, the guidance on rights of parents in choosing school placement for children with a Statement of SEN or EHC plan have remained the same for 20 years, with the most recent version of the *Special educational needs and disability: a guide for parents and carers* (DfE, 2014) stating:

'The local authority must comply with your preference and name the school or college in the EHC plan unless provision there is considered to not meet their needs, not represent good value for money or would impact negatively on the education of others.' (Pp.31, DfE, 2014).

The Warnock report (DES, 1978) suggested that special education should 'wherever possible' occur within mainstream settings. This marked a key policy shift with an expectation that special education provision should be available in mainstream schools, not special schools, for the first time (Runswick-Cole, 2011). These recommendations informed the Education Act 1981 and resulted in a significant shift in attitudes towards inclusion. The inclusion agenda was promoted for 30 years and was supported by both Conservative and Labour governments. As Hodgkinson (2010) notes, 'The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed the evolution of inclusive practices being supported by a raft of governmental policies, initiatives and legislation.' (Pp62, Hodgkinson, 2010). The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 amendment to the 1996 Education Act reinforced the government's commitment to the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools stating that a child with a statement of SEN must be educated in a mainstream school unless it is incompatible with the wishes of parents or provision of efficient education for others. This fed into the 2001 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice which clearly stated that the special educational needs of children would normally be met in mainstream settings.

However, in 2005, Warnock published a pamphlet, 'Special Educational Needs: a new look' in which she reflects upon what she considers to be the legacy of the 1978 committee's report. Warnock (2005) claims that a lack of clarity has emerged in relation to the concept of special educational needs, particularly that of statements, as well as in relation to the ideal of inclusion. The pamphlet expressed her concerns with the balance between special and mainstream school placements for children and young people with significant special educational needs. It was felt that many children's needs remained unmet in mainstream schools and suggested that children with special educational needs may feel more 'included' and have a greater sense of belonging within small specialist schools with statements possibly being reconsidered as 'passports' to special school education. Warnock (2005) proposed that evidence was needed to support this and that there should be a review of the policy of inclusion and the associated practice of issuing statements. Warnock's (2005) arguments resulted in considerable debate, including criticism for the

lack of consideration given to the opportunities for a social sense of belonging within mainstream schools (Norwich, 2010). However, there was agreement over the need for further research and evidence to inform government policy and reforms (Norwich, 2010; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). This led to a review by Ofsted in 2010 which concluded that 'no one model – such as special schools, full inclusion in mainstream setting, or specialist units co-located within mainstream settings worked better than any other.' (Pp. 3, Ofsted, 2010). Subsequently, the 2015 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice stated that a child's parent has a right to request any maintained school and any form of academy or free school (mainstream or special), non-maintained school or independent school (where they are approved by the Secretary of State). The emphasis on inclusion in mainstream schools has been removed, suggesting that the drive for inclusion of children with statements of SEN in mainstream settings is no longer being actively promoted in government legislation and parents have a right to choose any of the types of provision described above.

The Government green paper published in 2011 stated that they wanted to give parents more confidence in systems to support outcomes for children and young people through giving them more control. This would be achieved by providing parents with 'a clear choice of schools' (Pp. 51, DfE, 2011). They proposed to 'give parents a real choice of school, either a mainstream or special school' and 'remove the bias towards inclusion and proposed to strengthen parental choice by improving the range and diversity of schools from which parents can choose' (Pp. 5, DfE, 2011).

2.2.2 School accountability and school choice markets

Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014) state that despite the discourse around school choice for children with statements of SEN, including parents' rights to choose a school and to appeal the decision made by the LA, 'the implementation and practice of such reforms is neither assured nor simple' (Pp.117, Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014). A factor which appears to be important in contributing to the complexity of school choice may be the wider

educational system and political and economic dynamics (Norwich, 2014; Norwich and Eaton, 2015).

In the 1980's and 1990's the Department for Education set up an approach to education in line with market theories, giving choice to users (parents) of services in order to create a competitive school choice market and thus, increase standards (Bagley and Woods, 1998). In economic terms this would see schools as commodities and parents as consumers (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014). It has been suggested that the marketisation of schooling is intertwined with the standards agenda, which 'seeks to raise standards of attainment in school with the aim of improving workforce skill levels and national competitiveness in a globalised economy' (Pp.116, Runswick-Cole, 2011). Apple (2001) stated that schools were put into competition with each other for pupils and resources as their results were published and ranked in league tables. They were marked as a 'good school' in inspections based on their academic attainment. With this emphasis on academic outcomes and school accountability, Bagley and Woods (1998) found that school managers took their decisions based on an academic perspective and their views of what constituted a good school were framed in terms of examination results. They argued that this emphasis on academic outcomes could impact on children with SEN as they 'find themselves marginalised and devalued in a competitive environment driven by instrumentalist values antithetical to their needs, concerns and priorities' (Pp. 781, Bagley and Woods, 1998). Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi's (2014) economic analogy suggested that children might themselves become commodities with varying value to the school. If children place a high level of demand on teacher support and other resources, they will become unattractive clientele, with schools preferring to enrol children who will achieve high academic attainment without the same demand on resources (Evans and Lunt, 1994; Runswick-Cole, 2011).

This market oriented approach appeared to continue between 1998 and 2010 with Norwich and Eaton (2015) arguing that, despite many initiatives being developed around inclusion during this time, a higher level of importance was placed on the standards agenda to raise standards in schools. During this

time, there was also an increase in academies. Schools which do not meet Ofsted progression standards through performance testing can be at risk of losing status and being forced to become academies (Norwich, 2014). Although under central government funding, academies have more flexibility over curriculum, finance and teachers' conditions than maintained schools (Norwich, 2014). Norwich (2014) suggests that academies may use their greater flexibility to be less accepting of students with statements who apply to join the school. Through a fictional case study school, he suggested that schools may feel pressure in a system where accountability is through academic standards and may informally advise parents that the school was inappropriate for their child and to go to another school more suited to their child's needs. This highlights a dilemma between providing more choice and diversity to parents in a school market, and the schools exercising their greater independent control to influence their student intake, limiting school choice for children with SEN (Norwich, 2014). This could in fact narrow school choice options for parents unless the intake of children with SEN is closely monitored in academies and free schools. However, Norwich and Eaton (2015) state that there was little mention within the 2014 OFSTED framework for evaluating schools with regards to monitoring their admissions and exclusions of pupils with SEN/disabilities.

As the Green Paper, *'Support and Aspiration: A new approach to special educational need and disabilities'*, acknowledges, 'One of the single most significant decisions for parents is where they want their child to go to school.' (Pp. 51, DfE, 2011). However, it appears from government legislation and literature that there is a wider political context which might influence school choices available to parents. Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014) conclude that 'there is little doubt that the issue of school choice in the education market is a contentious and confusing one for many parents.' (Pp. 121, Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014) and several authors have suggested that within the context of school choice markets, children with statements of SEN may in fact become less desirable to schools (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Evans and Lunt, 1994; Runswick-Cole, 2011) and this may lead school staff to discourage parents from applying for their school (Norwich, 2014). Therefore, it appears

important to consider this topic from the point of view of the parents and to explore their experience and perceptions of the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for children with statements of SEN.

2.3 Theoretical models of decision making

Although the DfE (2011) proposed to strengthen parental choice by improving the range and diversity of schools from which they could choose, parents continue to make decisions within the constraints of the LA and the wider school choice market described above. Therefore, the decision is not made by parents in isolation but rather they are part of a social matrix. Cottone (2001) developed a social constructivist approach to ethical decision making within the context of counselling and argued that decisions cannot be located 'in' the individual or made within a social vacuum, but are always made in interaction with at least one other. A parent's experience of the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for children with statements of SEN would be likely to be influenced by their already established constructs of different schools and their child's SEN, based on previous social interactions, and their interactions during the process, such as discussions with staff in prospective secondary schools, LA professionals and other parents.

There is a wealth of literature on decision making theory. Much of this derives from economics and cognitive psychology and focuses more on how an individual makes an optimal decision rather than focusing on people's experiences and perceptions during decision making. However, some theoretical models derived from decision making theory, particularly those which focus on the role of emotions and social interactions, may be able to assist with the interpretation and understanding of parents' thoughts and feelings during their experience of the school decision making process.

2.3.1 Normative and descriptive approaches to decision making

Historically, decision making theory distinguished between normative decision making approaches, which focused on *what* decisions people ought to make in various types of situations, compared with descriptive decision making

approaches, which aimed to describe *how* people actually make decisions in a variety of situations (Rapoport, 1989). Normative decision theory assumes people are rational decision makers and that there are optimal decisions to be made. It does not necessarily take into account the context in which decisions are made in real life situations. Therefore, descriptive decision theory developed in order to describe *how* people think when making decisions.

2.3.2 Information Processing Approach

The information processing approach was developed to describe decision making. Bettman (1979) argued that choices of any complexity are usually constructed through the process of decision making, not merely revealed, and, therefore, are highly context dependent on the information available and the environment in which the decision is being made. When people have experienced a similar decision before, they are more likely to retrieve previously formed constructs from memory and select the option that had the highest evaluation. This may be applicable to parents selecting a secondary school, as parents may have previous experiences of secondary school and may have gone through the decision process previously with older siblings. However, for parents of children with statements of SEN, they may not have experienced the same decision options and context previously, so may be more likely to process more information and use decision making strategies to construct preferences about options and inform their choice.

The information processing approach initially focused on purely cognitive aspects of decision making. However, it later expanded to include the consideration of how emotions may influence decision making, making it more relevant when considering people's perceptions and experiences of decision making. This will be considered further in section 2.3.6.

2.3.2.1 Adaptive Decision Maker Framework

The Adaptive Decision Maker framework was developed as an example of the information processing approach. It is concerned with people making a choice between multiple options with multiple attributes (Payne and Bettman, 2004).

When considering school options, attributes may include the distance and time taken to travel to the school, the amount of support available in the school, the risk of bullying, potential for academic outcomes and any other attributes considered to be relevant to the child or the context of the environment. The Adaptive Decision Maker Framework argues that when people have to choose between options when no single alternative appears to be the 'best' option, decisions are made 'through a process of information acquisition and evaluation about the alternative and their attributes.' (Pp. 4, Beresford and Sloper, 2008). The value of each attribute to the decision maker may vary depending on 'their desirability to the decision-maker, the uncertainty of actually receiving the attribute value, and the willingness of the decision-maker to accept a loss on one attribute for gain on another attribute' (Pp. 116, Payne and Bettman, 2004).

For example, when parents are choosing a school, they may desire the opportunity for social interaction with peers available in a mainstream school more than the opportunity to have a specialist curriculum in a special school. However, the level of certainty about the specialist curriculum may be greater than the certainty that they will mix with peers in mainstream. Therefore, the parent has to accept the loss of the specialist curriculum for the more valued gain of social interaction. However, if this gain is more uncertain then they may choose the option with the more certain, but less valued attributes.

The value parents place on different attributes may be relative to their previous experiences and their current interactions and influences from other people involved in the decision making context, such as other parents. Therefore, an attribute considered to be important to one parent may not be valued by another.

2.3.3 Factors influencing decision making

2.3.3.1 Compensatory strategies and Emotional Trade-off Difficulty

A compensatory strategy is when a good value on one attribute can compensate for poor value on another. A compensatory strategy thus requires

explicit trade-offs among attributes as described in the example above. Baumeister and Bushman (2011) describe a trade-off as a 'choice in which taking or maximising on benefit requires either accepting a cost or sacrificing another benefit'. However, there are occasions where a good value on one attribute cannot make up for a poor value on another, resulting in a non-compensatory strategy. For example, the fact that a school is only a short distance away, may not be able to compensate for the fact that a school says it cannot provide support for a child. If parents have to make difficult sacrifices and compromises when choosing a school for their child with SEN, then they may experience negative emotions and perceive the process more negatively.

Luce (2005) suggested the Emotional Trade-off Difficulty (ETD) model which could aid understanding of possible coping strategies used by parents to reduce negative emotions experienced when making sacrifices during the decision making process. This model proposes that decision makers try to cope with the negative emotions associated with decision making, particularly emotions generated from trade-offs between highly valued attributes and highlights two coping motivations which often co-exist. These are the motivation to put more effort into the decision process in order to identify the best option and motivation to avoid particularly distressing decision operations, such as explicit trade-offs between attributes. The ETD model proposes that this tension is resolved by either making trade-offs implicitly rather than explicitly, for example, only focusing on one attribute and not addressing between attribute trade-offs, thereby avoiding compensatory strategies. Another strategy is to avoid trade-offs by preferring choices that are recommended by reasons independent of the characteristics of the options and attributes, for example, focusing on a doctor's recommendation. In the school context, this may be focusing on the recommendation of professionals involved, such as educational psychologists, speech and language therapists or other parents.

2.3.3.2 Number of options and attributes to be considered

Baumeister and Bushman (2011) state that although being given options and having a choice appears to be perceived positively, too many options and

attributes can provide information overload and overwhelm people making decisions. Schwartz (2005) believes that people can end up being unhappy as the number of options increases and refers to this as the 'tyranny of choice'. Baumeister and Bushman (2011) explain that this may be because as the number of options increase, there is a more likely chance that one of the options will be good enough. However, it becomes more difficult to process all of the information and make a choice. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) found that after choosing from among 30 kinds of jams or chocolates, people express less satisfaction with their choices than those choosing from among six options. Myers, Abell, Kolstad and Sani (2010) argue that as well as information overload when options are increased, there are also more opportunities for regret. There may be increased uncertainty about the values of some attributes and more attributes that are difficult to trade-off (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998). When considering choosing a school for a child with SEN, parents may have a wider choice set (mainstreams, resourced provisions and special schools) to choose from and may consider more attributes than parents of children without SEN, increasing the amount of information they need to gather and process and the opportunities for regret. Perhaps, this would again lead parents to focus on opinions and preferences of others such as professionals and other parents to reduce effort involved in the decision making and reduce any anticipated negative emotions.

2.3.3.3 Completeness of information

People may wish to have complete information about the options and attributes in order to make informed decisions. However, Bettman, Luce and Payne (1998) state that this is often not the case. They suggest that decision makers may infer information based on the information that is available, such as information about other attributes for that option. This suggests that if a parent does not have information about the school's academic outcomes they may infer this information based on their knowledge about the support that children receive. Within a social context, parents would also draw from their previously established constructs and those developed through interactions with others during this decision making process.

2.3.3.4 Recognition

It is suggested that heuristics can be used to reduce the cognitive effort involved in making a decision and limit the information to be processed. Myers, Abell, Kolstad and Sani (2010) describe a heuristic as 'a thinking strategy and problem-solving method that enables quick and easy judgements and search procedures,' (Pp 111). They use mental shortcuts to process information more rapidly and with less effort. The heuristic chosen will depend on how many options are to be considered, how many attributes each option contains and how accurate the decision needs to be. Therefore, people are highly selective about the information they attend to and this can have a major impact on choice. It is suggested that a heuristic may be used when one of the options or attributes is familiar and recognised by the decision maker (Beresford and Sloper, 2008). The option which is recognised is inferred to have more value. Recognition could include factors such as faces, voices or names. Therefore, if a parent visits a school where they know someone who works there, it may be considered a more valued option or if a particular school had children of the same ethnic origin or specific need, they may experience recognition and relate to that option more. This would assist parents in making a decision about which school they preferred.

2.3.4 Influence of others on decision making

This takes into account the social context in which people make decisions. As stated at the beginning of Section 2.3, parents are not making decisions in isolation. They will bring already established constructs to the decision making situation, which will be developed and changed based on information they receive through their interactions with others. This may include other parents who have children with SEN, family members and professionals involved.

Decision making theory suggests that a person is likely to place more value on the option that their peers are choosing (Beresford and Sloper, 2008). Therefore, parents should be more likely to choose the same school option as other parents they know. This may be more applicable to parents choosing

schools when their child does not have SEN. However, parents may be influenced if they know other parents with children with SEN. This may be particularly relevant for parents who are part of SEN parent groups.

Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison (1994) found that when professionals were involved in giving information to parents, the trust the parent had in the professional and the quality of communication and interaction with the professional, was found to be more influential than the information itself. Jungerman and Fischer (2005) investigated the interaction between 'experts and non-experts' in decision making situations. Parents may feel that they do not have access to information to be able to weigh up all of the options, and so want to short cut that process by seeking expert advice. Jungerman and Fischer (2005) proposed four factors that influence whether or not an individual accepts the professionals' advice. These were 'the judgement of the advisor regarding the recommended option, the judgement of the client regarding the recommended option, the advisors credibility and the extent to which the client trusts the advisor and the clients confidence in his/her own judgement' (Pp. 167, Jungerman and Fischer, 2005).

2.3.5 Making decisions on behalf of others

Parents have a responsibility to make decisions on behalf of their children under 16 years of age. However, children's participation in decision making is becoming more common and may impact on how parents approach decision making (Cavet and Sloper, 2004). Cavet and Sloper (2004) found that disabled children were less likely to be involved in decisions than non-disabled peers.

Parents may experience anticipated regret when making decisions on behalf of their child, not only that the outcome will not be positive, but that the child could later criticise the parent for the decision they took, which could place additional pressure on parents experiencing the decision making process (Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison, 1994).

2.3.6 Role of Emotions

It is argued that 'emotions have powerful effects on decisions. Moreover, the outcomes of decisions have powerful effects on emotions,' (Pp453, Mellers, Schwartz and Cooke, 1998). Following a review of research on emotions and decision making, Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) concluded that 'emotions constitute potent, pervasive, predictable, sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial drivers of decision making' (Pp799, Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam, 2015). Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) distinguished between integral emotions and incidental emotions. Integral emotions are those that arise as part of the decision situation and incidental emotions are those which carryover from other contexts into the decision making situation. For example, a parent may perceive that they had a negative experience when they went to look around a school because they were already feeling angry when they arrived due to an interaction in an earlier context. These emotions can help to prioritise decision making and reduce the amount of information to be processed (Lerner and Arsenio, 2000).

In the context of parents choosing a secondary school, integral emotions may occur through interactions during the decision making process and influence parents' perceptions of the process. Zajonc (1980) also states that affective reactions are often the first reactions to stimuli and may then guide decision making and judgment. Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) also suggested that emotions can influence the depth of thought when making a decision and the decision strategies used. It is suggested that emotional reactions which create positive affective states result in overestimating the likelihood of positive outcomes and underestimating the likelihood of negative outcomes. Emotions which elicit negative affective states have the opposite effect (Svenson, 2003). Schwartz (1990) proposed that this was due to negative moods being associated with threat and increased vigilance, and positive moods signalling a safe environment.

Feelings based on prior experiences may also influence the information attended to and shape decision making (Peters, Vastfall, Garling and Slovic,

2006). Kahneman (1973) described voluntary attention being given to information perceived to be relevant to current decision making goals and involuntary attention was characterised by aspects of the environment that are surprising, novel, unexpected, potentially threatening or extremely perceptually salient. Therefore, involuntary attention and selectivity of perceptual factors triggered by emotional responses may influence decision making processes.

2.3.6.1 Choice-Goals Framework

Bettman, Luce and Payne (1998) introduced the Choice-Goals Framework which proposed four important meta-goals in decision making; maximising the accuracy of a decision, minimising the cognitive effort, minimising the experience of negative emotion, while making the decision and afterwards, and maximising the ease of justification of the decision. They argued humans are emotional beings and that the trade-offs involved when making a decision can be wrenching. Therefore, the desire to minimise the negative emotion may be important in some decision making situations and affect parents' experiences of the process. They also argued that humans are social beings and one of the most decision-relevant characteristics of social context is that decisions are often evaluated, either by others or by one self. Therefore, parents may feel that they have to justify decisions about their school choice impacting on their decisions and perceptions and experiences of the process.

2.3.7 Post choice emotions

2.3.7.1 Dissonance after decisions and justification of choices

Baumeister and Bushman (2011) state that people experience dissonance when they make difficult choices, such as which school they would like their child to attend. Due to trade-offs made during the decision making process, they may experience dissonant cognitions and become aware of the desirable features that have been rejected and the undesirable features of what has been chosen. People like to reduce their dissonance by justifying their choices. Baumeister and Bushman (2011) argue that after making important decisions, people usually reduce dissonance by increasing the attractiveness of the chosen option and its attributes and downgrading the attractiveness of the

unchosen option. Brehm (1956) asked women to choose an item from two which they rate highly. Once they had chosen, they were asked to re-rate the items, the women increased their evaluations of the item they had chosen and decreased their evaluations of the rejected item, despite initially giving them the same rating. This type of dissonance is known as post-decision dissonance. It would suggest that when parents reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the school decision making process, they may begin to highlight the positives in the school which has been allocated for their child to attend and begin to ignore any negative attributes, such as the school being a long distance away.

2.3.7.2 Reactance theory

Once parents have made a choice about which school they would like their child to attend, they then have to wait for the local authority to agree with their choice or to suggest that another school is chosen based on the caveats outlined in the *Special educational needs and disability: a guide for parents and carers* (DfE, 2014). Brehm (1956) proposed 'reactance theory'. This states that people desire to have freedom of choice and, therefore, have a negative aversive reaction to having choices or options taken away by other people or external forces. Reactance refers to the negative feelings people have when their freedom is reduced. Brehm (1956) argues that reactance has three main consequences; it makes the person want the forbidden option more or makes it seem more attractive, it may make them take steps to reclaim the lost option and/or they may feel or act aggressively toward the person who has restricted their freedom. Therefore, if parents go through the decision making process to make a choice about which school they would like their child to attend and then that option is taken away by the LA, they may experience negative reactions.

2.3.8 Summary of theory

Although much of decision making theory focuses on the cognitive strategies used by the decision-maker with little consideration of the wider social context or of interactions involved in the process, a review of the most relevant models has identified some influences which may assist understanding and interpretation of parents' experiences and perceptions of the decision making

process when choosing a school for the child with a statement of SEN. The theory suggests that strategies used to make decisions and inform choices depend on the context of the decision making, such as the time and information available, interactions with others, the importance placed on the decision to be made, the number of options and attributes to be considered and the emotions involved (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998). It is suggested that emotions may have a significant impact on decision making, both due to affect when making the decision and emotions elicited through the decision making process. However, Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) state that more research is needed in the area of emotions and decision making. The trade-off of attributes when considering options can lead to negative emotions and anticipated regret (Luce, 2005). The anticipated regret can also be increased when making a decision on behalf of others (Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison, 1994) and when the number of options to be considered is increased (Myers, Abell, Kolstad and Sani, 2010). Therefore, through the government giving parents more options of schools to choose from they may actually increase negative emotions in parents. Brehm (1956) suggested that negative emotion could also be exacerbated if an option is taken away. For example, if parents choose a preferred school and then are told by the LA that it is not appropriate for their child because it would 'not represent good value for money' or 'would impact negatively on the education of others' (Pp. 31, DfE, 2011). Social interactions throughout the process with other parents, family members and professionals, such as Educational Psychologists, are likely to have an impact on the decisions made and parents' experiences of the process (Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison, 1994; Jungerman and Fischer, 2005).

The wider political and educational context in which parents are making decisions about which school they would like their child with a statement of SEN to attend, has been considered, as well as theory around decision making which identified factors which may impact on parents' experiences during the process. A systematic review of the research literature was carried out, in order to establish what has been found out about parents' experiences and perceptions of choosing school placement for children with SEN in research studies to date.

2.4 Systematic literature review

2.4.1 Purpose and research question

The purpose of the review of the literature was to systematically search and synthesise the research evidence relating to the parents' perceptions and experiences of school choice and decision making in regards to educational placement for children with special educational needs. Petticrew and Roberts (2006) suggest that systematic reviews can be useful when questions remain about people's experiences or where there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of a policy. Analysis can be helpful in refining research questions for the current research. The focus of the review was on the present research question:

How do parents perceive and experience school choice and decision making with regards to educational placement for children with special educational needs?

2.4.2 Study selection

As the type of question being asked in the review is about meanings and experiences of events in people's lives, the study designs identified in the search are likely to be qualitative studies, such as interviews, and quantitative studies, such as surveys collecting information on perceptions (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

2.4.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined as:

- All studies must include parents or carers of children with special educational needs and their consideration of school choice or decision making with regards to the educational placement of their child with special educational needs.
- From preliminary searches it became evident that research focusing on parents' choices and decision making around school placement at the transition from primary to secondary school was limited. As a result, all studies were included if consideration of school/education provision involved children and young people up to the age of 16 years. It was felt

that parents may have experienced some similar considerations and dilemmas when making decisions or choices throughout compulsory schooling age. Studies researching Post 16 education provision were not included because factors which influence decision making processes and choices are likely to be different for this age group.

- The present study focuses on parents' experiences of school choice and decision making for children with statements of SEN in the context of England. However, preliminary searches suggested that literature in this area is limited and so the search was extended to include international journals.
- All areas/types of special educational need were included in the search.
- Studies from peer-reviewed academic journals will be included in order to maintain research rigour and validity.
- Articles needed to be written in English to be included.
- The search criterion was set to include studies from 1981 until the present date. This was so that all relevant studies post the 1981 Education Act, when parents of children with statements of SEN were able to express preferences on school choice and schools began to be named in statements of SEN, would be included.

2.4.4 Search strategy

Electronic searches of databases included Ovid PsycINFO and Eric EBSCO. The search and identification of relevant studies has been called 'the most fundamental challenge' for systematic reviewers (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). Search terms used aimed to be sensitive so that all records that were relevant were retrieved through the database, whilst being specific enough so that the records retrieved were mostly relevant to the review. Preliminary searches and an initial scope of the literature identified additional search terms which were added to the database search. The final search terms and the number of articles identified in each database are recorded in Table 1: Search strings used in systematic review.

Search string	Number of studies identified through PsycINFO database	Number of relevant articles after screening	Number of studies identified through Eric, EBSCO	Number of relevant articles after screening
parent* AND (choice OR 'decision making') AND ('special needs' OR 'special education*') AND (School* OR Education*) Filters: Peer Reviewed 1981-2015	140	8	217	8

Table 1: search strings used in systematic search

Due to the nature of the search terms involving parents, educational placements, decision making and special needs, there was a high degree of sensitivity. Whilst this identified a large number of studies, an attempt to apply other filters led to the removal of pertinent papers. Therefore, all abstracts of studies identified in the two searches were assessed for eligibility in the review using the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in Section 2.4.7. A summary of the reasons for excluding or including articles identified on both databases is provided below:

- 92 PsychINFO and 136 Eric EBSCO studies were removed as they did not include either parents or carers of children with SEN or discussion of school choice and decision making around educational placement. The majority of the articles explored intervention programmes to support children with SEN, particularly interventions related to Autism. They also included teachers and SENCOs' experiences of SEN and Individual Education Plans.
- 29 PsychINFO and 49 Eric EBSCO were excluded because they explored parents' experiences, but not around choosing school placement. They mostly focused on parents' experiences of being involved in partnership working with professionals, Individual Education

Plans and supporting children with specific needs such as dyslexia, challenging behaviour and complex needs.

- 8 PsychINFO and 18 Eric EBSCO were removed as they involved school choice and placement, but not parents.
- 5 studies in the Eric EBSCO database were excluded as they focused on post-16 educational placement and transition planning.
- 3 PsychINFO and 1 Eric EBSCO comprised of an editorial page, book review and a presidents page rather than being research studies.
- 8 PsychINFO and 8 Eric EBSCO studies were identified as including both parents of children with SEN and school choice and meeting all of the inclusion criteria.

This left 16 studies eligible for inclusion. However, 5 were found to be duplicates across the databases and so 11 studies were identified for analysis. Full text articles were accessed for all 11 articles. The study design and key findings of each of these studies are summarised in Table 2: Summary of study design and key findings of identified studies in systematic literature review.

Table 2: Summary of study design and key findings of identified studies in systematic literature review

Author and year	Context/ location of study	Population/ sample	Study design/method	Main findings/outcomes of parents' perceptions (thoughts, feelings, views)
Jessen (2012)	New York City, United States of America	11 parents of children with special educational needs when choosing high school	28 interviews between mid-December 2008 and February 2009. Follow up interviews between April and June 2009 when they had found out school allocation	Families restricted their choices based on interpretations of available resources which were sometimes based on erroneous (schools 'steering' parents away) and lack of information (schools not advertising SEN provision). One family described process as a 'struggle' due to lack of resources available in schools and were 'disappointed' with their options.
Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014)	One local authority in England	65 families of children with SEN aged 4 – 13 years old	380 postal surveys (17% response rate) Survey adapted version of 'School choice survey' by Bagley and Woods (1998).	64% not attending local schools. Depending on type of SEN some parents felt that they did not have a choice. Some of those who felt that they did have a choice had to 'fight' for it. Factors influencing decision were child's SEN and the specialist staff and facilities available. LA featured highly as a source of information. However, the role of the LA was not always positively viewed. Parent partnership was used by relatively few parents. Acknowledges bias in respondents – higher response rate expected from dissatisfied parents. 'not easy to read parents' views and feelings' (pg132).
Flewitt and Nind (2007)	Three local authorities in England	19 parent questionnaires and 5 follow-up interviews with parents of children with	19 questionnaires and 5 interviews with 4 mothers and 1 mother and father. 5 interviews were across 3 LA's and a range of	Process of choice difficult for many parents partly because no ideal choice. Some parents felt no real choice or limited choice particularly in rural areas due to location and funding issues. Decision making dependent upon views of professionals,

Author and year	Context/ location of study	Population/ sample	Study design/method	Main findings/outcomes of parents' perceptions (thoughts, feelings, views)
		SEN in the Early Years.	SEN types. Detailed notes of parents' comments including verbatim quotes were made during interviews.	<p>hearsay and own feelings after visiting the setting.</p> <p>Some felt not much contact with other parents of SEN children.</p> <p>Some conflicting advice between different professionals added to difficulty when decision making.</p> <p>Consulted range of family, friends and providers from settings to discuss and reflect upon choices.</p> <p>Attitudes of staff upon visit to setting highly influential as this can reflect attitudes of staff.</p> <p>Resources and facilities, staff-child ratio and ability to focus on child's specific needs also influenced decisions.</p> <p>Choice making/choice avoiding was identified as source of disagreement between partners.</p> <p>Acknowledges caution with regard to representativeness for larger population but argues it elicits valuable qualitative insights</p>
Finn, Caldwell and Raub, (2006)	MidWest America	7 parents with children with SEN aged 7-14 years	Open-ended structured telephone interviews with parents who had chosen to transfer children from local public school to charter school. Interviews fully transcribed and coded	<p>Parents rejected previous school due to unwanted changes in former school structure, perceived excellence of charter school and former school not meeting specific SENs.</p> <p>Valued small sized school, high academic standards, rigorous curriculum, staff willing to provide services while addressing the student's disabilities, and immediate communication. Concerns of parents include high faculty turnover rates in special education as well as change in specific educational focus.</p>

Author and year	Context/ location of study	Population/ sample	Study design/method	Main findings/outcomes of parents' perceptions (thoughts, feelings, views)
				Limited generalisability – does not describe why they began choosing other school and how process of choosing was, how they went about making decision.
Ryndak, Orlando, Storch and Denney (2011)	United States of America	One parent of a child with significant disabilities aged 0-12 years.	Retrospective study involving 3 semi-structured interviews over a 3 week period. Interviews transcribed verbatim and shared with participant to check.	Two themes – perception of congruence and conflict between parents' views of child's needs and education service providers' views. When congruence was achieved the parent felt higher satisfaction, decreased stress and viewed services as higher quality. Went through cycle each time conflict of hope, awareness, frustration, despair, information gathering and decision making. When experienced conflict felt had no options and disempowered. Second theme was of stress this caused to the family during decision making and conflict. Highlighted importance for service providers to understand and respect parents' perceptions of their child's needs.
Lalvani (2012)	New York and Northern New Jersey, United States of America	33 Parents of children with SEN aged 4 -14 years	One off semi-structured interviews audio taped and transcribed.	Difference between understanding and perceptions of higher SES parents compared to lower SES parents. Higher SES parents were more able to advocate for their child but had to 'struggle' and 'fight' for inclusive education and described process as a 'rocky journey'. Process of choosing school placement requires expenditure of a great deal of time, energy and financial resources.

Author and year	Context/ location of study	Population/ sample	Study design/method	Main findings/outcomes of parents' perceptions (thoughts, feelings, views)
Lange and Lehr (2000)	United States of America	142 parents of SEN with varying type (age unknown)	Questionnaires sent to parents of children with SEN and without.	Factors which influenced decision to change school to Charter school included class size, staff members, curriculum, SEN services, philosophy of the school, number of children and SEN of child. Limited to factors which influenced choice not parents' experience of the decision making process.
Bagley and Woods (1998)	1 case study area within the UK	9 parents, 5 of whom had children with statements of SEN on transition from Primary to Secondary (11-12 year olds).	Part of Parent and School Choice Interaction Survey (PASCIS). Paper includes reporting on interviews with 9 parents (5 with statements of SEN).	Access to information is important. Not given government guides for parents. LA information booklet for all parents, one page for SEN listed 6 schools (3 specialist and 3 units).- confusion over mainstream schools with specialist provision. Confusion between process of school choice for all parents compared to those with statements of SEN – tremendous confusion and uncertainty. Middle class more informed consumers All visited at least one provision. Majority spoke to friends with children with SEN. Lack of understanding of own child's needs. Factors which influenced decision – intrinsic-personal/social: Focus on child's SEN SEN facilities, school commitment, child happiness, Location – lack of funding for transport. -not academic related.

Author and year	Context/location of study	Population/sample	Study design/method	Main findings/outcomes of parents' perceptions (thoughts, feelings, views)
Bagley, Woods and Woods (2001)	Three case study areas within the UK	All parents with children transferring from Primary to Secondary in three case study areas. Sample includes the sample from Bagley and Woods (1998)	Postal questionnaires - 240/6000 self-identified as having child with EN. 26/128 interviews SEN (9 statements of SEN).	Similar findings to Bagley and Woods (1998) Parents of SEN placed high value on safety, security, care, inclusivity, unconditional respect for individual worth and potential. Most felt had a choice, only those who were restricted by finances for transport felt restricted.
Tissot (2011)	Across the UK	Parents of children with ASD with mean age of 8-9 years old.	738 postal surveys consisting of closed items and 2 open questions.	Despite majority of parents gaining the first choice placement for their child, they found the process of choosing and obtaining school placement bureaucratic, stressful and time consuming. Parents perceived alternative placement suggestions to be financially motivated rather than in the best interests of their child.
Freeman, Alkin and Kasari (1999)	Los-Angeles, United States of America	Parents of children with Downs syndrome aged 0-21 years old.	291 postal surveys	When asked when would consider change, key themes identified were: approach of a school transition, the desire for greater inclusion, placement in a neighbourhood school, need for additional services and support, influences of peers (both positive modelling and negative harassment), parents' financial resources and ongoing information acquisition/decision making issues.

Author and year	Context/ location of study	Population/ sample	Study design/method	Main findings/outcomes of parents' perceptions (thoughts, feelings, views)
				Parents viewed school and programme decision making as a matter for continuing concern with themes such as being informed about choices before making decisions and frustration about the choice available were identified.

Table 2: Summary of study design and key findings of identified studies in systematic literature review

2.4.5 Identified themes from systematic literature review

The studies were analysed and common themes were identified across the studies based on the research question: *How do parents perceive and experience school choice and decision making with regards to educational placement for children with special educational needs?*

2.4.5.1 Perceived reasons/factors which parents report were important to their final decision about preferred educational placement.

Bagley and Woods (1998) identified two value perspectives held by parents and education providers when considering school choice, which were referred to as instrumental-academic and intrinsic-personal/social perspectives. The instrumental-academic perspective was described as valuing academic achievement in preference to acquiring personal and social skills, with a focus on achieving academic qualifications and measureable outcomes through tests and examinations. The intrinsic-personal/social value perspective was described as being concerned with the process; priorities are focused on the child's feelings and day to day experiences of school such as the quality of relationships, support, concern and care provided by the school. Bagley and Woods (1998) argued that the dominant value perspective for parents of children with SEN is the intrinsic-personal/social perspective rather than instrumental-academic and that they rarely mentioned considering academic outcomes when considering school choice. For example, in their study of parent surveys and interviews (Bagley and Woods, 1998), parents' main reasons given for choosing or rejecting schools were focused on the child and their SEN. They were concerned with the philosophy and commitment within the school, the nature of the provision, the environment and whether the child would feel safe and happy. Bagley and Woods (1998) state that although parents wanted their child to succeed to their fullest ability 'none of the parents interviewed cited academic-related reasons for choosing a school,' (Pp.779, Bagley and Woods, 1998). Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014) used an adapted version of Bagley and Woods (1998) school choice survey 16 years later and found parents continued to value the intrinsic-personal/social perspective. The child's SEN, specialist staff and facilities available were listed as key factors in

helping parents choose one school over another. These similar findings could have been due to the same survey being used to gain parents' perspectives. However, Flewitt and Nind (2007) also found that parents valued resources, facilities and ability to focus on a child's specific needs as important. Finn, Caldwell and Raub (2006) and Lange and Lehr (2000) found that parents in the United States of America also valued the school's philosophy, ability to address their child's specific needs and small class sizes/schools. The only study to mention outcomes was Finn, Caldwell and Raub (2006) which found that parents felt that high academic standards were important in influencing decisions about school choice.

This information is important in informing about what parents value when considering school choice and making decisions about where they would like their child to attend. However, much of the data relies upon ratings against questionnaire prompts and does not provide an insight into *how* they experienced the decision making process.

2.4.5.2 Experiences which influenced the decision making process

Through exploring the data more carefully subthemes were identified, which provided an insight into some of the experiences which influence parents' thoughts and decision making processes.

Access to information

Bagley and Woods (1998) state that 'one of the key factors in enabling parents to exercise their right to choose a school – and to reassure them that the choice they make is the correct one - is access to information' (Pp.773, Bagley and Woods, 1998). However, the experience of parents in their study suggested that parents were not made aware of government guides for parents of children with SEN and that the local authority provided all parents with the same booklet, with information about the transfer process and help to make their choice of school. This booklet contained one page about children with special educational needs and listed six schools (three specialist and three units). They also found that due to a lack of information parents were confused about specialist units attached to mainstream schools and that parents believed access and specialist provision would be available to all students who attended

the mainstream part of the school. Jessen (2012) found that schools did not state what facilities and resources they were able to provide in their information materials such as prospectuses. This led parents to restrict their choices based on limited information about school facilities. Bagley and Woods (1998) also stated that the three schools in their study kept information they gave to parents about SEN provision to a minimum. The new legislation in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) regarding schools and local authorities creating a 'local offer' in a parent friendly format may improve the information sharing about what educational provisions and facilities are on offer to parents when they are choosing a school placement for their child with SEN.

Role of Education Provider

The role of the Headteacher, SENCo and staff in an education setting can influence the decision making process for parents. Flewitt and Nind (2007) found that parents felt they were highly influenced by staff upon visiting a setting as it was felt this reflected the attitudes of the staff. This could impact on parents' overall perceptions of the schools philosophy and attitudes to supporting children with SEN, a factor identified as being important in making decisions. Jessen (2012) suggested that staff in educational settings were, in fact, consciously 'steering' parents away from their setting by providing them with erroneous information in order to shape the application pool, such as suggesting to parents at open evenings that they cannot provide the services their child needs.

School markets

Some of the lack of information which influences parents' decision making may be due to poor systems in place to share information or inaccessible information for parents. The attitudes of staff, which are reported to significantly influence a parent's perception about a setting, may be due to the school's attitudes and philosophies towards children with SEN or may simply be due to events which have impacted on the member of staff's attitude that day. However, the intentional withholding of information on SEN provision from prospectuses and the 'steering' of parents away from their setting appear to be conscious decisions made by the education providers to influence parents'

decision making by eliminating their setting from the choice set. Jessen (2012) and Bagley and Woods (1998) both argue that this is due to the school choice market, as discussed in section 2.2.2. Bagley and Woods (1998) suggest that schools are forced to value an instrumental-academic perspective because they have to respond to market pressures and accountability measures based on academic achievements. This differs from the parents' perspective which is driven by intrinsic-personal/social values. Jessen (2012) argues that schools that do not score well academically are judged as inferior and so are not appealing to prospective parents. Within the UK context, schools can face being judged by OFSTED and being categorised as 'need to improve' if they do not achieve certain standards.

Social economic status of family

On the theme of access to information, Lalvani (2012) found that there was a disparity between the understanding and perceptions of higher Social Economic Status (SES) families and lower SES families. Parents of higher SES families were more likely to be informed about school choice and the rights of their child to access different types of educational provision and so were more likely to initiate discussions with professionals and advocate for their child's place in a particular educational setting. Bagley and Woods (1998) found that middle class parents who were interviewed tended to spend more time planning and preparing to visit schools and making a choice. The consideration of differences between social classes to make informed decisions about school choice is not a new concept, Brantlinger (1987), 25 years before Lalvani (2012), found that out of 35 interviews with low income parents, most lacked information essential for making informed decisions regarding school placement.

Influence of others

The influence of others on parents' thoughts during decision making was captured in most studies. Specifically cited groups and their influence are summarised below:

Local Authority

In the English context, the Local Authority (LA) featured highly as a source of information (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014). The LA must name the parents' choice of school on a child's statement of special educational needs as long as the chosen school is suitable for the child's age, ability, skills and SEN; the child's presence will not damage the education of other children already at the school and placing the child in the school will be an efficient use of the LA's resources (DfE, 2011). If the LA feels that the chosen school is incompatible with one of these criteria, then this may lead to a disagreement between the LA and parents and it may be likely that parents view the role of the LA in the decision making process negatively. However, Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014) found that even when parents of children with statements of SEN were allocated their choice of school, the LA's role was not always viewed positively. Comments from parents indicated that some felt pressured by the LA when they wanted their child to attend a different school and some felt that little or no information on special schools had been provided (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014). In Tissot's (2011) study parents stated that dealing with LA staff was the most common cause of stress when determining appropriate educational provision for their child.

Other professionals

Flewitt and Nind (2007) found that parents perceived the decision making process as dependent upon the views of professionals and they felt that when professionals gave conflicting advice about school placement, the decision making process was more difficult. Ryndak et al. (2011) found that parents felt higher satisfaction and viewed services as higher quality, when professionals were congruent with their views about the needs of their child. However, when parents experienced conflict over the needs of their child, they felt they had no options and were disempowered by professionals.

Family and Friends

Parents were identified as consulting with a range of family and friends to discuss and reflect upon choices in Flewitt and Nind (2007) and Bagley and Woods (1998). Some parents felt that contact with other parents of children

with SEN could support the decision making process and parents stated they would appreciate more opportunity for this (Flewitt and Nind, 2007).

Parent Partnership

Parent Partnerships were set up by LAs in England to provide independent advice and support through the decision making process on the range of schools and facilities available for children with SEN. However, Parent Partnership was only referred to in one study which stated that it had been used by relatively few parents (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014).

Summary of experiences

From the research carried out with parents, it appears that the amount of information available does impact on the decision making process as was suggested by theory on decision making. It also appears that government policy and legislation may also be indirectly impacting on their experience of decision making as schools are thought to be withholding information and steering parents of children with SEN away from their school (Bagley and Woods, 1998; Jessen, 2012), as was suggested would happen within the school choice market context (Evans and Lunt, 1994; Runswick-Cole, 2011; Norwich, 2014, see section 2.2.2). There appeared to be a mixture of positive and negative experiences when parents were influenced by others within the decision making process. Parents appeared to report negative experiences with the LA. This could be a result of parents feeling that they have had their preferred option taken away from them by LA professionals. They may also feel that they have not been provided with complete information or experienced inconsistent information from professionals, which could lead to uncertainty about options and increase negative emotion.

2.4.5.3 Perceptions of the decision making process for choosing and allocating school placement for children with SEN

The most commonly used terms by parents to describe the decision making process for allocating school placement were 'fight' and 'struggle' (Jessen, 2012; Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Lalvani, 2012). One family in Jessen's (2012) study described the choosing process as being a 'struggle' due to the

lack of resources available in schools and that they were 'disappointed' with the options and choice. The lack of choice was echoed by some parents in Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014), Flewitt and Nind (2007) and Freeman, Alkin and Kasari (1999). The decision making process can be difficult for these parents partly because they feel there is no ideal choice/option available. Those that felt they had a choice of school often cited that they felt they had to 'fight' for it (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014). In Lalvani's (2012) study parents who advocated for their child to have a place in inclusive education described the process as a 'struggle', 'fight' and a 'rocky journey'. Lalvani (2012) concluded that the process of choosing a school placement for parents of children with SEN in the United States of America requires 'a great deal of time, energy and financial resources' (Pp.180, Lalvani, 2012). This was duplicated in England with parents described as finding the process of choosing and obtaining school placement bureaucratic, stressful and time consuming in Tissot (2011). In the English context, Bagley and Woods (1998) also found that at the transition from primary to secondary school parents were tremendously confused and uncertain about the process of choosing school placement for children with statements for SEN compared to the process for all parents.

Two studies (Flewitt & Nind, 2007 and Ryndak et al., 2011) also identified that the decision making process was a source of disagreement and stress between partners and for families at the time of choosing school.

2.4.5.4 Summary of themes identified from the systematic literature review

In response to the question, '*How do parents perceive and experience school choice and decision making with regards to educational placement for children with special educational needs?*', it appears that although each parent's experience is likely to be unique and dependent on their individual child's needs, there are some common themes arising. Through the literature, it is argued that parents place a value perspective on intrinsic-personal/social factors when choosing a school for their child with SEN (Bagley and Woods, 1998). Despite evidence of parents valuing these factors in their final decision/choice of where they would prefer their child to attend, there was

relatively little research exploring the experience parents have of the decision making process. This review suggests common themes which may influence and impact on a parent's experience of the decision making process including how informed they are about the process and the options of school choice available to them, their experience of visiting schools with a view to placement, particularly the attitudes of the staff in the educational placement settings, and the influence of interactions with other people, including LAs, other professionals and friends and family. It is suggested that parents' perceptions of the process are not always reflected upon positively, describing it as a 'struggle' and a 'fight' (Jessen, 2012; Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Lalvani, 2012).

The review of the research literature suggests that the information processing approach to making decisions (Payne and Bettman, 2014) may be applicable to decision making regarding school placement. The Adaptive Decision Making Framework suggests that people weigh up the value and certainty of attributes associated with each option (Beresford and Sloper, 2008). This seems particularly relevant when parents are considering educational placements and none of the options seem to be a 'best fit' and justifications for choices have to be developed. The influence of emotional factors on the decision making process described by Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) also appear to be applicable to the research findings. Parents reported being particularly influenced by the attitude of the education providers when visiting settings (Flewitt and Nind, 2007).

2.4.6 Quality and relevance of research studies included in systematic literature review using Weight of Evidence (Gough, 2007)

As well as describing the studies and identifying themes in a review, Gough (2007) states that it is necessary to assess each study in terms of its quality and relevance to the current research question. Gough (2007) suggests that all qualitative and quantitative research is in a sense biased by its assumptions and methods, but that if research is rigorous and explicit about its method,

purpose and hidden bias, then it provides a basis for assessing the quality and relevance of its research findings. As well as describing the studies and identifying themes, Gough (2007) states that it is necessary to assess each study in terms of its quality and relevance to the current research question. Gough (2007) suggests that all qualitative and quantitative research is in a sense biased by its assumptions and methods, but that if research is rigorous and explicit about its method, purpose and hidden bias, then it provides a basis for assessing the quality and relevance of its research findings. Gough (2007) states that the majority of reviews using his Weight of Evidence model have involved effectiveness research, drawing upon quantitative methodologies to identify the effectiveness of a treatment or intervention on a subject. The studies included in the current review focused on explorative research using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to gain further insights and understanding of parents' experiences rather than to establish the effectiveness of an intervention. However, it is proposed that the Weight of Evidence model can still provide a useful heuristic in which to form judgements about the relevance and quality of the studies. Criteria for appraising studies relevant to this review were created using the Weight of Evidence strands in Appendix 1a: Weight of Evidence criteria. These criteria were applied to each study in turn to provide a Weight of Evidence ranking (see Appendix 1b: Weight of Evidence appraisal). A summary of the findings in the Weight of Evidence appraisal is provided in the following paragraph.

The studies included in the systematic literature review provided a clear overview of research carried out to date in order to capture the perceptions and experiences of school placement for parents of children with SEN. However, 4 out of the 11 studies analysed (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Freeman, Alkin and Kasari, 1999; Lange and Lehr, 2000; Tissot, 2011;), used postal questionnaire data only, which enabled the views of large samples of parents to be sought, but clearly limits the amount of in-depth understanding that can be interpreted about parents' experiences of the decision making process when considering school placement for children with SEN. The remaining 7 studies used interviews to gain greater understanding of parents' perceptions and experiences. However, only four of the studies provided information or stated

that they transcribed the interviews verbatim and described analysis used, all of which either used thematic analysis or grounded theory (Finn, Caldwell and Raub, 2006; Jessen, 2012; Ryndak, et al, 2011). All four of these studies were in the context of the USA education system. Therefore, it appears that an important next step would be to seek a greater in depth understanding of parents' experiences and perceptions of the decision making process for school placement of children with SEN in the UK context.

2.5 Conclusions, rationale and research question

The current literature on parents' experiences and perceptions of the decision making process when choosing school placement for children with SEN suggests that parents have negative perceptions of the process and this would benefit from further exploration. The review of the literature suggested that parents who may not be fully informed to make decisions, feel that there is a restricted choice and that the attitudes of educational providers and local authorities can on occasions be viewed negatively. Two articles suggested that this can lead to stressful interactions for the family (Flewitt and Nind, 2007; Ryndak et al, 2011) and felt that the process was a 'struggle' and a 'fight'. This does not appear to be acceptable when local authorities have a duty to inform parents of their options and support them through the process, coupled with the government agenda to 'give parents more control' and improve school choice options for parents of children with special educational needs (DfE, 2011).

Further research is therefore necessary to explore the individual parent's experiences of the decision making process in order to understand why these negative perceptions developed and what they really think and feel about the process of choosing school placement for children with a statement of SEN. At the annual review of children's statements in Year 5, all parents are asked to consider educational provision for secondary phase and this is named on the child's statement/EHC plan. Therefore, all parents of children with statements of SEN and EHC plans have important decisions to make regarding the placement of their child in educational settings at this point. It is proposed that parental views and perceptions on how they perceive the experience of the

decision making process when choosing a school placement for children with statements of SEN is explored through in depth interviews in a UK context. As a result of the review of the literature and the rationale outlined above, this research aims to explore parental experiences and perceptions of the decision making process when choosing secondary provision for children with statements of special educational needs, with particular reference to the following research question:

How did parents perceive and experience the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for their child with a statement of SEN?

Recommendations will be made based on the analysis of the data to inform professionals, including schools, Educational Psychologists and Local Authority SEN teams, about how they could further support parents through this possibly contentious and confusing process (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014), in what is considered to be one of the single most significant decisions for a parent (DfE, 2011).

3. Chapter Three: Methodology

This section will consider the epistemological and ontological positions which informed research strategies in relation to the proposed research question and aims of this study. The chosen research strategy, its underpinning philosophy and potential limitations will then be explored, before going on to describe the research design and data analysis employed in the study, along with steps taken to increase quality and validity of the research.

3.1 Epistemological and ontological position

Philosophical assumptions and paradigms are described as the basic belief system or 'worldview' that guides a researcher's ontological and epistemological positions as well as methodological assumptions, which in turn inform methods employed (Guba and Lincoln, 2011; Langdridge, 2007). However, Willig (2013) heeds caution in researchers affiliating to one particular label or philosophical/epistemological stance, as labels can be subject to interpretation and different meanings may be attached by different writers and readers. Hood (2006) also stated that most researchers will not fit neatly into categories of any given typology. It is suggested that it is more effective to identify the assumptions that underpin the research question and then locate the position within a particular published classification system (Willig, 2013). Therefore, the current study will consider the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions in relation to the research question and then use Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) to locate the philosophical positions and paradigms underpinning the current research.

When thinking ontologically, researchers should attempt to answer questions such as 'what is there to know?' or 'what is the nature of reality?' (Willig, 2013). Duberly, Johnson and Cassell (2012) state that these questions concern whether or not the phenomenon that is being studied actually exists independently of our knowing and perceiving of it. Ontological positions can be described as being on a continuum from 'realist' to 'relativist' (Willig, 2013; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). A realist position would assume that there is a 'real' reality and phenomenon exists independently of our perceptual and

cognitive structures (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011; Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). A relativist position questions the 'out-there-ness' of the world and emphasizes the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to phenomenon (Willig, 2013). Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) state that a relativist view assumes that phenomena have no real, independent status separate from the act of knowing and that social reality is a creation of our own consciousness and cognitions. In the context of the current research, the ontological position is best represented by relativist assumptions, as parents experiences and perceptions of the decision making process are relative to their cognitions and context and the interpretation of the researcher. The study does not propose that there is one objective 'real' reality to be found.

Epistemology is concerned with knowledge about knowledge and asks 'how do we know?' about what constitutes reality and knowledge (Willig, 2013; Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). This is informed by ontological assumptions of reality. A realist stance may seek objective truths requiring neutral observation in a social world. However, Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) argue that this has been considerably undermined by the view that through observing the world it is unavoidable that the observer is influenced by their own 'notions of truth and objectivity' (Pp.17, Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). Epistemological assumptions can therefore be described as objectivist or subjectivist (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2011; Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). The current research question would assume a subjectivist epistemological stance as it does not assume that one objective truth can be sought, but that parents' experiences, and the researcher's interpretation of their experiences, are subjective in nature due to their individual constructs of the observed phenomenon. Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) state that subjective epistemological assumptions believe that 'we are shaped by lived experiences, and these will always come out in the knowledge we generate as researchers and in data generated by our subjects.' (Pp. 104, Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011).

According to Lincoln, Lynham and Guba's (2011) classification of basic beliefs of inquiry paradigms a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm appears to be

representative of the relativist ontological and subjectivist epistemological stance taken in relation to the current research questions. Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) state that 'If we reject the possibility of neutral observation, we have to admit to dealing with a socially constructed reality that may entail a questioning of whether or not what we take to be reality actually exists 'out there' at all.' (Pp.17, Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). Therefore, through adopting a constructivist/interpretivist philosophical position the current study does not seek to provide a singular, objective, generalisable truth, but accepts that there can be multiple truths that are relative to interpretation. Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) state that researchers within this paradigm attempt to gain increased knowledge regarding their study and participants by interpreting how the participants perceive and interact within a social context. It aims for a 'co-construction of knowledge, of understanding and interpretation of the meaning of lived experiences' (Pp. 196, Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

This study also adopts a phenomenological orientation to guide methodology, which fits under the umbrella of the interpretivist paradigm (Robson, 2011). Willig (2013) describes the aim of research using this approach is to produce knowledge about the subjective experience of research participants. It aims to capture the participant's feelings, thoughts and perceptions which constitute their experience rather than establishing the reality of the events. Therefore, it does not matter if a participant accurately describes what really happened as the aim is to establish knowledge of the lived experience, phenomenological knowledge, rather than the reality of the event. The phenomenological approach attempts 'to enter their experiential world by stepping into their shoes and looking at the world through their eyes' (Pp.16, Willig, 2013). The current research seeks to gain insight into the personal, lived experiences of parents when they were involved in the decision making process of choosing a secondary school for their children with statements of SEN and how they make sense of these experiences. Therefore, adopting a phenomenological approach appears relevant to the aims of the current study as it seeks to capture the parents' thoughts, feelings and perceptions about their experience rather than capturing the reality of the school selection events.

3.2 Rationale of Methodology

The proposed philosophical assumptions described above guide the current research into applying qualitative methodologies as the research focuses on the interpretation of individual subjective experiences and perceptions of each participant which cannot be quantified objectively. Four key qualitative methodologies will be considered briefly for their appropriateness in answering the current research question and a rationale is provided for the chosen methodological option.

3.2.1 Methodological options

3.2.1.1 Discursive approaches

Discursive approaches are concerned with the role of language in the construction of social reality and how people converse with one another. Willig (2013) explains that meaning is produced through analysing the text and does not look outside the text for further information. The focus is on the language and its role in the construction of the phenomenon rather than focusing on the participant. Therefore, discursive approaches do not address questions about subjectivity such as the participants' self-awareness and thoughts (Willig, 2013). It has been criticised for ignoring cognitive aspects of the participant and the social context around them (Willig, 2013). Langdrige (2007) refers to this as 'the lack of a person' (Pp. 345, Langdrige, 2007). Therefore, it may not be appropriate to the aims of the current research as it does not allow for the interpretation of the parents' thoughts, feelings and perceptions of their experiences.

3.2.1.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is interested in the ways in which people organise and thus bring order to experience through telling stories about themselves. Through constructing narratives about their lives, people make connections between events and interpret them. This focuses on how individuals weave their experiences into meaningful stories and is not concerned with identifying an objective reality of events, which supports the aims of the current research questions. However, it encourages the telling of one's story rather than using

questions as prompts. Parents may not be able to provide a rich story without prompts. Narrative analysis focuses on analysing how participants tell their stories in terms of structure, content and the use of language rather than focusing on their perceptions and interpretations of their lived experiences (Murray, 2003).

3.2.1.3 Grounded theory

Grounded theory was developed to provide a method that would allow researchers to move from data to theory so that new theories could emerge (Charmaz, 2008). It was designed to study social processes from the bottom up using an inductive approach (Willig, 2013). Initial data is analysed and categories/themes are identified for further data collection. This is repeated until there are no new categories identified and theoretical saturation is achieved. It aims to identify, refine and integrate categories, and ultimately to develop theory. Grounded theory was designed to identify and explicate contextualised social processes. This could be relevant to the aims of the current study as it aims to categorise participants' responses and requires researchers to return to participants to investigate deeper into emerging themes with the aim to access underlying cognitions, beliefs and attitudes which impact on participants' understanding of their experiences. However, it attempts to look for commonalities in responses across individuals to generate theory rather than focusing on their own individual personal lived experience and does not address issues of reflexivity and the role of the researcher.

3.2.1.4 Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA)

IPA places a phenomenological focus on the meaning and sense making of peoples lived experiences as well as utilising hermeneutic theories of interpretation. IPA researchers aim to be both empathetic and questioning. The first aim is to try to understand their participant's world and to describe 'what it is like', usually with a focus on a participant's experiences of a particular event, process or relationship (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006). However, it acknowledges that access to an experience is both partial and complex. The account is always co-constructed by participant and researcher and so the aim is to get as 'close' to the participant's experience as is possible through

reflecting on their own awareness of their position, their experience and their knowledge of psychology.

The second aim of IPA is to develop a more overtly interpretative analysis which moves beyond a description of the participant's experience. This aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participant's personal sense-making activities and consider what it means to the participant. Interpretation might engage with existing theoretical constructs which distinguishes IPA from grounded theory approaches (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006). It is also idiographic in that it focuses on understanding the experiences of specific individuals in specific contexts.

3.2.2 Rationale for selecting IPA

The research question concerns parents' perceptions and experiences of the decision making process when choosing a secondary school placement for their child with a statement of SEN. Therefore, the aims of IPA, to focus on in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meaning which they make from them, seem ideally suited in trying to answer this question.

The idiographic approach to understanding the individuals experience also suits the current study, as although the sample was homogenous in that it was made up of parents with children with special needs, who have all recently been through the school choice process, the context of the participants' contexts and previous experiences varied. Through taking an idiographic approach the differing experiences and meanings can be analysed at an individual level, before looking for consistencies or differences across participants.

IPA also acknowledges that the researcher brings their own preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes which will influence their interpretation of the participants' experiences as well as the participants' previous experiences influencing their interpretation. This complements the ontological and epistemological position taken in section 3.1, as it is interpretative in nature, not aiming to identify one

'real' reality, but to put forward an interpretation of the participants' experiences and sense making of the school choice process. Smith (2011) suggests that after carrying out a piece of IPA analysis, the researcher can relate their interpretation to existing literature, including psychological models and theory.

3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA's theoretical underpinnings are based within philosophy and draw on the fundamental underpinnings of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are leading figures in phenomenological philosophy. Their work has influenced the development of phenomenological and interpretative psychology (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Although, their contributions and beliefs have variations, they all place an emphasis on focusing upon 'lived experience' (Willig, 2013).

Husserl was the founding philosopher of phenomenology and focused on peoples' perceptions and experience of the world. He argued that in order to describe and fully understand any given phenomena, it is necessary to go 'back to the things themselves' (Langdrige, 2007). Husserl believed that people experience the world using a 'natural attitude', which means that experiences are taken for granted, are not fully focused upon and are perceived with regard to pre-existing expectations (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This prevents objects from showing themselves fully and, therefore, Husserl argued that we must bracket off or suspend our presuppositions, assumptions, judgements and preconceptions (known as epoché) in order to go back to the essential features of human experience and become fully aware of what is actually before us (Langdrige, 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). He believed that it was possible to bracket off these assumptions and transcend our own experience of the world so that it was possible to see it differently and discover the essential qualities of experience itself, known as transcendental phenomenology.

Philosophers succeeding Husserl, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre questioned how much people can truly bracket off preconceptions as

their experience of the world is as it is lived by them and phenomena will always be interpreted from within the world with all experience situated existentially, in a particular time and space (Langdridge, 2007). Heidegger emphasised the existential view of a person in context, using the term 'dasein' to describe how 'being-in-the-world' is always in relation to something, situated and perspectival (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Consequently, the interpretation of people's meaning making activities are central in phenomenological inquiry. Heidegger argued that people cannot be meaningfully detached from their context (people, language, objects and culture). Therefore, it is not possible for people to completely depart from their prior assumptions in order to achieve 'epoché' or gain knowledge free from interpretation (Langdridge, 2007). This can only be aimed for through engaging in reflective and reflexive thought (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). He believed that people can only be understood in the context of their meaningful world and, moreover, that their meaningful world is also an essential part of them (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006).

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty also view knowledge as inextricably interpretative and that the embodied nature of the world only becomes meaningful through our perception of it (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Merleau-Ponty said that people can observe and experience others, but they can never entirely share the other persons experience because that comes from their own embodied position in the world (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) argue that through the use of phenomenology an insight can be gained into how to study and understand human experience in its own right. Husserl highlighted the need to engage in reflective and reflexive thinking whilst studying experience. Therefore, a number of strategies were adopted throughout the research process to support this, such as keeping a research journal. However, like Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the current research acknowledges that it is not possible to fully bracket off our prior-knowledge, experience and preconceptions and only attempts can be made to this through reflexivity.

3.3.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and has its roots in the interpretation of biblical texts (Langdridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology influenced development of IPA placing emphasis on interpretation and the role of both participant and researcher in a dynamic research process.

Hermeneutics was linked to phenomenology by Heidegger, who argued that our understanding of being-in-the-world is always accessed through interpretation and the fore-structure (prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions), is always brought to this process of interpretation (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The fore-structure can present an obstacle to interpretation and priority should be given to the new object, letting it speak with its own voice, however it acknowledges that preconceptions are inevitably present. Heidegger philosophised that through interpreting the 'things themselves' it can help the interpreter to become aware of the fore-structure and what the preconceptions were. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest that bracketing of preconceptions should actually be a cyclical process throughout the interpretative process and that it can only be partially achieved through reflexive practices. Gadamer explained the cyclical process between the experience itself influencing interpretation which influences the fore-structure, which in turn influences the interpretation (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

This links to the concept of hermeneutic circles which is described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) as a dynamic relationship between the parts and the whole. In order to understand a part, it needs to be placed in the context of the whole, and in order to understand the whole, one needs to consider its constituent parts. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) propose that this is relevant to the iterative process of analysis in IPA and that the researcher should move back and forth through a range of different ways of analysing the data. Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest that there is in fact a double hermeneutic circle involved in IPA research as 'the participants are trying to make sense of their

world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world,' (Pp. 53, Smith and Osborn, 2008).

This also combines empathetic hermeneutics with questioning hermeneutics whereby the researcher is trying to interpret what the experience was like for the participant, at the same time as asking critical questions about the experience in order to interpret what it means to the participant (Smith and Osborn, 2008). They are trying to stand in the shoes of their participant but also stand alongside in order to ask questions about meaning. This double hermeneutic can offer a richer and more comprehensive analysis (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014), although it is accepted that gaining direct access to the research participants' life-world will remain unattainable (Willig, 2013).

3.3.3 Idiography

IPA is idiographic, concerned with the particular, such as specific individuals or events rather than taking a 'nomothetic' approach which aims to make generalisations at a population level (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009). It aims to provide detailed analysis in order to understand how particular phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context. Although, it is acknowledged that it is not possible to fully access another person's 'life world', Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) argue that a person can offer us a personally unique perspective on their relationship to, and involvement in, phenomena of interest. Accordingly, IPA utilizes small, purposive and carefully selected samples in order to collect rich data to understand the perspective of an individual and get as close to their lived experience as possible, rather than seeking sufficient numbers of participants to achieve theoretical saturation.

3.4 Limitations of IPA

IPA uses language as a means for participants to communicate and describe experiences. Willig (2013) proposes that this relies on the representational validity of the language. It is argued that language constructs rather than

describes reality and the words chosen to describe an experience always construct a particular version of that experience, i.e. the same experience can be described in many different ways. It is claimed that the interview transcript tells more about the way in which an individual talks about a particular experience within a particular context rather than the experience itself (Willig, 2013). However, IPA does address this in part through taking an interpretative stance.

IPA relies on participants descriptions of their experiences. Willig (2013) questions the suitability of accounts from participants in order to capture their lived experiences and meanings. Consideration was given to how successfully participants are able to communicate the rich texture of their experience to the researcher, particularly when not accustomed to talking in this way. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) state that 'our interpretations of experience are always shaped, limited and enabled, by language' (Pp.94, Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Language is limited and so creates boundaries to fully describing an experience, but it remains a useful tool to enable participants to share as much of their 'life world' as possible with the researcher.

Another limitation of IPA is that it only attempts to interpret how the world is experienced by people in particular contexts and does not further develop understanding of why such experiences take place and why they are perceived as they are. It could be argued that this could limit understanding of why people experience certain phenomena in certain ways (Willig, 2013). However, it does aim to interpret findings in the light of psychological theory and frameworks (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Finally, it has been argued that due to the central role of the researcher in the subjective meaning-making process, the trustworthiness of interpretation is limited to their ability to interpret, reflect and make sense of data (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). Therefore, the comprehensive procedures set out by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), provided for both novice and experienced IPA researchers, were followed throughout the data collection and analysis phases,

as well as considering quality and validity considerations as suggested by Yardley (2000 & 2008) (see section 3.7).

3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important part of IPA research due to the philosophical underpinnings and epistemological and ontological assumptions. Reflexivity involves awareness that the researcher and the object of study affect each other mutually and continually in the research process (Haynes, 2012). It moves beyond reflecting on the research process and methods used, to consider not only the researcher's role in forming the research through acknowledging the influence of the researcher's own experiences, assumptions and knowledge on the process and interpretations, but also how these transform and influence new understandings during the process through interactions with the participants and data, a double hermeneutic circle (Haynes, 2012; Willig, 2013). Researcher reflexivity involves thinking about how initial thinking came to be, how pre-existing understanding is constantly revised in the light of new understandings and how this in turn affects the research (Haynes, 2012). Willig (2013) describes the researcher as an author, playing an active role in the process and outcome, rather than being a witness to the research. It is important for the researcher to be reflexive and acknowledge preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes, and to be aware of their own responses during the research, in order to attempt to bracket them off and to access the phenomenology of the participants' experiences.

Initial consideration of what the current author brings to the research was considered in chapter one. To facilitate reflexivity throughout the process a research journal was kept, as suggested by Haynes (2012), throughout the data gathering and analysis process which included thoughts and feelings on the process as well as fieldwork notes of observations, interactions, conversations and emotions at each stage. Discussions with supervisors and critical friends familiar with qualitative research also supported evaluation of responses to the research subject, participants and process. Examples of

reflexivity recorded in the research journal are included in reflexive boxes at relevant points throughout the method section below.

3.6 Method

3.6.1 Participant selection

3.6.1.1 Sample selection

For a study using IPA, participants are selected purposively so that only those people who are able to offer a particular insight into the experience being investigated are recruited (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Landridge, 2007). Therefore, only parents who had recently experienced the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for children with EHC plans or statements of SEN were selected. The sample should seek to be fairly homogeneous depending on the specificity of the study. For example, Landridge (2007) explains that if the experience is fairly common then the sample may focus on participants from particular demographics, where as for a less commonly occurring experience the sample is likely to consist of participants who share that experience regardless of background characteristics. Participants should be selected on the basis that they grant access to a particular experience, rather than a population (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Therefore, the following criteria were used to select participants based on them having shared experiences:

- All participants were parents of children with an EHC plan or statement of SEN.
- All parents had a child with an EHC plan or statement of SEN in Year 6 during the academic year 2014/2015 and so had recently experienced the decision making process of choosing secondary school placement, but their children had not yet transitioned to secondary school.
- All parents had raised questions about type of placement for secondary education, i.e. mainstream, resourced provision or specialist provision, for their child and so had experienced a significant decision making process and had an EP involved at the Year 5 change of phase review.
- Parents and children who were at child protection level of support, and so considered to be vulnerable, were removed from the sample.

3.6.1.2 Sampling strategy

Through focusing on children who had an EP attend the Year 5 change of phase review, it was possible to identify parents who had experienced a significant decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for their child. Within the context of the local authority, EPs are only required to attend change of phase reviews where questions have been raised about the type of placement for secondary school. Parents of children with statements who are in mainstream primary and are expected to transition to their local mainstream secondary would not usually have EP involvement. The Educational Psychology database was used to identify children in Year 6 with a statement or EHC Plan who had an Educational Psychologist involved in the Year 5 annual review. It became apparent that none of the children in that year group had transferred from a statement to an EHC plan. A sample of children with EHC plans going through this process would not be available until 2018. However, it was felt that only having children with statements of SEN was still relevant as the LA were not changing procedures within the change of phase and school placement process when they transferred to EHC plans.

The relevant Educational Psychologist who had attended the review was then approached and asked if the parent or child were considered to be vulnerable based on the inclusion criteria above and removed from the sample accordingly. The EP involved in the case made contact with the parents who were left in the sample in order to ask for permission to share their contact details with myself (See Appendix 2: Phone script). All parents contacted agreed to share contact details and so a recruitment letter was then sent to the parents (See Appendix 3: Recruitment letter). This letter invited parents to take part in an interview to talk about their experiences of choosing secondary school provision for their child. Contact details were included for parents to use if they would like further information or were interested in taking part. Following contact from parents an initial meeting was arranged to meet the researcher and ethical considerations were followed as detailed Section 3.6.2.

Reflexivity: Initially it was intended that recruitment letters would be sent out to all parents deemed appropriate by EPs involved in the annual review and ethical approval had been granted for this (See Appendix 4). However, upon reflection with the principal EP, it was felt that using the EP service database to gain contact details was crossing the research/practitioner boundary and so it was decided that the EP who had worked with the parents would contact them directly and ask if they consented to their contact details being shared with myself for research purposes. This was discussed with my supervisor at university and it was felt that this did not need to go back to the ethics committee as it was an additional step to ensure ethical practice. All parents contacted did give consent for their contact details to be shared. This adaptation to the process may have influenced parents' perceptions of my role, as their EP was asking if their details could be passed on specifically for research purposes, and so this may have led them to be more likely to identify with myself as a researcher rather than EP practitioner, which in turn may have influenced responses to questions during the interview, helping them to feel that they could be open and honest about the role of the EP.

3.6.1.3 Final sample

Due to the idiographic nature of the study, with little attempt to generalise beyond the particular sample, a small sample size was recruited. This fulfilled the aims of the study, to understand the perceptions and experiences of individual parents and allowed for detailed case-by-case analysis of transcripts in order to provide a detailed account of individual experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The final sample included 8 participants, (2 mother and father, 1 father only and 3 mother only interviews), plus 2 pilot participants (mother and father interview).

3.6.2 Ethical considerations

This research was planned and implemented with consideration of ethical issues outlined in the British Psychology Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2010) and was granted ethical approval by the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology Ethics Committee (See Appendix 4: Ethical approval letter). Particular regard was paid to ensuring informed consent was obtained, issues of anonymity and confidentiality and to the reduction of potential for harm.

3.6.2.1 Informed consent

All parents were fully informed about all aspects of the research through the participant information sheet (See Appendix 5: Participant information sheet) and an initial discussion took place where the participants were given the opportunity to ask any additional questions before consenting to take part. If parents agreed to participate, the consent form was read with the parents and signed consent was gained before all interviews (See appendix 6: Consent form). The consent form asked parents to indicate that they had read the participant information sheet, understood that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point, without giving reason. Parents retained the information sheet, which provided them with contact details for the researcher, university supervisor and the chair of the ethics committee should they wish to make contact for any reason.

3.6.2.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Interviews were audio-recorded onto a digital recording device which was kept in a secured location and recordings were destroyed following analysis. Recordings were transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms used for parents' and children's names to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Other names used for people and places were omitted or replaced with a single letter, so that consistency of that name could be identified throughout that interview. Parents were informed through the information sheet and during introductory discussions that their data would be anonymised and would be reported in documents for research purposes.

3.6.2.3 Protection from potential of harm

It was perceived that there would be minimal risk of psychological harm, distress or discomfort for parents taking part in this research. However, steps were taken to reduce the impact of any possible feelings of stress and anxiety, which could be experienced upon recalling previous events and talking about personal experiences. Parents were given a choice of where they would like the interview to take place, either at their home or their child's current school. All participants chose to meet in their home, except for the two parents involved

in the pilot interview and they chose to meet at their daughter's school. Following each interview, oral debriefing took place in order to give the participants an opportunity to reflect upon the interview process, discuss any concerns and ask additional questions. A debrief letter was then sent out a few days after the interview, again reminding participants of their right to withdraw and contact details should they want to discuss anything further (See Appendix 7: Debrief letter). Participants could also access their case EP, who had made the initial contact regarding the study, if any additional support was needed. A follow-up phone call was made to each participant for the same purposes and to offer the opportunity to have a follow up meeting to debrief them on the findings of the study in June 2016. Along with the potential for harm, it should be acknowledged that the parents may have also experienced positive thoughts from being listened to and being given an opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions on the process.

3.6.3 Data collection

3.6.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

IPA requires a data collection method which will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used as they are considered to be one of the optimal methods of data collection for eliciting details about personal experiences and phenomenon from participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). It is acknowledged that semi-structured interviews do not necessarily elicit a 'true' or factually accurate recount of events, but through a series of open ended questions, it is intended that participants interpret the question and construct their own version and interpretation of experiences and events (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Langdridge (2007) states that semi-structured interviews represent a trade-off between consistency and flexibility. Consistency is maintained through the use of an interview schedule consisting of a series of questions and prompts designed to elicit the maximum possible information. The interviewer is also flexible, actively listening and adapting questions in response to the participant to explore some aspects in more detail and if questions have already been

answered earlier in the interview, then the schedule is not enforced rigidly (Langdridge, 2007).

3.6.3.2 Developing semi-structured interview schedule

The schedule was developed using a range of question types as developed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) for in-depth interviews. These moved from those requiring straight forward narrative and descriptive answers, such as, 'Can you tell me how you found out about the process of choosing a secondary school?' to those that required more reflective and evaluative responses such as, 'What advice would you give to parents who will be going through the decision making process in the future?'. The interview schedule did not ask the research question directly but aimed to facilitate the discussion of relevant topics, which would allow the research question to be answered through analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). As suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the interviews began with a descriptive question, talking about their child, to help the parents to feel at ease with talking. Formulating the schedule helped to reflect on the most appropriate order of questions and the phrasing of questions in order to avoid closed questions, leading questions or questions which made assumptions about their experience. An initial schedule was produced prior to submission to the ethics committee (See Appendix 8: Initial interview schedule). However, following the pilot interview and further discussions with a university supervisor, several amended versions were made before the final interview schedule was produced (see Appendix 9: final interview schedule).

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) believe that as a consequence of the preparation in constructing an interview schedule, the researcher is generally able to be a more engaged and attentive listener, and a more flexible and responsive interviewer.

Reflexivity: Through engaging in reflective and reflexive thinking following the pilot interview (described in the reflexivity box below) the semi-structured interview schedule was adapted several times. Although the first questions in part 1 (see Appendix 8) were intended to encourage the participant to feel relaxed and talk openly, the directness of the questions had the opposite effect, eliciting brief responses and I felt that this established me taking on a directive role which continued throughout the course of the interaction. I felt that this could then lead interpretation of their experiences to be more significantly influenced by my own preconceptions and assumptions. After changing the initial question to one broad question, it was felt that the participants talked more openly and confidently and I was able to take a less directive role, in keeping with the aims of IPA. The final interview schedule had seven main questions (see appendix 9), which were memorised to aid the flow of the interview and were asked when it was felt appropriate during the interview in order to reduce directedness and the influence of my role. Several prompts to encourage talk were left on the schedule to increase my confidence in encouraging participants to expand answers. However, these were rarely referred to during the course of an interview.

3.6.3.3 Pilot interview

The pilot interview was carried out with two parents with whom the researcher had been the trainee EP involved in their child's annual review. Therefore, some initial rapport had already been established which facilitated the beginning of the interview, but the data collected was not included in analysis as it was felt that power imbalances may influence the openness of parents' responses when talking about the role of the EP. Parents were asked to reflect on the interview process at the end of the interview and asked if there were any other questions they felt should be included in the schedule. Reflections following this interview were recorded immediately afterwards in the research journal. The experience of the pilot interview was valuable in providing experience in facilitating interviews and an opportunity to engage in critical reflection with regards to the interview schedule.

Reflexivity: Thoughts and feelings recorded in the research journal facilitated reflexive thinking after the first interview and supported adaptations for subsequent interviews. I felt that I had presented with a nervous persona which had influenced their responses during the interview. I also felt that I had looked to the interview schedule frequently to calm nerves, but that this had stunted the flow of the interview. In order to consider my role in the process more carefully, I listened and re-listened to the audio recording and transcribed all of my contributions in isolation. I also listened to the interview and noted what I would have said if I was able to repeat the interview again. This process helped to facilitate critical reflexivity, which helped me to adapt my role in subsequent interviews and supported reflections on the interview schedule.

3.6.3.4 Conducting the interviews

All participants took part in a single interview in their home in June or July 2015. Interviews were conducted in this time period to ensure that parents were aware of their allocated secondary school placement and were able to recall recent experiences about the process leading to this, but their responses would not be influenced by their or their child's actual experience of the transition to the new setting. There were no withdrawals of consent before or after the interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Consent was checked prior to the interview beginning and a brief introductory statement was said to the participants reassuring them that there were no right or wrong answers and that their opinions, thoughts and feelings were valued (see Appendix 9: Final interview schedule). Interviews were recorded on an audio digital recording device. Following each interview, reflections were written in a research journal, these included immediate impressions, thoughts and reflections of the participants' experiences and the interviewer's role in the interview process.

Reflexivity: Throughout the course of data collection, I continually reflected on my role and competence as an interviewer and considered how this impacted on the participant and the interview process. As I became more confident in the role, I began to draw upon skills developed from previous experiences including EP training around consultation skills and counselling concepts course about being an active listener. The interviews gradually increased in length. I was not sure if this was a result of my increasing confidence and competence at supporting the interview process or was coincidental that the participants were more at ease or felt that they had more they wanted to convey.

3.6.3.5 Transcription of interviews

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, which created an opportunity to begin to become immersed in the data prior to analysis. Transcription focused on accurate recording of spoken words rather than the exact length of pauses and all non-verbal utterances, as it is the content of the participants' account which is the focus of interpretation (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). However, notable non-verbal utterances such as laughter, groans, significant pauses, hesitations and interruptions were noted in brackets. Any identifying information, such as school and place names, were removed or replaced with an individual letter to mark consistency of its use throughout that interview.

3.6.4 Data Analysis

After transcribing the data, all transcripts were transferred into excel documents so that all commenting and themes could be recorded on the computer. Tables of themes could then be created in excel, which tracked all columns of data, including lines of transcript with initial noting. This enabled the researcher and future readers to see all stages of analysis in tables of themes. The transcripts were analysed using the process exemplified in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). IPA is intended to be a flexible approach to analysis but can be characterised by a set of common processes, such as moving from the descriptive to the interpretative and moving from the particular to the shared. The first four stages were completed for a single interview before moving onto the next interview, in line with IPA's idiographic commitment.

3.6.4.1 Stage 1: reading and re-reading

The first stage is immersion in the data of one transcript through repeated listening to the audio recording whilst closely reading the transcript. This first stage is conducted to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This was repeated twice for each interview. Initial thoughts, feelings and reflections were noted in the research journal and bracketed off for later scrutiny if appropriate in an attempt to remain focused on hearing what was actually being said.

3.6.4.2 Stage 2: Initial noting

This stage involved an exploratory examination of the transcript focusing on descriptive, linguistic and conceptual features. The aim was to keep an open mind and note anything of interest within the transcript. These notes were made in the right hand column of the transcript (see Figure 3.1: Extract from Transcript 1 exemplifying initial noting). The initial noting focused on three areas:

Descriptive comments focused on describing the content of what the participant had said within the transcript and describing the objects of concern. This included key objects such as relationships with people involved, specific events, processes and their values during the experience. This has a clear phenomenological focus staying close to the participant's explicit meaning. These were recorded in red (normal font in black and white version).

Linguistic comments reflected on the specific language used by the participant, such as metaphors, emotive adjectives, laughter and repetition. These were recorded in light green (italics in black and white version).

Conceptual comments asked questions of the data and moved towards a more conceptual understanding of what it means to have these concerns in this context. This involved engaging with the transcript at a more interrogative level, trying to unpack implicit underlying meaning behind the text. These were recorded in purple (bold in black and white version).

An example of one complete interview transcript with initial noting can be seen in Appendix 13.

35	to making your decision that you put down on the forms. So can you erm tell me about	
36	when you first started thinking about choosing a secondary school for H?	
37	(pause)	
38	P2: Panic! (both P1 & 2 laugh)	panic' nervous laughing - or looking back on process no longer panic and can look back in humour. Fear of the process/making a decision. Preconceptions. What was fear due to? Fear over child growing up? Choosing the right school for their child? Their child's needs?
39	P1: yeah like we said previously it was one of those things where it...it seems to be coming	Fear over child growing up.
40	up quickly so it's all a bit oh god is it that time already.	
41	P2: erm yeah and obviously we needed to start thinking about it a lot sooner than perhaps	Their child is different? Special? Pressure on decision
42	friends of ours who've got children of a similar age who erm you know are happy to wait	
43	until the cut off point and but you know we really we had to put some more ground work	ground work uniqueness of their decision - different to everyone else, more important?
44	in it really. We knew that we didn't really want C (local mainstream secondary) even	forming decision prior to looking
45	though we did go and look erm but all the reports and the size of it	reports from others and size influencing decision

Figure 3.1: Extract from Transcript 1 exemplifying initial noting

3.6.4.3 Stage 3: Developing emergent themes

The aim of this stage was to focus on small sections of data whilst reviewing the exploratory comments in order to develop emergent themes which captured and reflected understanding. Emergent themes were recorded in the left hand column of the transcript (see Figure 3.2: Extract from Transcript 1 with emergent themes added). Although each emergent theme focused on a section of text, they were influenced by the interview as a whole. This process is reflective of the iterative nature of IPA and relates to the concept of the hermeneutic circle in which the part and the whole can only be interpreted in relation to one another (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). At this stage, analysis moves away from being participant oriented and more into the researcher's interpretation. Themes may reflect participants original words and thoughts but also the analysts interpretation. Following this stage, the first transcript was shared with an EP colleague familiar with IPA research and a university supervisor to discuss emergent themes identified, agreement was found with the themes, although some were renamed to capture the concept more precisely (see Appendix 13 for an example of a complete transcript from Interview 2 with emergent themes added).

	35	to making your decision that you put down on the forms. So can you erm tell me about	
	36	when you first started thinking about choosing a secondary school for H?	
	37	(pause)	
Pre-decision emotions - fear of decision	38	P2: Panic! (both P1 & 2 laugh)	panic' nervous laughing - or looking back on process no longer panic and can look back in humour. Fear of the process/making a decision. Preconceptions. What was fear due to? Fear over child growing up? Choosing the right school for their child? Their child's needs?
Children grow up quickly	39	P1: yeah like we said previously it was one of those things where it...it seems to be coming up quickly so it's all a bit oh god is it that time already.	Fear over child growing up.
Unique needs of child	40		
	41	P2: erm yeah and obviously we needed to start thinking about it a lot sooner than perhaps	Their child is different? Special? Pressure on decision
	42	friends of ours who've got children of a similar age who erm you know are happy to wait	
	43	until the cut off point and but you know we really we had to put some more ground work	ground work uniqueness of their decision - different to everyone else, more important?
Discount option prior to visit based on attributes - size and reports	44	in it really. We knew that we didn't really want C (local mainstream secondary) even	forming decision prior to looking
	45	though we did go and look erm but all the reports and the size of it	reports from others and size influencing decision

Figure 3.2: Extract from Transcript 1 with emergent themes added.

Reflexivity: As emergent themes were developed, I felt concerned that the closeness experienced to the participant's lived experiences (phenomenology) would be lost as my interpretations may become increasingly influenced by previous knowledge of research and psychological theory. As a result of this, I felt that I may have been too cautious initially resulting in emergent themes which were overly descriptive. I reflected on this with my university supervisor on a number of occasions and was reminded to trust the process and the theory supporting this. I returned to the hermeneutic theory. The original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts as you conduct your analysis, but these then come together in another new whole at the end of the analysis in the write-up.

3.6.4.4 Stage 4: Searching for connections across themes

Emergent themes were grouped together by identifying common links between them using concepts of abstraction (similar themes brought together), subsumption (emergent theme becomes superordinate theme), numeration (frequency in which theme is supported signifies importance) and function (what function it serves) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Emergent themes were written onto sticky notes and placed onto large sheets of paper in order to make it physically easier to regroup and organise them as patterns and connections between themes became apparent (see Figure 3.3: Photographs to show the progression of identifying connections across themes for Transcript 1). Sorting tools on excel were also used to group emergent themes alphabetically. By using these methods, subordinate themes and overarching superordinate themes were generated. An excel document including all subordinate and superordinate themes was then created with examples of extracts from the transcript, along with initial notes (see Figure 3.4: Extract from Transcript 1 demonstrating table of superordinate and subordinate themes). See Appendix 14 for an example of superordinate and subordinate themes for Interview 2.

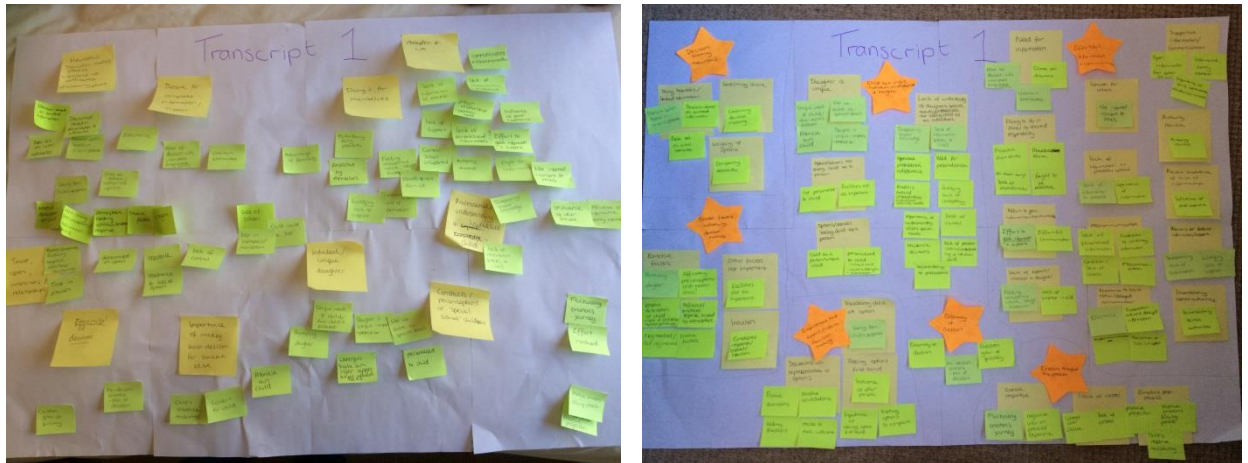


Figure 3.3: Photographs to show the progression of identifying connections across themes for Transcript 1.

Child as a unique individual/individualisation of daughter <i>Daughter is unique</i>	Unique needs of child	41	P2: erm yeah and obviously we needed to start thinking about it a lot sooner than perhaps	<i>Their child is different? Special? Pressure on decision</i>
		42	friends of ours who've got children of a similar age who erm you know are happy to wait	
		43	until the cut off point and but you know we really we had to put some more ground work	<i>ground work uniqueness of their decision - different to everyone else, more important?</i>
	Not as severe as special school	79	P2: which were lovely (...)but erm (...)we we didn't really think it was appropriate for H, she's	<i>lovely - in empathic tone. Pauses - awkward to put into words. Wanting their child to fit in? Be similar to other children in setting?</i>
	Lost in metropolis/mainstream	80	somewhere in between we didn't want her lost in the sprawl of the metropolis of CV but we	<i>lost in the sprawl of the metropolis - metaphor likening large mainstream to busy city, child 'lost' - physically and metaphorically.</i>
	Not as severe as special school	81	didn't really think that her needs were as severe as some of the other children at the special	<i>Needs not severe - wanting to be similar to peers.</i>
	Not as severe as special school	82	schools and that she would maybe get less support somehow in a special school because (...)	<i>child getting lost again, wanting most support for their child. Pause - unsure about how to put into words. Desire to make best decision for daughter</i>
	Not as severe as special school	83	she wasn't as needy? If that makes sense.	<i>posed as question - still unsure of 'correct' word See's her child as different and prioritises her child, wants most support, checking that I understands what she means without saying it in words. Doesn't want her child around children who are less able? not as good role models? they would need too much support and that would take away from their child.</i>

Figure 3.4: Extract from Transcript 1 demonstrating table of superordinate and subordinate themes.

Reflexivity: This stage of analysis was found to be particularly time consuming and complex. I wanted to maintain the phenomenological perspective of the participants' experiences, at the same time as being aware of my own preconceptions and assumptions, such as initial thoughts upon reading the interview transcripts and knowledge of literature explored in the review.

3.6.4.5 Stage 5: Moving to the next case

Stages 1 to 4 were repeated for each transcript. Each transcript was approached individually, with the aim to bracket off themes that had emerged

from the previous transcript, in order to maintain an idiographic perspective. The final grouping of superordinate, subordinate and emergent themes are shown in photographs in Appendix 10.

Reflexivity: It became particularly difficult to remain idiographic to each participant's phenomenological experience as this stage was repeated for each interview, I tried to bracket off new knowledge gained from analysis of previous interviews and remain focused on the participants' lived experience. As I sorted emergent themes into subordinate groups, I continued to return to the original transcript to remain focused on interpretation of the participants meaning. However, it is acknowledged that analysis of one interview will have, to some extent, influenced interpretation of the next.

3.6.4.6 Stage 6: Looking for patterns across cases

This stage involved searching for connections across cases, once stages 1 to 4 had been completed for each individual interview. All of the superordinate themes from each interview were collected on coloured sticky notes in order to identify which interview it had originated from. These were then sorted and grouped to create master themes (see Figure 3.5: A photograph to show the identified connections between superordinate themes across interviews). During this process superordinate and subordinate themes were relabelled and reconfigured. A table was then produced for each master theme, comprising of its superordinate and subordinate themes with the prevalence of each across the interviews (see Appendix 11: A table showing the prevalence of each superordinate and subordinate theme across interviews).

This stage was reflected upon with a critical friend, who was not previously involved in the study or from an Educational Psychology background, but shares a psychology background and has extensive experience in qualitative research.

quality and validity in qualitative research including sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance. These have been applied to IPA research in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and are considered in the context of the current study below.

3.7.1 Sensitivity to context

Yardley (2000) suggests that a sensitivity to the context of theory and research can be established through knowledge and understanding gained from previous research and critical appraisal of relevant literature in order to formulate a research question that addresses gaps in current understanding (Yardley, 2008). As well as a clear grounding in the philosophy and methodological approach adopted. The literature review provided a clear analysis of research literature relevant to the context of school choice and decision making theory which led to the current research question and rationale for the methodological options (See chapter 2 and section 3.2).

Continuous research to develop understanding of theoretical underpinnings, as well as implementation of IPA, has developed sensitivity to the approach (See section 3.3). In keeping with the idiographic stance of IPA, it has been important to try to bracket awareness of the literature when conducting interviews and during the early stages of analysis in order to remain sensitive to what the participants say about their lived experiences. A research journal was kept following each interview and throughout the analysis process to support reflexivity and bracketing of preconceptions and initial interpretations. Sensitivity was maintained throughout the stages of analysis by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the original data. Verbatim quotes have been included in the analysis section (See chapter 4) to enable the reader to reflect on the interpretations being made from the data (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Emerging findings were then analysed at a more interpretative level and considered in relation to previous research and theory which has been presented in the discussion (chapter 5).

In order to be sensitive to the participants needs and to enable them to feel that they could talk openly about their experiences, they were offered a choice about where they felt most comfortable for the interview to take place, with most choosing their home. Potential power imbalances were also considered, leading to data from parents who had been involved in working with the researcher within a practitioner EP context only being collected as part of a pilot interview and not included in the analysed data set.

3.7.2 Commitment and rigour

Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the study in the selection of an appropriate sample, the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis undertaken (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Yardley, 2008). Purposive sampling of the most appropriate participants to answer the research question has been described in section 3.6.1. It was aimed to improve the quality of the interview through developing the interview schedule following a pilot interview and reflections in supervision. Reflective thoughts about the interview process were also recorded in the research journal following each interview.

Commitment was made to immersion in the data through engaging extensively with each transcript following stages of analysis exemplified in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Supervision was sought from university tutors regarding both the process and analysis of the data, as well as gaining support from a colleague who was familiar with IPA and a 'critical friend' who has extensive experience in qualitative research but remains detached from the EP role, who offered reflections on each stage of the analysis.

3.7.3 Transparency and coherence

Coherence is an emphasis on integrating information in such a way that it makes sense as a consistent whole (Yardley, 2008). Coherence has been demonstrated in the current study through consistency in the rationale behind the research question, justifying the appropriateness of the methodology in answering this, explaining the selection of participants and conducting a thorough analysis in adherence to IPA principles.

As purported by Yardley (2008) caution should be taken when reporting interpretations as 'findings' to avoid making generalisation about patterns and interpretations made from the data. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) explain that in the context of IPA 'truth claims are always tentative and analysis subjective. At the same time the subjectivity is dialogical, systematic and rigorous in its application and the results of it are available for the reader to check subsequently' (Pp.80, Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Transparency refers to how clearly the stages of the research process are described so that the reader can see exactly what was done and why (Yardley, 2008). A detailed description of the method and stages of analysis have been provided, along with an audit trail in the appendix with examples of information given to participants, analysed transcripts and tables of identified themes with examples. A database is also available with a copy of all transcript, analyses and photographs demonstrating assimilation of emergent themes into subordinate and superordinate themes.

The influence of the researcher has been openly considered in section 3.5 and through the research journal kept throughout the data collection and analysis process.

3.7.4 Impact and importance

This considers whether the research provides useful insights and leads to recommendations which impact on future practice. The current research aims to offer greater understanding of perceptions and influences on the decision making process from the perspective of parents. It also offers recommendations and implications for support offered to parents by the LA SEN team and EP service, including the researchers own future practice. These are being fed back to the EP service and the LA SEN team directly with the intention that there will be a positive impact on future practice to support parents when choosing school placement for children with SEN.

4. Chapter Four: Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The following section presents an account of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of parents' perceptions and experiences of the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for their child with a statement of SEN. Three master themes were identified through the process of analysis described in Section 3.6.5. Each master theme comprised of three to four superordinate themes which are illustrated in Figure 4.1: Illustrative representation of identified master themes and superordinate themes. Although each master theme is presented in turn as an isolated theme, they are interrelated and elements of each theme impact on the experience of another. A table showing the prevalence of each superordinate and subordinate theme across interviews is included in Appendix 11.

The themes described in this chapter are a result of a double hermeneutic circle, influenced by the researcher's own interpretation and perspectives of the participants making sense of their experiences. It is acknowledged that another researcher may have focused on different aspects of the experiences. To illustrate the themes, examples of verbatim quotes from across the interviews have been included within the analysis section. Additional illustrative examples of each superordinate and subordinate theme are included in Appendix 12. The sampling of quotes aimed to be proportionate across participants so that individual voices could be heard and individual experiences illuminated. The aim was to illustrate divergence as well as convergence across participants so as to illustrate both breadth and depth of each theme (Smith, 2011).

4.1.1 Context of participants' experience

In order to support the idiographic understanding of each parent's experience, a summary of relevant contextual information has been included in Table 3: Contextual information about schools parents visited and school choices, for reference throughout the analysis chapter.

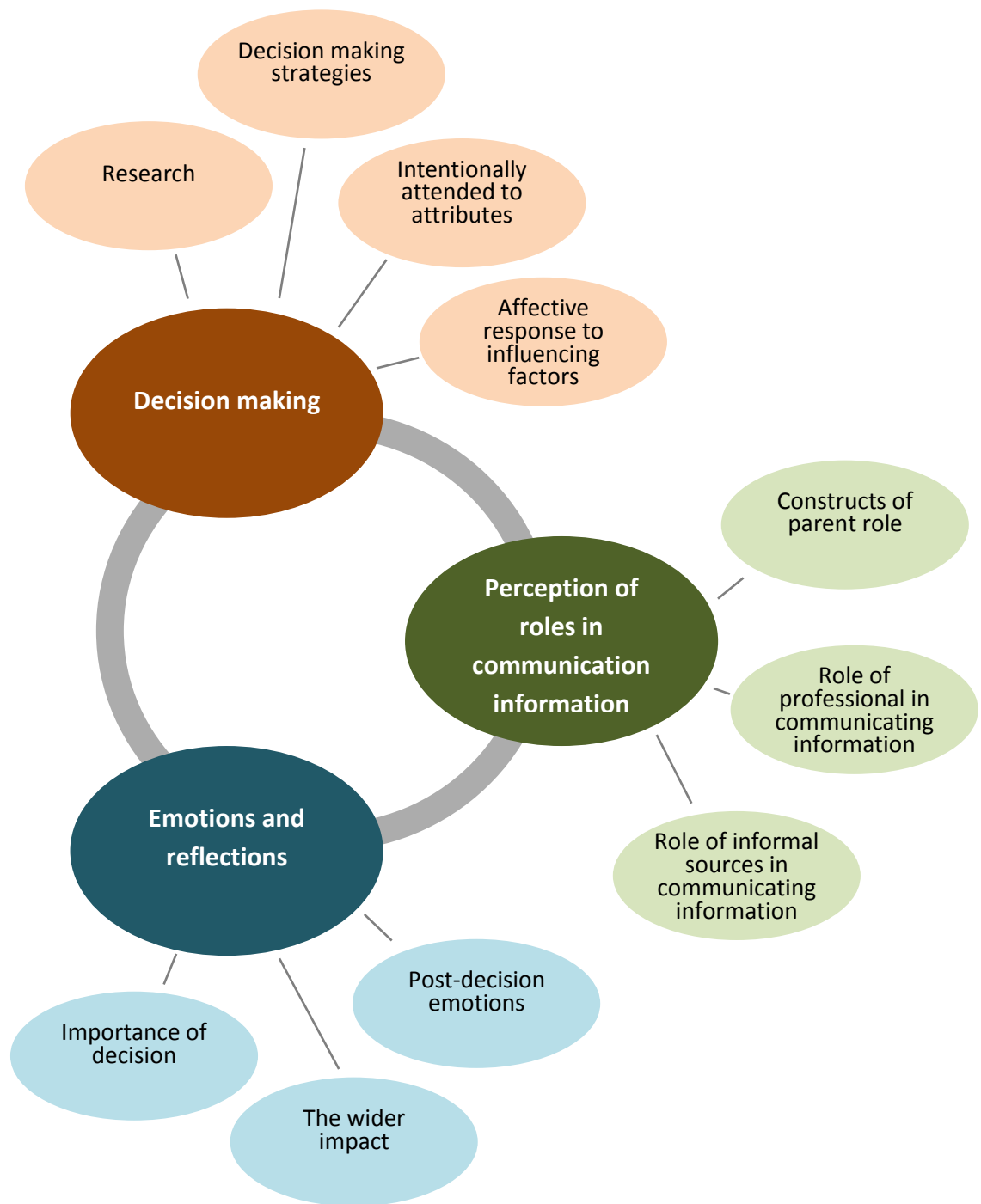


Figure 4.1: Illustrative representation of identified master themes and superordinate themes

Table 3: Contextual information about schools parents visited and school choices

Parents	Child	Current school	Area of need	Schools visited during decision making process	Preferred option	Allocated school
Sue and Eddie (white British)	Holly	Main-stream primary	Speech and language and learning	-local mainstream secondary -mainstream with SLCN resourced provision -mainstream with ASD resourced provision -special school for complex needs	place in SLCN resourced provision attached to mainstream	Mainstream place in school with SLCN resourced provision
Marge and Bob (White African)	Milly	Main-stream primary	Complex learning needs and dyspraxia	-local mainstream secondary -local mainstream with ASD resourced provision -special school for complex needs	Initially mainstream secondary place but parents told would not be able to provide support. Parents then chose a special school for complex needs	Special school for complex needs
Paula (white British)	Robert	Main-stream primary	Diagnosis of ASD	-mainstream secondary -mainstream school with ASD resourced provision -special school for complex needs -special school for ASD	Special school for complex needs	Special school for complex needs
Lin (White British)	Tess	Main-stream primary	Hearing impairment, speech and language and learning	-two mainstream secondary -mainstream with sensory and physical impairment resourced provision	Initially mainstream secondary and was allocated place. However, school felt unable to provide support. Eventually requested place in sensory impairment resourced provision	Sensory impaired resourced provision attached to mainstream
Sheila (White British)	Dominic	Main-stream primary	Diagnosis of ASD and medical conditions	-mainstream with ASD resourced provision	Place in ASD resourced provision attached to mainstream	ASD resourced provision attached to mainstream
Sufiyan (Pakistani)	Saif	Main-stream primary	Diagnosis of ASD	-mainstream with ASD resourced provision - local mainstream secondary -mainstream with SLCN resourced provision	Place in ASD resourced provision attached to mainstream school. Following unsuccessful request, chose place in resourced provision for SLCN rather than appeal	mainstream place in school with SLCN resourced provision

4.2 Decision making

This master theme encompasses all superordinate themes relating to parents' decision making about their preferred choice of secondary school, including activities and attributes which they perceived as important in informing their decision. The four superordinate themes were identified within all six interviews with subordinate themes within each (see Appendix 11 for the prevalence of subordinate themes across interviews).

4.2.1 Research

All the parents who were interviewed talked about gathering information to inform their decision making when choosing their preferred secondary school placement for their child. Information gathering included activities, such as visiting schools, speaking to others, including professionals and other parents, and researching on the internet. A range of research activities which parents could take part in were summarised by Lin.

I'd probably say do your research,...obviously look at your OFSTED things,...speak to other parents, go to the school, more than once, definitely to look round. ...take your child into that school, ask for the child to spend a bit of time in that school is another good one that I would say,...ask the professionals involved with the kids to be perfectly honest with you, ...not to hold back, not to pussy foot round you or anything like that, to give their honest opinion. I'd definitely say take ...current support and SENCo's for a look round at one of those visits because, like I said, they can look at things that you wouldn't even think about because you're not there for the full academic day. There's lots of things really,...but yeah definitely, definitely, it's got to be an informed choice.

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 1585-1594)

4.2.1.1 Visiting schools

Visiting schools appeared to be perceived as the most important research activity in informing decisions, with all eight parents commenting on the need to visit schools. Four parents recommended visiting a wide range of schools even

if they are not considered appropriate or have been discounted based on initial information gathered.

P1: I think definitely visiting the schools is probably the most important thing we did and going to plenty of them, rather than thinking (SLCN resourced provision) is probably the right one and going there and saying, right decision made, still going and visiting the other places even when they were discounted.

P2: and having that comparison. (Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, line 513-518)

This is perhaps so that parents feel that they have gathered enough information in order to make a more informed decision. Sometimes the additional information confirmed parent choice and sometimes the additional information appeared to change their choice preference. Following Sufiyan's experience, he felt that it would be useful for parents to gather information on more options in order to have a backup in case they did not get their first preference.

...visit them even if there isn't their preference, still visit them to find out because first choice is never guaranteed as we found out.

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 473-475)

Sheila only visited one school because she took her son with her on the visits and felt that she did not want to confuse him by visiting more schools and widening his choice set. Despite this, she still perceived visiting more schools as a useful decision making activity.

...visit as many schools and talk to as many people as possible ...and go to all the open nights, whereas we didn't because we didn't want to confuse Dominic.

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 676-678)

Parents also recommended visiting the same school more than once in order to confirm the accuracy of decisions.

We just thought let's just have one more check at (mainstream) just to be sure and from that second visit, it made, completely made our minds up, that was definitely the right place for him.

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 656-661)

The visits seem to be important in gathering information through having discussions with members of staff, particularly SENCos, and looking around the school. This will be discussed further in section 4.2.4.

You have to visit, you have to go through and see all the schools and talk to the SENCos, talk to them. (Bob, Int.2, lines 857-858)

4.2.1.2 Information about options from other people

The role of other people in communicating information throughout the process will be considered in more detail in Section 4.3: Perception of roles in communicating information. Three of the parents interviewed felt that information from other parents of children with SEN was important in informing decisions.

...parents obviously, because they know first-hand how their child's done at the school, how they've come on educationally, emotionally, socially,

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 506-507)

Sufiyan initially felt that information from professionals was an equally important source of information as visiting schools. However, upon reflection, he appeared to value the information gathered from school visits as the most important.

Two things mainly, one (primary school), the meeting there where they did according to his special needs their recommendations and their advice on schools on offer and the second main thing was actually visiting the schools itself ...that was the main important thing actually going and seeing the school itself and speaking to the teachers.

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, 378-382)

4.2.2 Decision making strategies

During the interviews parents explicitly discussed some strategies they used whilst making their decision. They appeared to go through two stages of decision making, first identifying the choice set of schools based on limited information and then further information was gathered to inform the decision for the preferred option in the choice set.

4.2.2.1 The choice set

An initial decision about the choice set appeared to be made based on information gathered on a limited number of attributes such as type of provision, the size of the school and practicalities such as distance or if a sibling attended that school.

...wasn't easy deciding which...school to look for, why that school, obviously as I said the two reasons why, (ASD resourced provision) was because of the special care there and (local mainstream), the only reason there was because his elder brother was already at that school.
(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 367-369)

Parents in five of the interviews expressed difficulties with identifying the choice set of schools due to a lack of information and made comments on the limited number of options in their choice set, either perceived as being due to their locality or a lack of specialist provisions.

I don't think there's enough choices,...personally, I think,...every high school should have a provision for children with special educational needs and then the choice would be even greater wouldn't it.
(Sheila, Int 5, lines 709-712)

Lin felt that the choice set was restricted because the mainstream schools are not able to adequately support children's needs.

I think sometimes mainstreams probably are being, are struggling and limping along because..., they've not got the outreach support that they should have. ...it's alright the government saying all kids can go to mainstream but if that training isn't there, that support isn't there, ...we probably are setting some kids up to fail.

(Lin, Int.4, lines 1524-1529)

4.2.2.2 Weighing up attributes and ranking options

After parents had identified the choice set and carried out research to gather information on the options, they appeared to use decision making strategies such as comparing attributes across schools, giving increased weight to some attributes compared to others and making compromises on some attributes.

...we decided that (SLCN resourced provision), but with (ASD resourced provision) as a second potential and we were fairly set on that weren't we? It seemed most appropriate to us, it wasn't a full on special school, it had a lot more provision and a lot more experience than (local mainstream) did and so to us it seemed fairly ideal.

(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 155-158)

4.2.2.3 The child

As well as analysing and processing information on attributes, parents in three of the interviews described visualising the child in the setting as a useful strategy in helping them to decide upon their preferred option.

...picturing Holly in each environment and, and being able to sort of imagine how she might feel and what she would think of each environment.

(Sue, Int. 1, lines 488-489)

Although parents in these interviews felt that it was important to consider the child's views from their perspective, they did not actually include the child in the information gathering or decision making process. Two of the parents did include the child in the process taking them to visit schools and valuing their

opinion. However, this caused issues for Sheila as she reported that this restricted the choice set as she wanted to avoid causing confusion for Dominic.

4.2.3 Intentionally attended to influencing attributes

Attributes which parents intentionally set out to gather information about and were able to explicitly articulate as informing their decision making are discussed in the following section. Although there was quite a high level of convergence in consideration of particular attributes across interviews, there was divergence in the weighting that these attributes had in influencing decision making. Paula described a range of attributes that she considered when making her decision.

...tailoring the curriculum, the life skills,...the size of the school, the size of the classes, the amount of support that he would get...

(Paula, Int.3 , lines 621-622)

4.2.3.1 Distance

Practical attributes such as distance appeared to feature across most interviews with parents. This was considered in terms of the cost and time taken to travel to school each day, being able to pick the child up quickly if necessary and the opportunity to go to school with peers who live locally. This was a factual attribute which had a high degree of certainty of occurring and could be identified early in the information gathering stage. Therefore, it appeared to have a significant impact on decision making early in the process, particularly when identifying the choice set.

So we decided to go and take a trip there, although I was concerned about the distance because we felt it was quite a long way for him to be on a bus because he'd probably be the first one to be picked up and the last one to be dropped off and when you've done a full school day, it's quite a lot.

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 230-233)

4.2.3.2 Siblings

The practicality of having siblings in the same school for dropping off and picking up was also considered by parents who had older children.

...my oldest daughter goes to (mainstream)...so I thought well having both kids in one school much easier, (Marge, Int. 1, lines 305-307)

4.2.3.3 School size

Another factual attribute, which provided certainty of the attribute occurring, was the size of the school. Information on this attribute could be collected prior to visiting schools and so could inform the initial choice set.

I went small school first of all, then I went on recommendation, ...that narrowed it down significantly by looking at the small schools because most of them are over a thousand, there's only literally maybe about 3 within (the local authority) that have under a thousand on role, (Lin, Int. 4, 728-231)

A smaller school appears to be considered to be more welcoming and nurturing by parents, with a larger school being perceived as overwhelming and less personalised for the child.

...they knew all the kids by name, because it was a small school, and I liked that kind of thing. (Lin, Int. 4, lines 914-915)

P1: It's just too big, too many people. I think it would just totally overpower her.

P2: It's noisy and chaotic.

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 100-102)

4.2.3.4 Peers and Socialisation

All six interviews discussed opportunities with peers as being an influencing attribute. There appeared to be a conflicting dilemma between the perceived positives and negatives of this attribute in mainstream and specialist provision.

The following quote exemplifies a parent's concerns of bullying in mainstream secondary and the hope that other children will be accepting of their child

...bullying, which was a main one, how they dealt with bullying, ...how many other children in the school had got special needs and how the other kids were with them, and what they did with the other children to make them aware of these other children so they could be accepted.
(Paula, int.3, lines 316-319)

However, benefits of being with socially more able peers in mainstream was seen as a positive attribute in order to support the child's own social development.

We sort of don't want to isolate him totally with children who have autism or other disabilities. He needs to see the different side of things as well, and he needs to be pushed as much as he can and I think that's where he needs to be, in a mainstream school and to learn the social skills. He's not going to learn those when everybody's got the same skills (laugh) or lack of them... (Sheila, int. 5, lines 729-734)

More frequently expressed concerns across the interviews were regarding their child being with other children who were considered to be 'more severe' than their own child and the negative impact this may have on their child.

... the children there weren't even speaking, they were communicating via ipads and pointing at pictures in books and we felt this isn't going to help him socially, bring him on... (Paula, Int. 3, lines 242-244)

Once Marge saw children in a special school interacting and fitting in, she was reassured and she no longer felt that she had to compromise on this attribute.

I was watching the teachers talking to the kids and all the different disabilities that were in that little classroom and how they were interacting between the different children and they were all treated the

same. There was no 'one' that was standing out, that was completely different, they were all involved in whatever they were doing. And that's what I needed for Milly. (Marge, int. 2, lines 427-431)

Parents appeared to want opportunities for their child to make friends and learn social skills from more able peers. However, this had to be balanced with wanting to protect their child from bullying in a mainstream school. They perceived a decreased risk of bullying in special schools, but there appeared to be negative perceptions around the impact of their child being around less able peers. This could be due to them having less opportunity to learn socialisation skills from other peers without social communication difficulties, which could isolate them in the future. It appeared that parents viewed their child as being unique and different to children in both types of setting, whilst primarily wanting their child to belong and be accepted.

4.2.3.5 Facilities

The facilities available at a school were only explicitly raised as an attribute in one interview. However, parents may have considered facilities as part of the support available which is discussed below.

...when they've got better equipment there's more opportunity to do different things, isn't there. Whereas, if they've not got very...good resources, they're a bit more limited, so they were...considerations definitely. (Lin, Int. 4, lines 959)

4.2.3.6 Academic achievement and opportunities for the future

Consideration of academic achievements and perceived opportunities for the future were explicitly raised in four of the interviews as being an influencing attribute. Marge perceived special school to provide more options for the future after visiting a mainstream school and being informed that if a child could not cope academically, they would do hairdressing.

...so that's also why I thought, okay she's not going to be academic, does she want to be a hairdresser and I don't know, but that's why also (special school) there is a lot more choices.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 353-359)

Lin felt the opposite based on her preconceptions of special schools and so this type of provision was discounted when defining the choice set.

There is no expectations when they go into special school, that's why I never even entertained that thought. ...I really doubt she'll go to university or anything like that, but there's no reason why she can't do something,

(Lin, Int. 4, 1738-1742)

Sheila also felt that special schools compromised opportunities for academic achievement. She appeared to feel that this was not an attribute she could compromise on and so the school was discounted from the choice set.

We'd talked about (...) (special school) and I'd spoken to those quite a while ago, but they don't have any sort of educational achievements...like what I'm hoping, whilst Dominic's well enough that we can do as much as we can...whereas they don't do O-levels, or whatever it is now...statutory exams, so I felt that if he went there, he wouldn't necessarily reach his potential (Sheila, Int. 5, lines 254-261)

This also appeared to be a concern for Marge originally. However, she received information from the same special school which reassured her that she would not have to compromise on this attribute and that her daughter would have the opportunity to gain academic qualifications, if appropriate to her, and this influenced her decision to choose this option.

The third meeting I went to see (special school) about is that the headteacher did say to me 'if we find that Milly can do GCSE's, we'll push her towards it. If she can't, we won't put her in that.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 562-564)

4.2.3.7 Individualised curriculum and support

A personalised curriculum was described as a positive influencing attribute. This was perceived as being more available in a specialist setting than within mainstream settings.

I think, realistically, (special school) with everything being adapted individually for each child, is more suited for him than...having to fit into (mainstream's) way of doing things. (Special school) mould it to each child
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 361-363)

The perceived availability and access to experienced support appeared to be a highly weighted attribute. Marge discounted a mainstream school when she was given information which suggested that support would not be available throughout the school.

Then all of a sudden in Year 8 all the interventions would stop... and that was a red light for me
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 134-137)

Lin felt that access to more specialist and experienced support would be available in a specialist provision.

Experience is a massive factor..., that's I suppose where the plus point of a resourced provision comes in or a specialist school of some description, that they..., have seen kids of all shapes, sizes, abilities and can, you know, pass that on to another child.
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 1533-1537)

4.2.4 Affective response to influencing factors

As well as intentionally gathering information on certain attributes to inform their decision, parents' decision making also appeared to be influenced by their affective response to influencing factors attended to unintentionally. Parents spoke about their emotional responses to school visits and this seemed to

significantly influence decision making with parents either discounting or confirming choices based on their feelings.

P2: yeah yeah it just felt, it just felt right, didn't it?

I: yeah, what things were particularly important in helping you to make your decision?

P1: ...I don't know. It's kind of difficult. I think the most important thing is just what felt right. (Sue and Eddie, Int. 1, lines 484-487)

We felt, we felt good about it, it felt right you know, (Paula, Int. 3, line 659)

You've got to rely on your gut feeling a little bit, (Lin, Int. 4, line 1616)

These emotional responses were analysed further in order to interpret what influencing factors contribute to these responses and understand why they are having an impact on decision making.

4.2.4.1 Influence of person showing round

The importance of the impression created by the person showing them round the school can be seen in the example provided by Lin. She visited the same school twice, but was shown round by two different people. After the first visit she felt a negative response to the person showing her round and immediately ruled out the school as an option.

When we looked round...the resourced provision one, the SENCo that showed us round, I mean my partner P came with me and we both said the same, we felt that she was a right negative nelly. (Lin, int. 4, lines 211-213)

...so I don't know, maybe she was just ready for retirement (laughing) and it were like, it's not going to be in my life time, it's okay, but it really did put us off, you know, P (partner) and I came out of looking round

there and we both just sort of went 'nah'...we just didn't get a good vibe
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 881-887)

However, upon returning to the provision and being shown around by a different person, Lin acknowledges that the experience was more positive and she subsequently decided that this would be an option for her child.

...we just talked over things,...about like I said about, I'd been shown round and it all negative and one thing and another, and it was amazing how being shown round by a different person

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 1231-1233)

...it was a much more positive

(Lin, Int. 4, line 1251)

The emotional response appears to be influenced by information gathered about the SENCo's attitude and is acknowledged by Lin to be a primary source of influencing information.

I suppose after the SENCO's attitude, then it probably did come down to the other parent experiences, definitely. (Lin, Int. 4, lines 993-994)

Marge described having a negative impression of a SENCo who showed her around a setting due to what she was wearing. Marge makes reference to the appointment being made a long time in advance suggesting that the lady should have been more prepared. Perhaps being in her PE kit gave Marge the impression that because she had not made an effort to prepare for their meeting, then perhaps the school would not be interested in putting in the effort to support her daughter.

...it wasn't that professional either because she was still in her PE kit and I'd made this arrangement ages ago and she was still in her PE and she said 'don't worry about me I'm like this all the time.' And I thought that wasn't really professional, SENCOs they should be more professional than that.
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 318, 322-325)

Showing an interest in the child appears to create a positive impression for parents.

I think the main thing that I got out of that,...was that they seemed genuinely interested in Holly. She was a real person as opposed to just another student. ...that meant quite a lot and he was obviously interested in, he asked us a lot of questions about Holly and what she struggles with and what she's good at and what her interests are and all that kind of stuff. ...he seemed to have a genuine interest in her as a person.
(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 452-462)

Through showing an interest in the child, Sue and Eddie felt able to trust the information given and made a decision that this was a preferred option without even seeing all of the setting.

...we didn't really see that much of the school the first time round, it was mainly taken up with speaking to (SENCo).
(Sue, Int. 1, 466-467)

Paula discounted one school after a visit where she felt that the person showing her round did not show an interest in her child.

...the second one like I said we didn't get a great impression because she didn't really, we were trying to tell her information about Robert and she didn't seem to take it in, she didn't seem at all interested
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 560-562)

The person showing round actually stating that they want the child also appeared to create a positive response in parents.

They said 'yes we really do look after him' so that was then the decision to go for (mainstream with SLCN resourced provision)
(Sufiyan, Int.6, lines 149-151)

When the person showing them round was affable and welcoming this also created a positive feeling for parents.

(SENCo) was...more than affable about...giving out her email address, ...contacting her with any questions once we'd gone away and if you want to come back and visit again that's fine..., very open to being accessible. ...I think that really helped.

(Sue, Int. 1, lines 528-532)

Therefore, the parents interviewed appeared to use their emotional responses to the person showing them round to inform their decision making. If the first person who they had contact with in the school was welcoming and appeared genuinely interested in their child then parents were more likely to rate this option more highly and vice versa.

4.2.4.2 Influence of atmosphere

In addition to their emotional response to the person showing them round, four parents appeared to experience emotional responses to what they described as the 'atmosphere' in the school. If children's behaviour was observed to be calm in a school on the day of the visit then parents appeared to view the atmosphere and the school overall more positively.

P1: ...I think just the atmosphere there was quite different. When we went to (SLCN resourced provision) the kids, they all seemed (...) calm for want of a better expression. There was a lad that held the door open for us.

P2: calm and happy.

P1: they were just all chatty and smiley and stuff

P2: ...there were people toing and froing and everybody was it's like you say it was calm (directed to P1), it was fairly quiet, relaxed, bright, cheerful. When we went to (local mainstream), it just seemed grey. There were bits of art stuffed, sort of shoved in a corner...it just felt dark and gloomy.

P1: It was a bit chaotic, yeah.

P2: and it was noisy and there was banging and shouting and it was just a totally different atmosphere. (Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 316-330)

Paula acknowledges that she had created an image based on her preconception of a special school. However, through observing calm behaviour on the day that she visited the school, she viewed the school more positively.

...there was just a sense of calm, you know, I just imagined children running round the place causing chaos, having meltdowns or whatever and they weren't, they were all happy.and we went into a class where, it was an art class and all the children were coming up showing us their work, really proud of what they'd done, you know and it was just, it just had a really nice feeling about it you know...it just felt comfortable, it felt a caring environment. (Paula, Int. 3, lines 427-437)

When parents observed disruptive or unsettled behaviour in schools, they appeared to be more likely to discount a school. However, they attributed the reason for discounting the school to their perception of their child's response. It may, in fact, be that the parent's own emotional response to observing the behaviours contributed to their construct of the 'atmosphere' in the school.

Yeah I'm not sure that she would understand, but I think she would find some things quite upsetting sort of some of the behavioural problems and (..) I mean there was a little boy and he was throwing himself around and f-ing and blinding in front of me and having to be restrained and I think she would have found that quite upsetting. I mean they were lovely schools and it wasn't that the children weren't being looked after but I think (..) it wasn't right for Holly. (Sue, Int.1, lines 87-92)

4.2.4.3 Influence of familiarity

Sufiyan and Sheila were familiar with staff in the resourced provisions attached to mainstream secondary through previous outreach support being delivered to their children in primary school. This increased familiarity when they went to

visit these settings and both parents decided to choose the resourced provisions as their preferred option suggesting that familiarity with the professionals may influence their decision making.

so that was the main decision and because they were already working with him at (primary), they weren't there, but visiting every so often and looking around what is the best way of moving ahead with him, so that was the main reason why we decided for (resourced provision).

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 299-305)

4.2.4.4 Influence of previous experiences

Parents' previous experiences of primary school appear to implicitly influence their decision making. Paula and Lin both felt that their child had done so well in mainstream so far that they did not want to consider special school education initially, therefore, influencing their preferred options.

I was a bit kind of like, I don't really want him to go to a special school because he's done so well in mainstream, but then we thought well we'll go and check it out...with a view to ruling it out really

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 173-175)

However, Bob and Marge had not had a positive experience with the primary school their daughter attended and so this appeared to influence their openness to exploring specialist education and also which attributes they valued most highly.

...I thought well she's not getting anywhere, we're not getting anywhere in the system, nobody seems to be helping they're trying all of this, and they're doing this and they're trying this, they're trying this and I need to get her into somewhere, where she's actually going to progress...and that's why I went to go visit the first time.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 386-391)

4.3 Perception of roles in communicating information

This master theme includes all superordinate themes relating to parents' perceptions and experiences of the role of themselves and others within their initial decision making and the wider school allocation process. Parents discussed both formal and informal sharing of information and communication with others and how this impacted on their experience in all six interviews.

4.3.1 Constructs of parent role

Parents who were interviewed saw their role in the process as gathering information to inform their decision. Lin talks about giving herself plenty of time to gather information and consider her decision.

*I wanted to give myself plenty of time to do my research,
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 690-696)*

When Paula was asked how she knew which questions to ask, she talked about carrying out research in order to know what type of information to gather during visits to schools.

I: How did you draw up that list of questions?

P: just as they popped up into my head and I suppose...friends who have got children in upper school...their experiences as well and the things that have been put in place for their children and it gave me a few ideas, also researching on the internet...about moving special, a child with special needs into an upper school, things that you've got to think about. I think I found some information on the national autistic site and just googling as well.
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 301-309)

Parents also saw their role as being an advocate for their child. They talk about fighting for what they want through asking for meetings, writing reports and actively contacting professionals.

P1: it's a long process and you need to fight for what you want for your child

P2: yeah

P1: you know your child better than anybody else

(Marge and Bob, int. 2, lines 837-838)

However, despite taking an active role in gathering information, several parents talked about a lack of information provided to them about appropriate schools available to choose from. Eddie expresses an overriding concern that if they had not been proactive, their daughter may have ended up going to a school which was unable to meet her needs.

...you sort of get the feeling that if if you're not proactive and you don't sort of chase it up and all the rest of it then she would have just ended up at (local mainstream) and that's it. ...I don't know where else it would have come from someone actually coming and saying (local mainstream) is not appropriate which I think we're sort of going back to just having some kind of letter going out saying these are the schools in your local area and these are the telephone numbers.

(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 797-804)

4.3.2 Role of professionals in communicating information

The following will explore parents' perceptions of their experiences and interactions with professionals involved in the process of choosing and allocating secondary school placements.

4.3.2.1 Local Authority Special Educational Needs team

Parents in three interviews reported their designated casework officer (CWO) from the LA SEN team as being a source of information and support through the process.

I think also knowing A(CWO), she's a really, really good person to be on your side kind of thing, so I could just phone her up and say 'I haven't

heard this, I haven't done this, what should I be doing here? Do I need to be doing this?' ...because she's my main contact person and then she'll tell me I can do this and do this and do this and do that

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 224-229)

This positive relationship appeared to have been established over a long period of time since Milly was given a statement earlier in primary school and so Marge felt confident in contacting her CWO as a source of support through the process.

Paula and Marge both felt that their designated casework officers also took on the role as an advocate for them during the LA allocation process.

B(CWO) had taken it on board and said that she'd support us as much as she could do, obviously because she doesn't make the final decision,

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 917-919)

However, this positive relationship with a CWO did not appear to be consistent across all parents. Eddie and Sue, who in fact had the same CWO as Marge and Bob, talked frequently during their interview about their overarching feelings of frustration with trying to access information and support from the LA SEN team.

...it's always felt like we've been trying to scrabble at information and it's always been us trying to squeeze information out rather than it being offered so it doesn't feel like we've been supported. We're kind of supported if we ask the right questions. (Eddie, Int. 1, lines 205-207)

Despite Marge and Paula perceiving the LA SEN team as a source of support throughout the process, they also felt that information about the process and schools could have been communicated more clearly and Marge also acknowledged that the relationship she experienced may not be consistent for all parents.

And if every statemented child had a A(CWO) we would, the statementing process, the choosing of high school, all of that would go much smoother, but the thing is, I still had to fight a lot of it on my own and find out a lot of the stuff on my own.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 653-658)

Therefore, it appears that parents experiences of accessing information and communication with the LA SEN team was inconsistent, which may be contributed to by having established relationships over time with one consistent CWO. However, all parents felt that information on the process could be made clearer in order for parents to feel more informed throughout the information gathering and decision making process.

P1: ...like I said earlier on, just some kind of an initial letter to parents whose children are statemented or whatever, just to sort of say because your child is statemented you need to start the process earlier, you need to start go and look at schools, here's a list of schools in your area, here are the telephone numbers, give them a ring. Make an appointment, something as simple as that. List of schools with numbers...

P2: Here's a list of questions to ask...

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 570-575)

...it's been hard work..., a lot of time has been put into it and a lot of confusion. ...it could have been made a lot easier, if there was just outlines of, like a time line, a bit more information from professionals about how you apply, who's involved, what they all do, who makes the decision, and what do they make it on... and the dates, how long it takes, and when you find out. The whole process from start to finish basically, we've just sort of fumbled along as we've gone along...

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 1059-1065)

Parents who were interviewed appeared to expect that it was the role of the LA to decide if they had been allocated their first preference of school. However, they seemed to feel that this was communicated too late, with several parents

mentioning that they started the process much earlier than parents of children without SEN, but found out which school they had been allocated at a similar time.

...but we only found out a week before all the other children found out and we had already started the process in Year 5 and everybody else had just filled in a form, sent it off... (Marge, int. 1, lines 770-771)

Parents appeared to want the outcome to be communicated sooner in order to be able to begin a gradual transition to secondary school earlier.

I feel if decided possibly earlier in the first application he would have had more time, he would have gone there earlier. ...they could have started arranging for him to visit there earlier. I think things like that can make a slight difference. (Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 334-337)

When Sufiyan was told that his child had not been allocated a place in their preferred school, the LA SEN team suggested he consider the resourced provision for SLCN at another mainstream school. Sufiyan states that if he had been informed about this school earlier in the process, it could have saved worry and anxiety experienced by himself and his son when they were told that they had not been given a place in the first choice school.

If you don't get it then...you're running around too much then and you're worried as well then. So at the beginning if they were given all the information about all the schools which one provide which er special needs I think it would be better for parents then to look round. (Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 486-490)

Sue and Eddie and Sheila experienced confusion and further frustration when they received letters naming the mainstream school where they had applied for a place in the resourced provision, but with no mention of the resourced provision. Both sets of parents talk about the emotional anxiety experienced at this point due to lack of clarity in the information.

...I just didn't know what we were going to do if he wasn't in the provision, and then the alarm bells start ringing and you sort of tend to get things out of proportion a little bit,

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 245-251)

...I kept thinking what do I do, we've missed the deadline to get anywhere else...

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 213-214)

Sue and Eddie were also concerned about placement for Holly and felt that the LA were no longer concerned as they had finished their part of the process.

Really upset. ...it just seemed to have been (LA) dropped the letter and then as far as they were concerned Holly has got a place so that's the end of it you know and we wipe our hands of it..

(Sue, Int. 1, 219-231)

When Eddie and Sue found out that she had been given a mainstream place, but would receive support from the resourced provision, they were happy with the outcome, but frustrated with the effort and confusion in finding out the 'full story'.

P1: the problem with it was that it didn't actually say on there: 'brackets but she will have access to the resourced provision'. ...I think the problem was that that was a standard letter that goes out but obviously that only told half the story of what the guys at (resource provision for SLCN) had been up to and what they were wanting to do with Holly. It wasn't simply mainstream place end of...

P2: no I was going to say that wasn't communicated at all.

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 188-198)

When Sheila tried to clarify the information in the letter, she also experienced frustration with nobody seeming to want to give her answers.

...we just got the letter...saying that he'd got a place at (mainstream), not in the provision and that was when things got a bit stressful so I rang education straight away and they said 'well you need to speak to the school'...and the school said 'well we can't, we don't know if he's got a place in the provision' (Sheila, Int. 5, lines 484-491)

Two sets of parents, Marge and Bob and Paula, experienced additional anxiety when there was confusion between the usual school allocation process and the process for children with statements for SEN. Both parents were contacted by the usual process to tell them that they had not been allocated a place. However, once they investigated, they found that there was a lack of communication between the two systems.

...we went into stress mode when we got the letter saying you haven't been assigned... (Bob, Int. 2, lines 778-780)

...they're not communicating. They seem to be working alongside each other but there is no actual link between, between the two systems... (Marge, Int. 2, lines 833-834)

In contrast to the other parents interviewed, Lin found the experience of LA decision making relatively smooth. She was initially allocated a mainstream place of choice, but when they were not putting support in place for her daughter, she decided to change her preference to the resourced provision for sensory impairment. She explained that this process was again an easy aspect of the school choice process and that she just phoned up her casework officer who sorted out the paperwork very quickly.

So yeah I made that phone call to (CWO), she said right, I'll start the consultation process, I'll write off to (resourced provision) ...and it were all done and dusted without any quibble really. (Lin, int. 4, lines 1318-1322)

4.3.2.2 Support services including Education Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy and Outreach services for ASD and HI

Marge and Bob found the EP service a useful source of information on their child's needs which helped to inform them in the decision making process.

I think our main meeting that...changed our minds was A(EP) was in the meeting with us, ...that meeting when A(EP) started talking about what she had seen Milly been doing, how she had interacted with Milly and just the way A(EP) was talking about how Milly is and it actually made us understand.
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 440-457)

However, Eddie and Sue perceived information from the EP on choosing schools as unhelpful.

...when B was Ed Psych, cos he kind of didn't really give an opinion either way he just basically said 'well it doesn't really matter because you can always change your mind.'...non-advice really (laughing) isn't it. He was basically saying 'well you just do whatever you want...and it doesn't really matter'
(Sue, Int. 1, lines 429-434)

Other parents were aware of EP involvement. However, did not express that they had played a significant role in the process or were not aware of how influential they were in the process.

And we've never had much dealing with the educational psychologist, I know we did initially when Robert first started at school,...so we don't really know who our educational psychologist is really, I think they've just gone to the school, but I've, we've not really had any dealing with them
(Paula, int. 3, lines 1014-1019)

This also appeared to be apparent for involvement of speech and language therapists.

I've spoken to her on the phone and she's been really helpful, but she didn't have any influence on the the decision.

(Paula, Int.3, lines 1028-1032)

Paula appeared to have a clear construct of the role of the autism outreach service, which may have developed through consistent ongoing support from one member of the team.

I know with autism outreach, they supported us with it, but they're not allowed to sort of push you from, in any direction, they can only just say, you know, it's a good school or whatever, they can't say 'oh you should go there'. ...they've been very good giving us advice on the procedure and supporting us like doing the assessments

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 999-1004)

Lin, Sheila and Sufiyan's children had all received outreach support during primary school from secondary resourced provisions and professionals. These appeared to have a greater influence on the process through expressing opinions about schools, suggesting provisions for parents to visit and providing a sense of familiarity when parents looked round the resourced provision where they were based (see section 4.2.4.3).

...a teacher at (resourced provision for HI). She said to me 'why don't you just come and have a look at (resourced provision for HI) again', and I said 'I am, I'm going to come.' And I think I went the next day,

(Lin, Int.4 , lines 1229-1230)

Sue and Eddie felt that they had involvement with a range of professionals, but that there was a lack of consistency with involvement from five different EPs and SALTs, which prevented professionals from getting to know their child. They were concerned that this then influenced the LA's decision making and allocation of schools. Eddie may have felt frustrated with this, as he may have attributed not getting the place in his preferred option, which they had invested

time and thought into choosing, to the reports which the professionals had written.

I think that when...sort of documents and reports like that get moved around and used as evidence for various things or whatever, that might also have influenced some of the feedback we've had about things like school and maybe something that's been written down because somebody spent an hour with Holly has somehow made it through to someone then saying 'well that's why I don't think that (resourced provision for SLCN) is appropriate or that's why I think perhaps a special school is appropriate', whereas yeah I think consistency's been an issue in general hasn't it? (Eddie, Int 1, lines 591-596)

Parents who had access to consistent support from a service over time, appeared to view their role and input in the process as more influential and effective. However, parents who did not have the consistent support either appeared to not recognise a significant role of services in the process or felt that the information provided by services was inaccurate.

4.3.2.3 Independent parent support services

Independent parent support services were referred to in three interviews, Marge felt that there was a lack of consistency in who she was able to speak to at this service and found that the information they provided on schools was not personalised to them and so decided against using them as a source of support.

Oh I was passed round from pillar to post. There were too many different people there and then when you wanted to speak to the same person and they're not there or they're off for a week and 'can we help you?' and I'll go 'yes' and you have to start the whole process again and that's...that's where I gave up on that side.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 286-289)

Paula and Sufiyan mentioned speaking to independent parent support services as part of information gathering. However, there was brevity in content about their involvement, suggesting that parents did not feel that they played a significant part in informing the process.

4.3.2.4 Current schools

The child's primary school was mentioned as providing information and support to parents in five of the interviews. This included providing information about the process, helping to complete paperwork, information about prospective schools and expressing opinions about secondary schools.

...they really did give us every possible help...who to contact and everything. Obviously they couldn't make the decision for us but what we needed we could contact them any time and that was very helpful in that sense.
(Sufiyan, Int.6, lines 341-346)

Paula and Lin took current teaching assistants on visits to schools with them and they considered their opinions when weighing up attributes.

..his teaching assistant, ...obviously she knows what's best for him as well as us, ...so that's why we took her to every single visit we've done so straight away she obviously was a part of the decision making process as well,
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 1039-1042)

Marge and Bob were the only parents who expressed a negative view of the role of schools in the decision making process. This may have been due to their previous negative experiences around accessing support for their daughter throughout primary school.

...the information was soooo haphazard if I can put it that way, it was if you need to do this phone these people, if you need to do that phone these, I had no idea what I had to do at that point. I didn't know what I needed to do. I completely lost through it. I hadn't got a clue what I was supposed to be doing...
(Marge, int. 2, lines 296-299)

4.3.2.5 Prospective schools

This section will focus on the impact that information given by prospective secondary schools had on two parents' experiences of the decision making process. The influence of the person showing parents round prospective schools on their decision making is discussed further in section 4.2.4.1. Lin chose her preferred option of a mainstream school fairly early in the process. However, once she received confirmation of a place in this school, staff from the school seemed unwilling to provide support for her daughter, leading to an emotionally negative experience.

...by this point, I'd totally lost faith in (mainstream secondary). I knew that they didn't want her basically. They didn't want to make the changes that they needed to make...to accommodate her and for it all to run smoothly.
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 393-395)

Lin tried to advocate for her daughter by arranging meetings with the executive head of the academy, who also provided information, which made her feel that they did not want her daughter. Despite feeling that it was her daughter's right to receive support in that school, she eventually decided to change her preferred option of school.

Information Lin feels she was given from the executive head:

...he turned round to me in that meeting and he said to me 'well I think kids with SEN should be either in a special school or schools with units' and I said to him 'I can't believe you've just said that to me.' And he said 'well there's only you and I in the room' and part of me wanted to stand up and walk out of there and then, but part of me needed to fight for my kids and for other kids with SEN.
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 426-431)

Lin perceived that her negative experience may be due to wider school agendas.

I think that's very, very frustrating, you know, I really do. It's like they only want the elite kids and the easy kids. They want the money that your SEN kids bring into school, because it's extra money, but they don't necessarily want to spend it where it should be spent

(Lin, int. 4, lines 1033-1036)

On a visit to a mainstream secondary with a resourced provision with ASD, Marge was also told that they would be unable to meet her daughter's needs. Although, Marge felt that this information was inaccurate and that it was not the role of the school to be saying that, she decided to discount the school and look elsewhere.

(mainstream with resourced provision for ASD) just wasn't prepared to help,...they just said to me straight out so sorry, we just can't put things like that in place for her. It's best you look somewhere else. Now for a statemented child you should not be told something like that...

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 121-124)

Most parents felt that a range of professionals played a role in providing information about schools and the process. However, parents' experiences of information from professionals appeared inconsistent, even from the same person or professional body. Overall, parents appeared to view information and communication more positively if they had already established a relationship with the professional. Two parents experienced prospective mainstream secondary schools stating they were unable to support their children. Although parents felt that this should not be the case, they still decided not to further consider these schools when they did not appear to want their children.

4.3.3 Role of informal sources in communicating information

As well as accessing information formally from professionals, parents frequently talked about the role that informal sources of information played during the decision making process. This included accessing information from

family members, friends who worked in schools, other parents and indirectly through working in schools.

Marge works as a support assistant for a child with autism and found this to be a useful route to accessing information about the process through speaking to the autism outreach service when they came to support the child she was working with.

...I said to them there just chatting one afternoon and I said to her what actually is the process and they were able to say to me. This is what you need to do...
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 251-254)

Marge also found out information regarding one of the school options from a friend who worked at the secondary schools she visited. Perhaps due to her already established relationship with her friend she trusted the information from her, rather than that provided on her visit to the school.

...when I heard that all of that stops by the year 8, that put me off and that was somebody else that works there that has that experience, that inside, I could put it as 'inside information' that I wasn't told in that meeting...and it was from a very very good friend of mine.
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 366-370)

Eddie and Sue found that an informed family member from a different local authority was a helpful source of information on the process.

P1: everybody needs an (Aunty)...

P2: clone her somehow

P1: ...I mean the kind of inputs we've had from her..., I can't remember all the times that she's helped us out and given us information and stuff that we wouldn't otherwise have found out. It would be good if that, rather than coming from (Aunty), came as part of the process.

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 561-568)

They expressed concern for parents who may not have this source of informal support.

...concerned about you know what do other parents do...if they haven't got an (Aunty) and they're not as proactive as we've been and they perhaps don't have as good a relationship with school as we do, what happens to them?
(Eddie, Int. 1, 829-833)

Lin, Paula and Sheila were all part of special needs support groups with other parents of children with SEN and reported valuing the information that other parents provided about secondary schools.

...parents are very good, they're quite honest about what they feel about their school,
(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 684-689)

As well as receiving information from other parents about school attributes, Paula also experienced parents taking the role of giving advice on the process.

...had said it might be worth you trying at the end of Year 5 because if you don't get in at Year 6, then you can't try again you know so it's almost like a double...chance of being able to do it
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 295-297)

Paula acted upon this advice, despite not wanting her child to leave his primary school at the end of Year 5. When he was not allocated a place at this point, Paula experienced mixed emotions. She may not have experienced the apprehension about getting a place in Year 6, had she not applied and been turned down in Year 5.

...selfishly...I was almost glad about it, just because I didn't, I couldn't bear the thought of him leaving his teaching assistant...but then I felt apprehensive that I hope we've got a good opportunity..., for him to get a place at the end of Year 6, then that was the worry...it's like 'right

we've got turned down once, are we going to get turned down again?'
(Paula, Int.3 lines 774-766)

Therefore, parents appeared to value the information provided by informal sources greatly. However, it may not always be the most accurate information and could potentially lead to less accurate decision making or unnecessary anxiety during the process.

4.4 Emotions and Reflections

4.4.1 Importance of decision

Through analysis of the roles that people played in communicating information, it became apparent that all of the parents interviewed experienced some negative emotions, such as frustration and anxiety, at different points during the process.

Emotions may be exacerbated due to the pressure that parents feel surrounding the decision as they feel responsible for making the best decision for their child. When asked to talk about when they first started thinking about choosing a secondary school, the initial response from Eddie was

Panic! (both P1 & 2 laugh) (Eddie, Int. 1, line 35)

This could demonstrate the importance of the decision to the parents or reflect their own feelings of competence around making the decision. Paula talked about the enormity of making an accurate decision due to the impact it could have on their child's future.

I think some people will just accept it and it might not be the right thing for their child but you've got to think of them first, ...it's their future, you know, it's everything isn't it. (Paula, Int. 3, 988-990)

4.4.2 The wider impact

Sufiyan wanted to involve his child in the information gathering and decision making process. However, he talks about the worry that this caused his son when they were not allocated a place in their first choice of school.

...because he was not sure where he was going to go, he was asking 'oh why (ASD resourced provision) say no?', so he was worried as well, 'Am I going to go there? Where am I going to go?'

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 353-355)

Lin spoke about the impact of the stress she experienced on her own mental health and relationship with her partner.

...you have to fight for everything to get what should be the basic human rights and it's so wrong. It has nearly broke me, don't get me wrong, I've ended up on anti-depressants and, I'm going to get upset in a minute... and (partner's) ended up having to move out, because he can't cope with the stress.

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 458-462)

4.4.3 Post-decision emotions

Despite parents appearing to experience negative emotions during the process, all six sets of parents were positive when reflecting on the final outcome. They all stated that they felt their child was going to the best place for them or that they felt they had made the right decision.

It certainly seems that what has happened is pretty much ideal for H, ...it has been thought about and tailored, ...I think where she's going and everything has been right..., it's just that it wasn't communicated so we thought one thing whereas in actual fact it was actually pretty good..

(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 244-247)

Those who were allocated their first choice of school experienced relief and talked about being fortunate to receive a place.

...I mean there will be a lot of parents who haven't been that fortunate won't there...and I do appreciate how fortunate we've been to get that place in the provision (Sheila, Int.5, lines 523-527)

Those who had to change their first choice preference of school during the process, either due to the school being reluctant to support the child or the LA not allocating a place, began to highlight the positive attributes of their new preference and the negative attributes of the rejected preference, making them feel positive about the final outcome.

...it is probably for the best because under the current management at the other school (first preference) she wouldn't be getting the support that she's going to get, she wouldn't be leaving with...the qualifications that she's going to get...at (new preference), ...she wouldn't have been getting the support there, (Lin, Int. 4, lines 1356-1360)

Although parents seemed to experience negative emotions during the wait for the outcome of the LA's decision, they still reported that they felt that they had the most influence in the decision making process.

I: who do you feel chooses the secondary school for Holly?

P2: Us, yeah yeah

P1: I would be worried if it was anyone else (P2 laugh) absolutely

P2: I think the only point where I felt a bit out of control was when we got the initial letter from (Local authority) that said that she'd not got the resourced provision place because (SLCN resourced provision) deemed it not suitable...But yeah absolutely I think it's been our decision.

(Sue and Eddie, Int. 1, lines 785-793)

Lin stated that she felt pushed into changing which school she wanted her daughter to attend, but still felt that she made the final decision.

I do feel really disappointed that my hand was pushed to make this decision
(Lin, Int.4, line 1354)

I think it definitely is down to parental choice (Lin, Int. 4, line 1552)

There was only Paula who felt that the LA had the most influence rather than parents.

I mean I went through sheets and sheets about, ...and highlighted bits, like it's the parents' choice, but it didn't feel that way, it didn't feel that it was our decision at the end of the day. We could only ask for it, but it was in somebody else's hands that made the final decision,
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 1161-1166)

4.5 Summary of analysis

The analysis found that all the parents interviewed felt that it was important to carry out research to inform what they felt was a big decision. Parents felt that the choice set of specialist options was limited and some appeared to feel, or were told, that mainstream schools would not be able to meet their child's needs. They considered a range of explicit attributes to inform their decision. However, they also appeared to be significantly influenced by emotional reactions when visiting schools.

Parents felt that they had to be proactive in gathering information and were concerned that if they had not taken this active role, information may not have been forthcoming. A converging thread emerged throughout the interviews suggesting that parents would like information on the process and appropriate schools available to be more clearly and freely communicated.

There was divergence across interviews when the roles of professionals were considered and the inconsistency in information and communication from professionals appeared to affect the parents overall experience of the process. This may have contributed to some parents seeking information and advice

from informal sources. They appeared to place more value and trust in information when they either had an established relationship with the person they were communicating with or when the other person appeared interested in their child.

5. Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how parents experience and perceive the decision making process when choosing a secondary school for children with statements of SEN. This was carried out using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Government publications promote parental rights when choosing educational provision for children with SEN (DfE, 2011) and aims to provide parents with a 'clear' and 'real' choice of schools when making what is described as 'one of the most significant decisions' a parent has to make for their child (Pp. 51, DfE, 2011). However, a systematic literature review showed that there has been little in depth exploration of parents' experiences of this process, particularly in England, and so it was hoped that the current study would add to the existing knowledge in this area and help to inform professionals involved in the process, in order to effectively support positive experiences for parents.

This chapter will consider the research question proposed at the end of the literature review in relation to each of the three master themes identified during interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews. The double hermeneutic cycle involved in interpreting the parents' perceptions and experiences is acknowledged, with the findings representing the author's interpretation of the parents' interpretation of events. As suggested by Smith (2011), government legislation, theory and research literature discussed in the literature review is also considered in relation to the findings of the analysis in order to aid the author's interpretation. The research question explored is:

How did parents perceive and experience the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for their child with a statement of SEN?

The discussion of the research question and analysis will be followed by conclusions drawn from the discussion, a critique of the study and discussion of

its limitations and a consideration of the implications of the study for varying stakeholders, including educational psychologists, and for future research.

5.2 Master Theme One: Perceptions of Decision Making

From analysis of the parents' interviews, it appeared that most of them perceived a significant part of their experience of the school choice process to include gathering information about schools and visiting schools, in order to make an informed decision about which school they were going to 'name' to the local authority as the school that they would like their child to attend for secondary education. This included thoughts and feelings about the choice of schools available to them, the difficulties of including their child in the decision, what they perceived as important attributes for a school to have and about the person who showed them round the prospective schools.

5.2.1 School choice

Despite government literature stating that they wanted a clear and real choice for parents (DfE, 2011), the parents interviewed in this study expressed difficulties in identifying which schools they could choose from and felt that there was a limited choice of schools available to them. Parents' experiences and perceptions of gathering information about the schools available will be discussed further in Master theme 2: perceptions on communicating information. This section will focus on parents' perceptions of the choices available. The government proposed that parents should be given a 'real choice of school' in the green paper published in 2011, with the aim of 'improving the range and diversity of schools from which parents can choose' (Pp. 5, DfE, 2011). This is described as including special and mainstream places in a range of maintained and non-maintained schools (DfE, 2011, 2014). The parents interviewed did seem to be aware that they could choose from mainstream, resourced provision or special school settings, with most parents visiting a range of placements during the decision making process.

Despite this, several of the parents thought that the choice set was limited (see section 4.2.2). One set of parents attributed this to the area where they lived.

However, the other parents appeared to perceive the limited choice as being due to the lack of specialist options. This suggests that parents did not perceive having a range of mainstream secondary schools available as increasing the choice set, with one parent stating that, if every secondary school had a resourced provision for SEN, then the choice would be increased. This could be due to parents feeling that mainstream schools are less able to meet the needs of children with SEN as effectively as resourced provisions or special schools. One parent explicitly stated that she felt mainstream secondary schools did not have sufficient access to support and training in order to meet children's needs. This is despite successive governments' promotion of inclusion since the Warnock report in 1978, until recent government publications stating that the bias to inclusion would be removed (DfE, 2011).

One contributory factor to this perception may be due to parents' lived experiences when visiting secondary schools. After a visit to a mainstream secondary, Sufiyan felt that it did not have support for children with SEN. Two other parents were told by prospective mainstream secondary schools (one of which had an ASD resourced provision attached) that they were unable to provide the additional support needed to meet their child's needs (see section 4.3.2, prospective schools). As well as one parent appearing to attribute this to the school lacking access to support and training, in two interviews it was suggested that schools focus on the high achievers rather than wanting to invest in supporting children with SEN. Research on school choice markets has suggested that with schools experiencing pressure to prove academic progress and high levels of attainment, children with SEN, who might place a high level of demand on teacher support and resources, will become less attractive clientele for schools (Bagley and Woods, 1998; Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Evans and Lunt, 1994; Runswick-Cole, 2011). Norwich (2014) suggested that the increase in academies may exacerbate this further, with these settings using their greater flexibility to be less accepting of children with statements of SEN and steering parents towards other options. This could lead parents to experiencing events which result in them perceiving that there is less choice, thereby leading parents to feel that there is a reduced number of schools to choose from rather than having 'increased choice' as proposed by the DfE

(2011). One of the parents interviewed described feeling that a prospective secondary school's attitude towards supporting her daughter changed when it became an academy. Jessen's (2012) research in the USA also suggested that secondary settings were steering parents away from their setting by unofficially suggesting that they could not meet their child's needs during parents' evenings.

The present government's initiative to create a 'local offer' may provide parents with more information about what they should be able to expect a school to offer. However, Norwich and Eaton (2015) state that there is little mention within the current OFSTED framework for evaluating schools with regards to monitoring their admissions and exclusions of pupils with SEN. Therefore, without measures to change schools' accountability for supporting children with SEN, parents may continue to experience a lack of choice for their child within the socio-political context.

5.2.2 The child

The SEN Code of Practice (2015) states that children have a right to express an opinion and for their opinion to be taken into account. However, the current study highlighted complications with achieving this effectively within school choice decision making. Some parents tried to consider the child's view from their own perspective through imagining the child in settings without involving the child directly. Two parents tried to actively involve their child in school visits and include their opinion. However, for one parent she then felt she could only visit one school as she did not want to cause confusion for the child and the other parent thought that the child was then anxious when he found out that he did not get allocated a place in the school that they had looked around. Therefore, if the inclusion of children in decision making is to be promoted, it would need to be explored as to how this could be achieved in a meaningful way without causing anxiety for the child.

5.2.3 Perceived importance of research and intentionally attended to attributes

In the interviews all parents talked about their experience of deciding which secondary school they wanted their child to attend and perceived that it was important to consider certain attributes which they felt were necessary for a school to have. They felt that it was important to invest time and effort into gathering information which could then inform their decisions when choosing their preferred option. They discussed visiting schools and gathering information from professionals, family and friends. Their perceptions of visiting schools will be considered further in section 5.2.4.

The attributes which parents perceived as important to consider when making a decision included distance, school size, opportunities with peers, the availability of support and an individualised curriculum and opportunities for academic achievements and the future. This has some consistencies with previous research on school choice for parents of children with SEN. The consideration of opportunities with peers and support and curriculum available is similar to the intrinsic-personal/social value perspective found to be the dominant factors considered by parents in Bagley and Woods (1998) and Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014) studies described in section 2.4.5. An emphasis was placed by parents on the importance of a school being able to focus on the child's specific need, frequently speaking about individualised curriculums, consistent with Flewitt and Nind (2007). However, parents in Flewitt and Nind's (2007) study also reported facilities available as highly valued which appeared to be less emphasised in the current study with only one parent explicitly referring to facilities available. The current findings were also consistent with research in the USA, finding that the school's ability to address their child's specific needs and small school and class sizes were valued by parents (Finn, Caldwell and Raub, 2006).

Where the current research appeared to differ from the research reviewed was in the value placed on academic outcomes and opportunities for the future. Bagley and Woods (1998) found that parents rarely mentioned instrumental-

academic factors such as academic qualifications as being important when choosing and rejecting schools, whereas this was described as being an important influencing attribute by several of the parents interviewed in the current study. The findings in the current study are similar to Finn, Caldwell and Raub's (2006) study which consisted of a structured interview rather than a postal survey. Perhaps parents are less likely to perceive, or feel that they should not perceive, academic outcomes as important when asked to rank attributes on questionnaires and surveys. When provided with an opportunity to speak about attributes in more depth in an interview situation, it emerges that parents do in fact value opportunities for academic achievements as important.

Using the information they had gathered, all parents appeared to engage in information processing approaches to some extent, such as those described in section 2.3.2. As described by Beresford and Sloper (2008) in section 2.3.2.1, parents may have gathered information about school options and attributes and then engaged in a process of evaluating the attributes as in the Adaptive Decision Maker Framework. Parents in the current study appeared to give different value and weighting to different school attributes and this weighting also varied between parents. Based on theory described by Payne and Bettman (2004), this could have been due to a range of factors. The desirability of the attribute to the parent can impact on the weighting given to the attribute, perhaps based on their perception of their child's needs or their previous experience. For example, Bob and Marge valued the availability of support highly, which could have been due to their previous experiences of having to fight for support. The certainty or uncertainty of an actual attribute actually occurring may also impact the value given to the attribute. For example, Paula felt that her son would benefit from having a high level of support and from making friends with more able peers. However, the certainty of support in the special school weighed heavier than the possibility that he would benefit from being able to mix with more able peers at mainstream secondary. Also, the parent's willingness to compromise and use compensatory strategies, in which a good value on one attribute can compensate for a poor value on another, is influential (Payne and Bettman, 2004). For example, initially Lin was unwilling to compromise on distance when she felt that support would be appropriate in a

nearby school. However, as it became apparent that it would be more likely that there would be a greater level of support available in the distant school, Lin compromised on the distance attribute, feeling that the extra travelling time would be compensated for by the gain in additional support.

Having to make compromises in order to choose a preferred school, such as the one experienced by Lin above, may have made the decision making more emotionally difficult for parents. Luce (2005) proposed an emotional trade-off difficulty model, which suggested that parents would find making compromises emotionally challenging and so may avoid making difficult trade-offs, such as in Lin's interview when she resisted making a difficult trade-off, but eventually compromised on distance for the benefit of additional support. Luce (2005) suggested that when a trade-off is made, people reduce their negative emotions by only focusing on the gained attribute and ignoring the attribute which has been compromised. After Lin made a compromise and decided on the school which she perceived would provide additional support, she began to talk more about the gain of the support. Luce (2005) also suggested that they may avoid trade-offs altogether by focusing on recommendations independent of the attributes such as opinions of other parents or professionals. This may explain why the parents interviewed appeared to value the opinions of other parents and professionals greatly.

5.2.4 Affective responses and the role of emotions

Parents perceived researching schools and comparing attributes as a significant part of the decision making process. They appeared to have developed constructs when they reflected on the process about what they felt was important to consider when choosing a school such as the distance, school size and opportunities with peers. However, they also talked about basing decisions on their gut feelings and emotional responses. Through descriptions of their real lived experiences when they went to visit secondary schools, it appears that it is their interpersonal interactions with the person showing them round and the atmosphere created in the school, which influenced these

feelings and shaped their overall perceptions of the school, significantly influencing which school they chose.

Parents described both positive and negative experiences when they went to visit schools. They appeared to have a positive experience if they perceived the person showing them round to be affable and genuinely interested in their child. Experiences such as asking about their child's interests and sharing contact details led to these perceptions. If the person showing them around did not appear to be interested in finding out about the child or the parent thought that they had made a lack of effort for their visit, then they did not get a positive impression and had a negative experience. These experiences elicited positive and negative emotional responses in the parents which influenced their decisions about the school they wanted to choose. For example, Lin visited the same school twice. The first time she had a negative experience and decided that that school was not an option. On a second visit, she had much more positive interaction with a different person showing her round and described the difference as 'amazing' (Lin, Int 4, line 1232). When she had this positive experience she changed her mind and decided that this school was an option after all.

This is consistent with Flewitt and Nind's (2007) research which also found that parents were highly influenced by the staff when they were shown round. These emotions would be described by Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) as integral emotions which arise as part of the decision making situation and may influence the strategies used to make decisions. Parents' emotions appeared to change during visits, particularly in response to the person showing them round and to the atmosphere in the school based on children's behaviour (see section 4.2.4).

Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam (2015) also identified incidental emotions which are not directly related to the decision making but may carry over from other events and influence decision making without awareness. These may have also influenced parents' experiences of the process. However, it does not appear that these were perceived as influencing their experiences as none of

the parents discussed them during interviews. One parent did acknowledge that the mood of the person showing round may have been influenced by these incidental emotions which then impacted on their experience suggesting that the person showing them round was waiting for retirement. They attributed this to a possible reason for the negative interaction.

Svenson (2003) elaborated that positive mood can result in the overestimation of positive outcomes and vice versa, impacting on the evaluation of attributes and overall perception of an option. This could be applicable to the current research as schools where parents experienced positive feelings about the person showing them round appeared to then be viewed more positively overall. On the other hand, when negative emotions were experienced, they may have then generalised this negative perception to the school overall, such as when Marge felt that the SENCo showing her round had not made an effort because she was in her PE kit, she may have then generalised negative feelings to perceiving that effort would not be made in supporting her daughter.

5.3 Master Theme Two: Perceptions of roles in communicating information

5.3.1 Effortful information gathering

There was convergence across all interviews regarding perceptions of gaining information. All parents appeared to feel that there was a lack of forthcoming information and that it was an effort to gain information about school options and the process, which caused frustration at different points during their lived experiences (see section 4.3.1 and 4.3.2). It was suggested by parents that being given clearer information about the process and schools available would support a more positive experience of the process. There was divergence across parents' perceptions and experiences of interactions with others and they seemed to have different lived experiences with the way information was communicated. Some parents experienced positive relationships with professionals and other parents felt that they had to rely on informal sources to gain information. Parents' perceptions and experiences of the role of others in communicating information will be considered in more detail below.

5.3.2 Role of parent

Previous research considered in the systematic literature review (section 2.4) did not highlight parents' perceptions of their own or their child's role in the process. However, it appears important to clarify what a parent's experience of their role is or what they perceive it should be during the process which was defined by the government as 'one of the single most significant decisions for parents' (Pp. 51, DfE, 2011). The analysis suggested that all of these parents developed constructs which defined their role in the process as being to research and gather information in order to support them in making an informed decision about which secondary school placement would be most appropriate for their child. Some of the parents interviewed also felt that it was their role to advocate and fight for their child, with one parent writing several reports to the LA SEN team in the hope of influencing their decision about school allocation. Parents felt that they had to be very proactive in their role of gathering information and advocating for their child and felt that the experience of their role may be more positive if information about school options and the process was forthcoming from professionals. They appeared to take on the role of the expert when gathering information, deciding what to ask on school visits and what attributes were important in informing their decision. It appeared that the parents did not necessarily assume that all parents take on the same active role. Two parents expressed concern that if parents were not as active in seeking information, their children may not end up going to the most appropriate school.

5.3.3 Role of LA professionals

5.3.3.1 Local authority SEN team

Analysis in the current study identified inconsistencies between perceptions of the role of the LA in the process due to different experiences with professionals, particularly that of their Casework Officer (CWO). This had an impact on their perceptions of the process overall. Parents in three interviews felt that their CWO was approachable, that they could ask them questions about the process, seek reassurance when they had concerns and would

advocate for them during the LA allocation of school placements. They perceived that they had a positive contribution to make to their experience. However, this perception of the role was not shared across all parents. Some appeared to view the role of the CWO as less significant with them not attending meetings and playing a minor role in the process. Some parents expressed a negative perception of the role of the LA stating that it was difficult to actually get information from them. The latter perception was more consistent with previous research, which found that the role of the LA was not perceived positively by parents (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Tissot, 2011). It emerged from the analysis that the disparity between parents' perceptions of the role of the LA may be due to the relationship which they had already established with their CWO. Parents who already had an established relationship with their CWO, appeared to have a more positive perception of the LA's role. This is reflective of Bradbury, Kay, Tighe, and Hewison's (1994) study, which found that the trust and quality of the communication and interaction that people had with professionals was more influential than the information itself. The parent, who had built up a trusting relationship with her CWO through previous home visits, may have perceived any information from the CWO more positively than those who did not have an established relationship.

Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi (2014) did find the LA featured highly as a source of information. In the current study, all parents, whether they had a positive or negative perception of the role of the LA, felt that more information could be provided to them regarding the process and appropriate schools available. Once parents had decided which school they would like their child to attend and stated their preferred choice to the LA, they appeared to experience anxiety whilst waiting for the LA to communicate the decision about which school their child had been allocated. Three parents communicated that they had to wait too long to find out which school their child had been allocated. They also felt that this information was provided too late in the school year, limiting the time for transition activities, which could result in their children having a negative experience of transition. Some of the parents' anxiety experienced during this part of the process could perhaps be due to the parents

not having control over this part of the process and not having timescales communicated clearly about when they will find out the outcome.

Two parents also experienced confusion between the usual school allocation process and the one for parents of children with statements and EHC plans due to the lack of clear information from the LA. Two other parents felt that the information about which placement their child had been allocated was not communicated clearly, which caused them to experience further frustration and anxiety. They felt that if information had been communicated more clearly, that they would have had a more positive experience of the process.

5.3.3.2 Educational psychologists

The role of the EP was also perceived differently across interviews. Most parents interviewed did not appear to recognise a significant role or were unclear about the role that the EP had played in the process. This was despite all parents included in the study having had a minimum involvement of an EP present during the Year 5 change of phase annual review. One set of parents felt that the EP information on choosing a school was unhelpful as they appeared indifferent. Only one parent spoke of the EP playing an influential role in the process. This was when the EP focused on understanding the child's needs and type of support that would be appropriate. Therefore, if EPs are unable to share opinions about schools, they may be more effective in supporting parents in identifying what would support their child's needs in order to help parents to gather information which supports them in feeling able to make an informed decision.

Jungerman and Fischer (2005) proposed that parents may feel that they do not have access to all the information in order to be able to weigh up all of the options and so want to short cut that process by seeking expert advice. One parent talked about the benefit of professionals combining their expert knowledge of the decision making situation with individual knowledge of the child in order to positively inform the process. However, he felt that due to the number of different professionals that had been involved with his child, they had not been able to gain a true understanding of his child's needs. Jungerman

and Fischer (2005) suggested that people are more likely to accept professionals' advice if they trust the advisor and if the advisor is credible. If parents had the opportunity to work with consistent professionals who have been able to get to know their child over a period of time, they may be more likely to trust the advisor and view the information as more credible.

5.3.3.3 Outreach services

In four of the interviews, where parents had children with specific diagnoses of autism or hearing impairment, outreach services had been involved in supporting the child in school. Where outreach services had been involved with supporting children, parents all appeared to perceive their role in the decision making process positively. This appeared to include providing information on the process and schools. Parents' positive perception may have been due to having already established a relationship with the adult or having increased trust in their understanding of their child's individual needs. This again is reflective of the findings of Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison (1994). However, not all parents interviewed had involvement from outreach services and so did not have access to this source of support, leaving them with a layer of support missing.

5.3.4 Role of schools

Parents in five of the interviews perceived the role of their current school in the process positively. However, the parent who had already experienced a negative relationship with their child's school did not value the information provided. The school which parents felt had been unsupportive in the past may not have provided useful information to the parents. However, it could be a further example of the relationship and quality of communication a parent has with a school being more influential than the information itself (Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison, 1994).

All parents perceived the role of the prospective school to be to provide information about their school. They viewed this more positively if the person showing them round appeared to show an interest in the child, rather than

focusing on what the school had to offer or commenting on the school's inability to meet the child's needs.

5.3.5 Role of independent parent support services

Parent Partnership service was referred to in three of the interviews in the current study. However, their role did not appear to be significant in two of them and in the third, the parent described a negative perception of their involvement (see section 4.3.2.3). The systematic literature review only cited one study which referred to Parent Partnership (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014) and was found to be used by relatively few parents. Sufiyan did report that he would have had more involvement with this service if he had decided to appeal against the LA decision, and so perhaps they play a more significant role in the process if parents appeal against LA decisions.

5.3.6 Role of informal support

Information from informal sources appeared to influence both parents' experience of the process and the decisions they made. This was viewed positively by parents. Three parents were also members of parent support groups and found information from other parents about their experiences of schools valuable, consistent with findings in Flewitt and Nind (2007). Parents appeared to place a high level of trust in information from informal sources. For example, Marge believed her friend who stated that all the support in a school she was considering would cease when her child went into Year 8. This was in preference to the information provided by the SENCo during her visit to the same school. This may be that the level of trust in an established relationship is more influential than information from an 'expert' source where the same level of trust has not been established (Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison, 1994). .

Informal sources of information were perceived as having a positive influence on the process by parents. Parents may perceive that informal sources of information can be more honest about a school setting than professionals are able to be and so may feel that this information is more informative to their decision making. However, not all parents of children with statements or EHC

plans have contact with informal sources of information and so having parents rely on informal contacts as primary sources of information does not provide a fair and equitable system for all. Not all parents appeared to be aware of parent support groups either, with one stating that there were not any available within the LA. Therefore, not all parents are experiencing equal access to information from other parents either. However, caution should also be taken with regards to encouraging parents to rely on information from informal sources as there is no monitoring of the accuracy of information and so this could lead to misunderstandings about the process and parents may have a negative experience. For example, Paula applied for her child to move to a special school at the end of Year 5 rather than Year 6, based on information from another parent, even though she was not sure that she wanted him to move early. This caused her additional anxiety by going through the process of waiting for the LA outcome of school allocation twice and worrying that she would not get their preferred school option the second time round after not being allocated it on the first attempt.

5.4 Master Theme Three: Emotions and Reflections

5.4.1 Negative emotions

When parents reflected back on the process it appears that they all experienced negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety at different points during the process. This was most commonly around parents' experience of communication of information, including identifying schools to choose from, during visits to schools and when trying to find out if their child had been allocated a place in their preferred choice of school.

Parents also experienced frustration when their preferred option was removed from the choice set either through the school expressing that they could not meet the child's needs or the LA informing them that they had not been allocated a place. Two sets of parents also spoke of the stressful experience when they thought that they may have been allocated a place in the mainstream part of the school when they had requested a place in the resourced provision. Brehm (1956) proposed that people have negative

aversive reactions to having options and choices taken away, termed reactance theory. Reactance theory suggested that parents may feel they want that school choice even more, put up more of a fight to reclaim the option and/or feel negativity towards the person who has taken away that choice. These parents did appear to experience anxiety at the prospect of having to consider new options and began to feel that their preferred choice was the only suitable option. Another parent also began to write reports and fight for her preferred school when she thought that she might have it taken away. This could also contribute to negative perceptions of the LA and schools, which have effectively removed the option from the choice set.

As well as parents experiencing negative emotions during the school decision making and allocation process, two parents perceived that their experience of going through the process had a wider impact on their family's emotions (See section 4.4.2). Lin attributed her experience of going through the process as contributing to her worsened mental health and a negative impact on her relationship with her partner.

5.4.2 Perceived influence in decision making

Five of the six parents thought that they had the most influence in the decision making process, despite some having experienced an anxious wait to find out if they had been allocated a place in their preferred school and not necessarily getting their preferred option. This is the intended outcome of government legislation which promotes parents' rights in choosing their child's school placement (DfE, 2011). Sufiyan repeated 'the choice was ours' several times throughout the interview despite not getting his first choice. This could also possibly be an example of an emotion-focused coping strategy in order to feel that they had control in the situation or may have been that they did feel that they had the most influence, as although they may not have been allocated their first preference, they were still able to make a choice about which to request as their second option.

5.4.3 Importance of decision making

From the analysis it appeared that it was important to parents to be able to make an informed decision in order to be able to choose the school that they felt would impact most positively on their child's future (see section 4.2.1 and 4.4.1). Three of the parents interviewed spoke explicitly about the importance of their decision because of the impact it would have on their child's future. This may have added to the emotions parents experienced during the process as they may have felt additional pressure making a decision on the behalf of someone else, which could have such a big impact on the child's life. This may be why they felt it important to invest time and effort into finding out about schools and being able to make an informed decision. This may have been a form of anticipated regret with parents experiencing additional anxiety in case the child does not have a positive experience in the school that they have chosen (Bradbury, Kay, Tighe and Hewison, 1994).

5.4.4 Post-process emotions

Although some parents experienced negative emotions during the process of school allocation, all six parents stated that they were either pleased with the final outcome or that they thought that it would be the best place for their child (see section 4.4.3). Parents also appeared to emphasise the positive attributes at the allocated school and the negative attributes of rejected schools or ones that had been removed from their choice set. Baumeister and Bushman (2011) suggested that people try to reduce dissonant cognitions, thoughts about desirable features that have been rejected and undesirable features that have been chosen, by increasing the attractiveness of the chosen option and its attributes and downgrading the attractiveness of the unchosen option as an emotion-focused coping strategy. This may have resulted in the positive attitudes towards the final outcomes for parents.

5.5 Conclusion

The study will conclude with a summary of the discussion of analysis highlighting aspects of parents' experiences which were effortful and those which were perceived as supportive. This is followed by a consideration of the

limitations and implications of these conclusions for future practice and research.

5.5.1 Conclusions from discussion of analysis

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how parents experience and perceive the decision making process when choosing a secondary school for children with statements of SEN. Through a review of the research literature available on parents' decision making, it was identified that there was a lack of detailed exploration of parents' experiences of the process, particularly in England, with most of the studies utilising postal questionnaires and surveys. Through using semi-structured interviews with parents who had recently experienced the process and using IPA to analyse transcripts, a deeper understanding of their lived experience could be explored providing a unique contribution to the research literature. The discussion thus far has considered each of the themes identified from analysis of the interviews in relation to the research question:

How did parents perceive and experience the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for their child with a statement of SEN?

In summary, it appears that although each of the parents interviewed had their own unique experience of the process, most of them perceived their experience to be effortful. The parents interviewed indicated that they were satisfied with the outcome of the decision making process and they did appear to feel that they could choose between a range of placement types such as mainstream, resourced provision and special school placements. However, their experiences of going through the decision making process did not appear to be perceived as a 'clear' or 'real' choice as promoted in government publications (DfE, 2011). Parents perceived the choice to be limited and experienced difficulties and confusion with the way information was communicated from finding out about prospective schools to the process of allocation. Parents' perceptions of the process as a 'fight' and a 'struggle' identified in the literature

review (Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Jessen, 2012; Lalvani, 2012, section 2.4.5.3), were echoed in the current study. Through a detailed analysis of their lived experiences using IPA, interpretations have been made identifying parents' constructs around events which were perceived negatively, leading to the process being effortful, and events which were perceived as helpful and supportive of a positive experience of the process. These are summarised in Figure 5.1: An illustrative diagram to show experiences which were perceived by parents to be effortful or supportive to the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for children with statements of SEN.

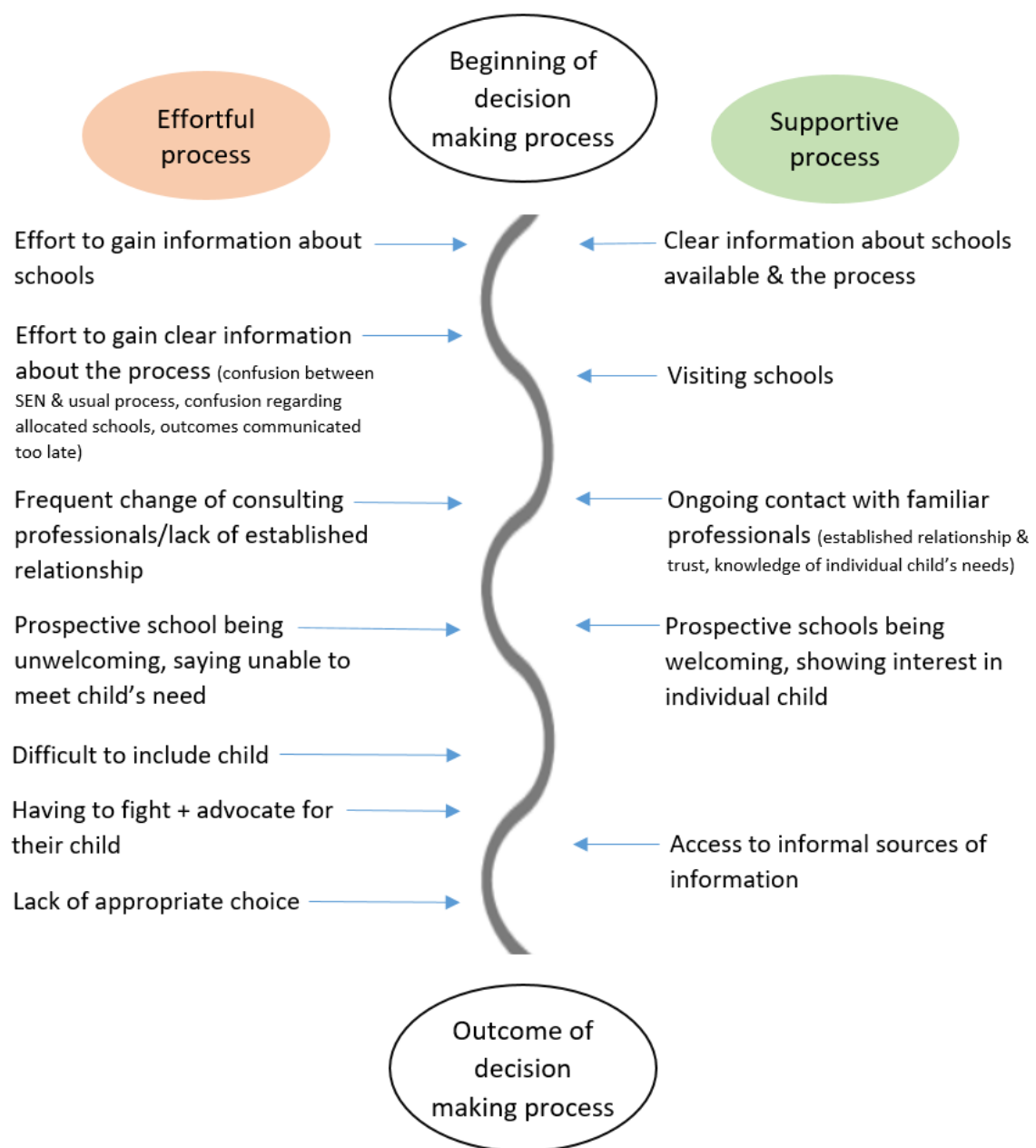


Figure 5.1: An illustrative diagram to show experiences which were perceived by parents to be effortful or supportive to the decision making process when choosing secondary school placement for children with statements of SEN.

5.5.1.1 Effortful process

Parents appeared to find the process to be effortful at different stages. Experiences which contributed to it being perceived as an effortful process began with parents finding it difficult to identify which schools were available for

them to choose from and an effort to find out information about the schools. Some parents perceived that the choice available was limited and felt that more specialist provisions were needed in order to increase the number of options. They did not appear to perceive that mainstream options widen the choice set. This could be due to mainstream secondary schools not having the ability to meet the needs of individual children or schools purposefully steering parents away due to competitive school choice markets (Bagley and Woods, 1998; Jessen, 2012).

Parents appeared to put pressure on themselves to choose the most suitable school available on behalf of their child. They found it difficult to include the child in the process without causing them anxiety. Therefore, it appears that parents wanted to gather information in order to make an informed decision, but found gathering this information effortful, which appeared to be due to their interactions and experiences with other people during the process. Parents expressed difficulty with accessing clear information from the LA SEN team and other professionals involved. One parent found information from the Educational Psychologist to be unhelpful and several others perceived their role as insignificant. Perhaps this was due to their limited involvement and the EPs and other professionals involved with the family and child frequently changing so that they are not able to establish an ongoing relationship. It is suggested that this may lead to less trust and parents perceiving that professionals have a lack of knowledge and understanding of their individual child's needs.

Parents thought that information regarding the process was not clearly provided with two parents speaking of confusion between the SEN and normal school allocation process. The process was also felt to take too long with parents feeling like there was no information on timescales. They felt that the information about which schools they had been allocated was provided too late to support a positive transition for the child and found it difficult if the school they had chosen as most appropriate was then taken away from them. Parents perceived that they had to actively fight and advocate for their child.

5.5.1.2 Supportive process

From their lived experiences, these are elements that parents perceived would be supportive in helping them to have a more positive experience of the process.

Parents felt that visiting schools was a beneficial part of the process. Their experiences of visiting schools helped them to make a decision about whether they felt the school would be suitable for their child. They appeared to be influenced by their perceptions of the person showing them round and the atmosphere within the school.

Despite parents' negative experiences during the process, several parents spoke about sources of support, such as their current schools help with the completion of paperwork and teaching assistants accompanying parents on visits to schools to contribute to the decision making process. There was divergence across interviews regarding experiences with professionals. It appeared that these may be perceived more positively if the people providing information have an established relationship with the parent, such as specialist outreach services, or show an interest in the child as an individual. The EP, who parents felt provided them with useful information on their child's individual needs was perceived positively as the parents felt this information was able to support their decision making. This suggests that being able to develop a relationship with professionals is important in developing trust and parents feeling that information is more personalised to their child. Parents who had access to consistent support from a service over a longer period of time, appeared to view their role and input in the process as more influential and effective. Parents who did not have the consistent support either appeared to not recognise a significant role for services in the process or felt that the information provided by services was inaccurate.

They also felt supported by informal sources of information, such as family members and other parents of children with SEN. However, not all parents have access to this source of support and so could lead to an inequitable system. Although perceived positively by parents, informal sources may

provide parents with misleading information about the process which could ultimately lead them to experience a more effortful process.

Although the LA SEN team felt that they provide parents with information about schools and the process, this was not experienced by the parents who were interviewed. Based on their lived experiences, these parents perceived that clearer information about schools and the process from LA professionals would support a more positive experience.

5.5.2 Critique and Limitations of study

Through using IPA as a methodological approach to exploring the research questions, it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of the parents' lived experience of the school choice decision making, including their thoughts and feelings about the process. Findings, such as the potential influence of affective responses when visiting schools and inconsistent experiences of professionals, may not have emerged through quantitative surveys and questionnaires. Although IPA enables an in-depth interpretation of the parents' experiences, it does acknowledge that this is limited to a representation of the researcher's own subjective interpretation of the expressed perceptions of the parents interviewed and does not claim to present generalisable truths. The limitations of IPA are discussed further within the methodology chapter (see section 3.4), along with a consideration of quality and validity within the current study using Yardley's (2000, 2008) framework (see section 3.7).

All of the parents in the sample had recently been through the experience of the decision making process and had now been allocated a school, which their child would be starting in a few months' time. Therefore, they were able to speak freely and openly about the process and appeared motivated by the opportunity to share their experiences with others, which aided the richness of the data collected through the interviews.

As the researcher plays an active role in collecting and interpreting the data, reflexive thoughts were recorded in a research journal following interviews and

during the analysis in an attempt to bracket off preconceptions and remain sensitive to the parents' perceptions of their lived experiences. Sections of transcript and identified themes were also shared in consultation with supervisors and critical friends to support interpretations remaining grounded in the original data. A systematic process of analysis to support immersion in the data was followed in accordance with Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) as described in detail in the methodology chapter. Excerpts of annotated transcripts and verbatim quotes have also been included, in order to provide a transparent account of interpretations and to allow the reader to reflect on the interpretations made.

Due to the small sample size and only taking place in the context of one LA, the findings may not generalise to other parents' experiences. As previously stated, a parent's experience is likely to be influenced by their individual social and historical context, such as previous experiences with schools and interactions with specific professionals. Therefore, parents' experiences may vary even within the same LA, as demonstrated during analysis of interviews in the current study. In other parts of the country the systems employed by LA professionals to support parents in the process may vary from those in the area where the current research was carried out and, therefore, limits the generalisability of the study. While it may appear that a sample size of 8 parents talking about their 6 children is small, it is in keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA, as recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). This provided an opportunity for detailed case-by-case analysis of transcripts providing an in-depth understanding of individual parents' thoughts and feelings during their experience of the process of choosing school placement for children with a statement of SEN, such as their experiences of visiting schools and perceptions about why the process was effortful. This detailed analysis provided powerful illustrative examples of the lived experiences of the participants, which had been identified as being limited in previous studies analysed in the systematic literature review due to the methodologies employed.

The study aimed for a homogeneous sample of participants through purposive sampling (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). However, this limits the exploration of perceptions and experiences to the group of parents who were interviewed. Social economic status, additional learning needs of a parent and ethnicity are all factors which may impact on a parent's experience of the decision making process. However, these were not controlled for within the inclusion criteria and so could have influenced the homogeneity of the group. All parents interviewed in this study were competent at speaking in English and were able to articulate their thoughts and perceptions clearly. Some of the parents interviewed shared concerns that not all parents may have access to the same information, or advocate and fight for their child's rights, as effectively as they felt they did, which could lead to an inequitable system. This will be considered further within implications for practice and future research.

5.5.3 Implications for practice

The analysis and discussion concluded by suggesting that the parents interviewed in the current study perceived their experience of the decision making process to be effortful. Figure 5.1 summarises elements of their lived experience perceived by parents to be supportive of a more positive experience of the process. These will be considered to inform implications for future practice.

The parents in this study appeared to want to make informed decisions about which secondary school setting may be the most appropriate for their child's secondary education. However, they found it effortful to gather information and to navigate their way through the decision making process. Parents' experiences and perceptions of professionals appeared to differ across interviews with some feeling that gaining information about appropriate schools and the process was difficult. It appeared that the relationship and trust that the parent had with the person providing information influenced the parents' perception of the information. If the parent had already established a relationship with the person providing information and felt that they were affable and interested in their child, then they appeared to perceive the information and

support given more positively. Therefore, to improve parents' experiences of the process, it may be important for parents to experience more consistency across professionals and to feel that information is freely available and relevant to their child.

5.5.3.1 Implications for LA SEN teams

Parents interviewed in the current study consistently felt that communication of information could be improved. Therefore, in order to improve parents' experiences and perceptions of the process, the LA SEN team need to provide clear and accessible information to parents about the process and the schools available. Although the LA SEN team state that they do provide all parents with a letter and a booklet informing them about the process (see section 1.1), this was not perceived to have been the case by any of the parents who were interviewed, with three parents stating explicitly that it would be helpful if this information was provided. Therefore, the LA SEN team may need to explore a more effective way of communicating information about schools and the process to parents. Clear communication of timescales may also help to reduce anxiety experienced when parents are waiting to find out about allocation of school placements. This may be most effectively done in collaboration with parents who have been through the process and are able to reflect on what information they feel would have been helpful and how the information could have been communicated more effectively. The SEN Code of Practice (2015) states that LAs must involve parents in developing and reviewing their local offer and so collaborating with parents to develop effective communication could impact on other SEN systems involving parents. Information needs to be equally accessible to all parents in order to create a fair process and so consideration needs to be given as to how to effectively communicate with parents who may be illiterate, have additional learning needs and/or speak English as an additional language, such as translation of information, access to verbal communication of information and visual representations of timelines and schools available.

Parents appeared to experience a positive perception of their Casework Officer (CWO), when the CWO communicated directly with the parents, made themselves approachable to parents and took an interest in the child. Having a consistent CWO over a period of time, may help parents to feel that they have a positive relationship. Where this is not possible, an allocated CWO making direct contact with parents, such as a phone call when they are about to start the process, may help to increase a sense of familiarity, help to make them appear affable to parents and improve parents' perceptions of the quality of interactions. This was suggested as being important when communicating information by Bradbury, Kay, Tighe, and Hewison (1994). It may also be supportive to parents to have an individualised phone call when the outcome of allocation is communicated, particularly for parents who have not been allocated their first preference, to provide an opportunity for parents to clarify any questions and confusion and discuss next steps. This may reduce some of the anxiety experienced by the parents in the current study.

LA professionals may also be able to play a role in improving the consistency of experiences for parents through establishing clearly defined roles for professionals involved in the process. This may first involve clearly defining the roles of those involved in collaboration with professionals, such as EPs and independent parent support services, and then making sure this is communicated to all the professionals involved in the process. This could also be communicated to parents so that they are clear about what they can expect from each professional. The implementation of EHC plans could provide an opportunity for professionals to establish more consistent relationships with parents prior to the change of phase process.

5.5.3.2 Implications for Educational Psychologists

The change of phase annual review forms part of an EP's core work when a parent questions which educational setting would be most appropriate for a child's next phase of education. Therefore, it is beneficial for the service to maximise the effectiveness of the EP role in the process. The EP role was described by the LA as informing their decisions once parents have stated their

preference (see section 1.1). However, it appeared that the parent who evaluated the role of the EP positively in the current study felt that it was beneficial for the EP to discuss the child's individual needs with the parents prior to stating their preferred choice. Perhaps, if the EP was involved earlier in the decision making process, they would be able to support parents' decision making more effectively.

If parents are unclear as to what is important in meeting their child's needs, they may also find it difficult to know what information they need to gather. Through collaborative discussion with EP's, parents and current SENCo, appropriate support to meet the child's needs could be discussed, identifying which attributes are important in supporting their child's needs and a personalised list of questions to support information gathering on school visits could be generated. This may help parents to focus their information gathering and research. The EP could possibly support incorporating the child's views about what is important to them at this earlier stage so that parents are able to use this to inform their information gathering, if they felt that taking them on the visits would be confusing for the child.

5.5.3.3 Implications for schools

The implications for prospective secondary schools may be around awareness of the impact they have on parents during school visits. However, further exploration of secondary school perspectives may need to be carried out to investigate if schools feel that parents are consciously 'steered' away as this may impact on the person's attitude when they show the parent around.

Current primary schools appear well placed through already having established relationships to support parents with information about the process. Parents in the current study appeared to value SENCos accompanying them on visits. As shown in the current study though, not all parents may have experienced a successful relationship with their current school and so perhaps CWOs have a role in checking the relationship the parent has with their school and offering

additional support, or making parents aware of independent parent support group, when needed.

5.5.4 Implications for future research

Feedback on the study and possible implications for practice are due to be shared at both an EP team meeting and LA SEN team meeting in subsequent months. A feedback session for parents involved in the study has also been arranged. Further research and monitoring of any changes made as a consequence of this feedback would be beneficial in supporting developments.

The current study has provided an in depth exploration of parents' perceptions and experiences of the decision making process which highlighted the role of others in the process. Further research is needed to explore the experiences and perceptions of these key others, such as the LA SEN team, EP service and SENCos in primary and junior schools. Gaining the views of a wider range of parents would also be beneficial in order to explore if these findings are identified across specific groups of parents such as similar social economic status.

Further research would also be beneficial to investigate secondary schools perspectives from both the SENCos' and school managers' perspectives across a range of settings. This could help to identify if schools feel that they have appropriate training and resources to meet the needs of children with SEN effectively and if they feel that there is pressure placed on schools to support children who may achieve higher academic outcomes impacting on accessibility for children with SEN.

The role of the child in the process appeared to be challenging for parents as they did not want to cause confusion for the child and may need further research to investigate how this could be done more effectively.

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Appendices

Appendix 1a: Weight of Evidence criteria for this review

	WoE A: Quality of execution of study. Coherence and integrity of the evidence	WoE B: appropriateness of research design and analysis for addressing the question of specific systematic review	WoE C: relevance of particular focus of study for addressing question of specific review
High	Transparency and quality of methods used such as detailed description of data collection and analysis, fellow researchers/peers reviewing analysis and transcripts, audit trail mentioned. Rigour and clarity of how conclusion, themes and theory have been drawn from data.	In-depth data collection including interviews gaining detailed information about parents' perceptions and lived experiences. Verbatim transcription and analysed in detail.	Parents' experiences and perceptions of the process of decision making involved in choosing secondary school placement(11-12 years) for children with a statement of SEN in English education system. More recent studies may be more relevant to current contexts.
Medium	Moderate description of execution of study. E.g. Some detail about data collection but lacking detail and rigour in how themes and theory have been developed from data.	Questionnaire with follow-up interviews with a small sample. Notes taken from interviews with some verbatim comments.	Focus on parents' experiences or perceptions of choosing school placement for a child with SEN within the English education system or secondary/high school in international context.
Low	Little description of methods used, lack of transparency about data collection and analysis.	Postal questionnaire/survey with descriptive statistics but no description of parents' experiences or perceptions.	Focus on parents' experiences or perceptions of choosing school placement for a child with SEN within an international context.

Appendix 1b: Weight of Evidence appraisal

Study	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Jessen (2012)	High - Clear description of methodology and justification of methods. Rigour in linking themes to data, use of flow charts and concept webs as well as coding of transcripts, and triangulation of data.	High - Interviews with 12 sets of parents (2xparents of SEN) – total of 28 interviews. Interviews with wider professionals to gain larger view of school choice and participant observation in parents' evenings. Triangulated with numerical data from NYC DfE. Interview transcribed and coded using grounded theory.	Medium – interviews carried out with parents throughout the decision making process for selecting high school. However, only focused on two sets of parents with children with SEN and within international (New York, USA) education context.	High/Medium
Bajwa-Patel and Devecehi (2014)	Medium – description of data collection and demographics. Not much rigour in data analysis, descriptive statistics not statistical analysis.	Low – postal survey, mostly descriptive statistics with some written comments from parents to support themes.	Medium – in context of UK focusing on parents of children with statements of SEN, mostly 12-13 years old following transition to secondary. No in depth understanding of decision making process of choosing school.	Low/medium
Flewitt and Nind (2007)	Medium – clear description of data collection. Descriptive statistics of questionnaire data and thematic analysis for interviews but no detail about how analysis carried out and how data linked to themes.	Medium – postal survey/questionnaire with 5 follow up interviews with parents. Not transcribed, only verbatim quotes. Analysis and descriptive statistics.	Medium – interviews provided detail about choice making for parents of children with SEN in UK. However, in the context of early years settings for 3-4 year olds.	Medium
Finn, Caldwell and Raub, (2006)	High – transparency in how gained access to data sample and consent, data collection methods and analysis. Carried out pilot interview. Structured interview schedule used to remove bias.	Medium – open-ended structured telephone interviews – may limit opportunity to gain in depth information about parents' experiences. Full transcription of data with description of thematic analysis.	Low – 7 parents of children with SEN in international (USA) context. Age range 7-14 years, not limited to choosing secondary placement.	Medium
Ryndak,	High – transparency maintained throughout	High/medium – 3 semi-structured interviews	Medium/low – retrospective over	Medium

Orlando, Storch, Denney and Huffman (2011)	data collection and analysis. Acknowledges bias of researcher. Transcripts shared with participant and analysis checked for agreement. Constant comparative analysis between fellow researchers.	with participant to gain detailed perceptions of experiences relating to decision making processes in child's education. Limited to one participant. Audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.	12 year period not focusing on primary to secondary decision making. Establishing parents' perceptions, thoughts and feelings around decision making for child with SEN. International (USA) context.	
Lalvani (2012)	Medium – some transparency in description of data sample and how this was accessed. Some description of data collection and analysis. No accuracy checks with peers, researchers or participants.	High – 33 semi-structured interviews with parents in order to gain perspective and understand context in which interpret experiences. Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Emergent Themes Approach and coding used to analyse data.	Medium/low – Parents of children with SEN, one aspect of interview focused on process through which educational placement was determined. Age range 4-14 years. International (USA) context.	Medium
Lange and Lehr (2000)	Medium – moderate description of execution. Data collection methods described and mixed methods of analysis including descriptive and inferential statistics. Inductive method of coding written comments by parents across researchers.	Low – postal survey completed by 608 parents of children with and without SEN. Parental satisfaction survey so lacking in depth detail of parents experiences. Written comments coded and themes developed.	Low – parents with and without SEN included. Survey of general satisfaction not just decision making process of school placement. Age of children not specified (in charter school). Survey carried out in 1996-1997 so lacking relevance to current context. International (USA) context.	Low/medium
Bagley and Woods (1998)	Low - Data extracted from part of a larger study. No description of how interviews conducted or how analysed data to develop themes.	Low/Medium – this study draws from the qualitative data the large scale study, focusing on interviews with school staff and 9 parents (5 with statement of SEN). No description about how data transcribed or analysed.	Medium – included interviews with parents of children with statements of SEN regarding perception, experiences and values of parents relating to school choice in UK context. However, interviews were conducted in summer 1994.	Low/medium
Bagley, Woods	Medium – moderate description of data	Low/medium – large postal survey with over	Medium – investigating	Medium

and Woods (2001)	collection and sample (copy of questionnaire included). Quotes from interviews used to support claims but lack of rigour - no description of analysis. Descriptive statistics of quantitative data. SEN self-reported by parents in questionnaire could result in lack of accuracy and included gifted children.	6000 questionnaire response (240 with children with SEN). 26 follow-up interviews with parents of children with SEN including 9 with statement of SEN. No description of transcription or coding and analysis.	parents preferences, perceptions and responses of parents of children with SEN, including statements for SEN, on transfer from primary to secondary. However, data collected in 1994-1996.	
Tissot (2011)	Medium – description of sample and questionnaire used. Questionnaire was piloted and revised. Large sample of 738 parents of children with ASD returned. Statistical analysis of quantitative data, coded and thematic analysis of qualitative data.	Low – Questionnaire used to gather views of parents. 37 closed items and 2 open items. Lack of opportunity to gain in depth perception and experiences of parents. Data from open questions were transcribed and coded into themes.	Medium – Gathering parents views of children with SEN (ASD specific) within UK context on school process of gaining school placement. Not specific to secondary. Average age of returnee child 8-9years.	Medium
Freeman, Alkin and Kasari (1999)	High/medium – Sample of 291 parents of children with Down's syndrome. Spanish and English versions of questionnaire to gain representative sample for area. Statistical analysis for forced choice questions and qualitative for open questions with independent and peer grouping of qualitative comments and then themes checked with sample of 30 parents for accuracy and validity.	Low – postal questionnaire of satisfaction of parents with educational system. Lack of opportunity to gain in depth perception and experiences of parents. Data from open questions were transcribed and coded into themes.	Low – Parents views on school placement of children with SEN (Down's syndrome specific). Not transfer to high school or process of decision making specifically. International context (Los Angeles, USA).	Low/medium

Appendix 2: Phone script provided to EP's contacting parents

Introduction – remind them who you are

Reason for calling – A trainee Educational Psychologist in our service is carrying out research about parents' experiences of choosing secondary school provision for children with statements for special educational needs. As you went through this experience last year, I was wondering if you would mind if I pass on your contact details to Laura so that she can send you a letter telling you a little bit more about the research and invite you to take part.

If they want to know more about the study -

She would be grateful if you would take part in an interview about your experiences, thoughts and feelings of the process you went through while deciding where your child will go to secondary school. The interview will take approximately an hour and all information will be anonymised and used for research purposes only. You do not need to agree to take part at this stage, I am just phoning to ask if you consent to me passing on your contact details to Laura so that she can get in touch to tell you more about the study and then you can decide if you would like to take part in an interview.

Appendix 3: Recruitment letter

Printed on LA EP service letter head

Date

Name and address

Dear name

I am currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in I am carrying out research into parents' experiences of choosing secondary school provision for children with statements for special educational needs. I believe that you have recently gone through this process yourself and I would very much appreciate your input.

I would be grateful if you would take part in an interview about your experiences, thoughts and feelings of the process you went through while deciding where your child will go to secondary school.

All information provided by you will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. The interview should take approximately one hour.

If you are able to take part in the study, please contact me by email at ... or by telephone on I would like to arrange an initial meeting to provide you with more information about the study and to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you in advance.

Yours sincerely

Laura Booth
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Supervisor:
Neil Ryrie
(University of Nottingham Supervisor)



Appendix 4: Ethics approval

SJ/wb
Ref: 634



UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

Tuesday, 31 March 2015

Dear Laura Booth & Neil Rylie,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'A qualitative study of parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for children with statements of special educational needs'.

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson, Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 5: Participant information sheet

<p>School of Psychology Information Sheet</p>

A qualitative study of parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for children with statements of special educational needs.

Ethics Approval Reference Number: 634
Researcher: Laura Booth (laura.booth@kirklees.gov.uk)
Supervisor: Neil Ryrie (lpxnr1@nottingham.ac.uk)

This is an invitation to take part in a research study on parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for their child who has a statement of special educational needs. Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

If you participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview in which you will be asked to talk about your experiences, thoughts and feelings about the process you went through when choosing your child's secondary school placement. The whole procedure will last approximately 1 hour. Following the interview, there will be an opportunity to meet again if you think of any additional information you would like to discuss and if you would like to hear about the study's findings.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

If you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Consent form

<p>School of Psychology Consent Form</p>
--

A qualitative study of parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for children with statements of special educational needs

Ethics Approval Reference Number: 634
Researcher: Laura Booth (laura.booth@kirklees.gov.uk)
Supervisor: Neil Ryrie (lpxnr1@nottingham.ac.uk)

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily? YES/NO
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? YES/NO
(at any time and without giving a reason)
- I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected. YES/NO
- Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

“This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.”

Signature of the Participant:

Date:

Name (in block capitals)

I have explained the study to the above participant and he/she has agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix 7: Debrief letter

Printed on LA EP service letter head

Date

Name and address

Dear name

Thank you for taking part in the research study on parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for their child who has a statement of special educational needs.

If you think of any addition information or would like to discuss any of the information we talked about during the interview on the (date) further, please do not hesitate to contact myself by email at or by telephone on I will make a follow-up phone call to find out if there is anything else you would like to discuss and to offer you an opportunity to arrange a meeting to discuss the findings of the study.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any point. All data you have provided will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Booth
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Supervisors:
Neil Ryrie
(University of Nottingham Supervisor)

Appendix 8: Initial interview schedule

Proposed Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for: A qualitative study of parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for children with statements of special educational needs.

Introduction: Remind of purpose of study referring to information sheet and consent form completed on previous visit. Explain the structure of the interview (outlined below) being transparent and honest about what wanting to find out about.

Part 1: Questions to develop understanding of current situation

- Where doescurrently attend?
- Where willbe going in September?
- Can you tell me about....?
- What are his/her areas of need?
- What doeslike?
- How do you feel about where will be going in September?
- How doesfeel about where he/she is going in September?
- Have other siblings/friends attended.....? How did they find it?

(Parts 2 and 3 will run in parallel to each other)

Part 2: Question to develop understanding of events and process experienced when choosing secondary placement

-Can you tell me about when you first started to think about choosing a secondary school for ...?

-How did you find out about the process of choosing a secondary school?

-Where did you get information from?

- How did you go about making your decision?

-What was the first thing you did?

-What activities/factors influenced your decision making?

- Was there anything you did which influenced you decision making?

-Where did you visit?

-How did you decide where to visit?

- Can you tell me about any people who influenced your decision?

-Were any professionals involved?

-Who did you talk to?

-Who spoke to you?

-What things were particularly important to you in making your decision?

-What was useful in helping you make the final decision?

-What advice would you give to another parent who is going to be choosing a

Part 3: Questions to develop understanding of thoughts and feelings experienced throughout the process

Questions to explore feelings throughout the process will be interwoven throughout Part 2.

-How did you feel after ... (e.g. you spoke to...?, you visited...?, the meeting?)

-What did you think about ...(e.g. the school?, ... point of view?, that comment?)

-What were you thinking when...(e.g. you met...? you saw...?)

-Can you tell me more about that?

-Is there anything else?

secondary school for their child?

Part 4: Questions to clarify information and reflect on experience

-It sounds like...

-How did you feel about the process?

-How do you feel/what do you think about choosing your child's secondary school now?

Closing of interview:

Check if there is any other information they feel is important to know.

Check how participant feels following the interview.

Thank participant for taking part and share debrief statement. Remind participant of what will happen to data and how it will be used and shared.

Appendix 9: Final interview schedule

Proposed Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for: A qualitative study of parental experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process when choosing secondary provision for children with statements of special educational needs.

Introduction:

Remind of purpose of study referring to information sheet and consent form completed on previous visit. Explain the structure of the interview (outlined below) being transparent and honest about what wanting to find out about - The aim of this interview is to gain an in-depth understanding of your experience of choosing a secondary school for I am interested in exploring your thoughts, feelings, perceptions and reflections. There are no right or wrong answers and I would like you to be as open and honest as possible. All of your opinions are valued and useful. I may say very little because I am interested in listening to your views. Some questions may seem obvious but this is because I am interested in hearing your personal thoughts and feelings. Please take your time in thinking and talking.

Part 1: Questions to develop understanding of current situation and contextual information

- Could you tell me about (child's name)

(Parts 2 and 3 will run in parallel to each other)

<p>Part 2: Question to develop understanding of events and process experienced when choosing secondary placement</p> <p>1) Can you tell me about when you first started to think about choosing a secondary school for ...?</p> <p>-when did you first start to consider which secondary school ...might go to?</p> <p>2) How did you find out about the process of choosing a secondary school?</p> <p>-Where did you get information from?</p> <p>-How did you find out about possible secondary schools?</p> <p>3) How did you go about making your decision?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about anything you did or went to when you were deciding which secondary school you would like ... to go to?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about any events or activities that formed part of the decision making process?</p> <p>- What activities/factors influenced your decision making?</p> <p>-What was the first thing you did?</p> <p>- Was there anything you did which influenced you decision making?</p> <p>- Can you tell me about the process you have been through in deciding where you would like ... to go to secondary school?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about the stages you went through?</p> <p>-Where did you visit?, How did you decide where to visit?</p> <p>-Which schools did you consider?, How did you find out about them?, Why did you consider school...?</p> <p>-Did you attend any meetings when you were deciding which a secondary school?, Who attended that meeting?</p> <p>4) Can you tell me about any people who influenced your decision?</p> <p>-Were any professionals involved?(EP?)</p> <p>-Who did you talk to (professionals, friends, family members)?</p>	<p>Part 3: Questions to develop understanding of thoughts and feelings experienced throughout the process</p> <p>Questions to explore feelings throughout the process will be interwoven throughout Part 2.</p> <p>-How did you feel after ... (e.g. you spoke to...?, you visited...?, the meeting?)</p> <p>-What did you think about ... (e.g. the school?, ... point of view?, that comment?)</p> <p>-What were you thinking when... (e.g. you met...? you saw...?)</p> <p>-Can you tell me more about that?</p> <p>-How did you feel?</p> <p>-What do you mean by...?</p> <p>-Can you give me an example of...?</p> <p>-What happened then?</p> <p>-What was that like for you?</p> <p>-What did that mean?</p>
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<p>-Who spoke to you?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about anyone else who supported you in making a decision?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about any other support that you have received?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about your experience of professionals involved in the process?</p> <p>5) How did you make you final choice/decision about where you would like... to attend?</p> <p>-What helped you to decide which school you would like ...to attend?</p> <p>-What things were particularly important to you in making your decision?</p> <p>-What factors helped you to decide?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about factors which influenced your decision?</p> <p>-What was useful in helping you make the final decision?</p> <p>-What was most useful in helping you to make a decision?</p> <p>-What factors didn't support the process?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about any difficulties you experienced when deciding where you would like .. to go to?</p> <p>-How did you feel about making a decision about where you would like... go to secondary school?</p> <p>How did you feel about choosing a secondary school for ...?</p> <p>6) Once you had made a decision, can you tell me about the process of getting a place for ... in that school?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about what happened once you made a decision?</p> <p>-What was it like between deciding where you would like ... to attend and finding out where he/she had been allocated?</p> <p>-Can you tell me about the activities and events you went through in requesting a secondary school?</p> <p>-Did get a place at the school you had initially chosen?</p> <p>-What did you feel about the process of getting a secondary school place once you had made a decision?</p> <p>-What was it like between deciding which school you would like .. to attend and finding out where he had a place?</p> <p>-How did you feel when you found out which school ...had a place at?</p> <p>7) What advice would you give to another parent who is going to be choosing a secondary school for their child?</p> <p>-What do you feel would be helpful for parents of children with special educational needs to consider when choosing secondary school?</p> <p>-Who do you feel had the most influence in deciding where... will attend secondary school?</p> <p>Part 4: Questions to clarify information and reflect on experience</p> <p>-How did you feel about the choices available to you?</p> <p>-How do you feel about the process of choosing a secondary school?</p> <p>-How did you feel about the information you were given?</p> <p>-Has your view of choosing a school for children SEN changed?</p> <p>-How did you feel about the process?</p> <p>-How do you feel/what do you think about choosing your child's secondary school now?</p> <p>-Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think is an important part of your experience?</p>	
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Closing of interview/Debrief:

Check if there is any other information they feel is important to know.

Check how participant feels following the interview.

Thank participant for taking part and share debrief statement – further contact, if they would like to receive information about the findings, that they can contact myself if they want to discuss anything further.

Remind participant of what will happen to data and how it will be used and shared.

Let them know that they can contact their case EP if they need to talk.

Time to process and reflect on the interview? How did they find it? Do they have any additional questions?

[illegible]

Transcript 2

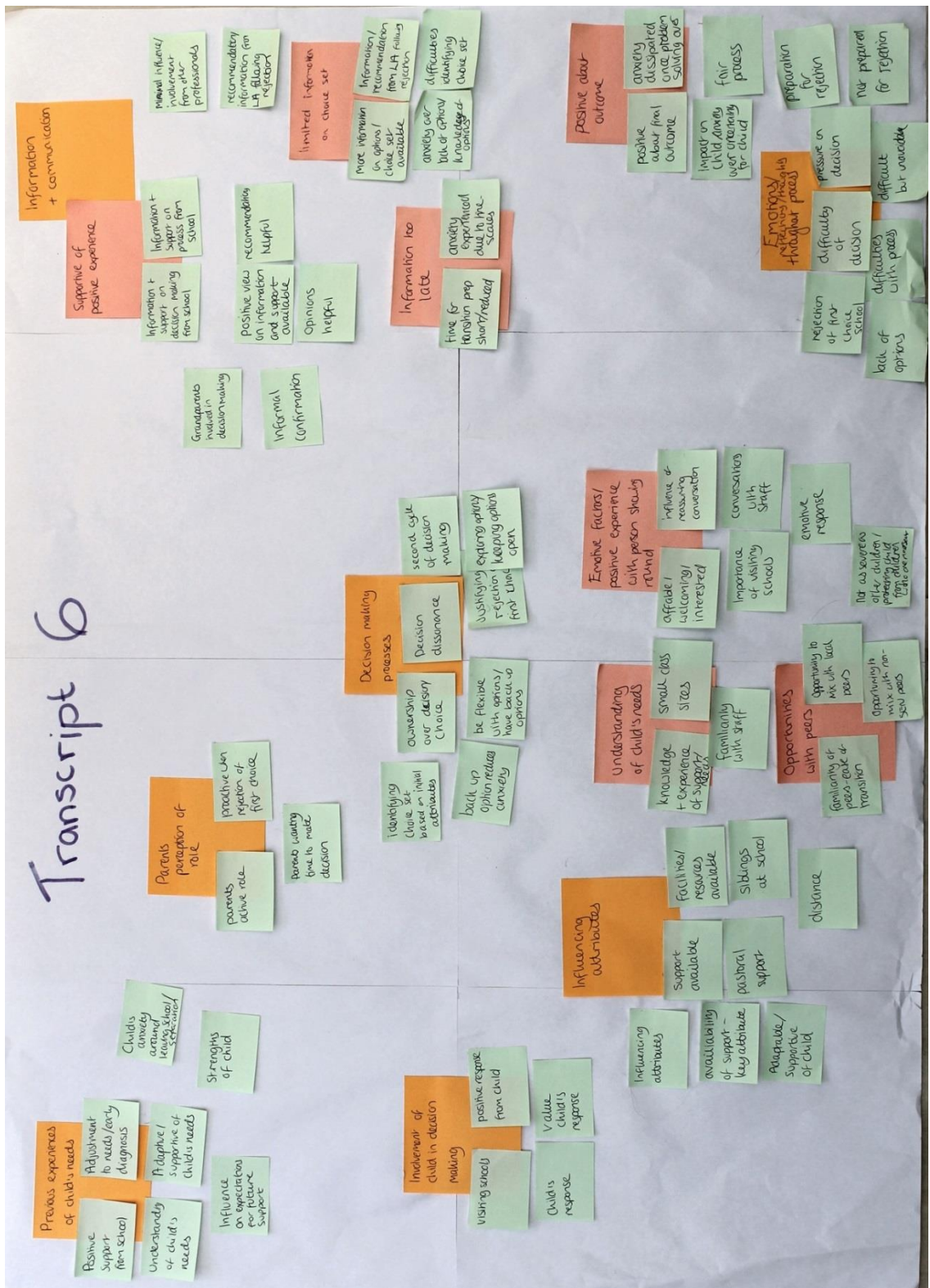


[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Transcript 6



Appendix 11: A table showing the prevalence of each superordinate and subordinate themes across interviews

Master theme 1: Decision Making

	Int. 1 – Sue & Eddie	Int. 2 – Marge & Bob	Int. 3 – Paula	Int. 4 – Lin	Int. 5 - Sheila	Int. 6 - Sufiyan
Research	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Visiting schools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Information from other people	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decision making strategies	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Choice set	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Weighing up and ranking attributes	✓	✓	✓	✓		
The child	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Intentionally attended to attributes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Distance		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Siblings		✓		✓		✓
Schools size	✓		✓	✓		
Peers and socialisation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Facilities				✓		
Academic achievement and opportunities for the future	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Individualised curriculum and support	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Affective response to influencing factors	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Influence of person showing round	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Influence of atmosphere	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Influence of familiarity			✓	✓	✓	✓
Influence of previous experience		✓	✓	✓		✓

Master theme 2: Perception of roles in communicating information

	Int. 1 – Sue & Eddie	Int. 2 – Marge & Bob	Int. 3 – Paula	Int. 4 – Lin	Int. 5 - Sheila	Int. 6 - Sufiyan
Constructs of parent role	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Role of professionals in communicating information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
LA SEN team	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Support services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parent partnership		✓	✓			✓
Current schools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Prospective schools	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Role of informal sources in communicating information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Master theme 3: Emotions and Reflections

	Int. 1 – Sue & Eddie	Int. 2 – Marge & Bob	Int. 3 – Paula	Int. 4 – Lin	Int. 5 - Sheila	Int. 6 - Sufiyan
Importance of decision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The wider impact		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Post-decision emotions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix 12: Additional illustrative quotes to exemplify themes from analysis

Master theme 1: Decision Making
<p>Research</p> <p>Visiting schools</p> <p><i>yeah, we started thinking about it sort of, beginning of year 5 and mm and decided that we would have a tour round quite a few different schools, because we weren't really sure where we wanted him to go,</i> (Paula, Int. 3, lines 76-78)</p> <p><i>P1: visit the school</i> <i>P2: as many as you can</i> <i>P1: yeah</i> <i>P2: and as often as you need.</i> <i>P1: even the ones that you might have discounted from day one because ev(...)even if it's a complete no no its still good as a measuring stick.</i> (Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 519-526)</p> <p><i>we didn't visit another school because I didn't want to confuse Dominic... whereby then he would have a choice</i> (Sheila, Int. 5, lines 351-357)</p> <p><i>if you need to go back to the school, go back again...and if you find that you're not 100% sure, go back again and go two or three times until you know</i> (Marge, Int. 2, lines 863-866)</p> <p><i>P2: yeah yeah and I think I am glad that we did go and see the special schools because lovely as they were, it again confirmed, every time we were sort of comparing this school to (SLCN resourced provision), this school to (SLCN resourced provision).</i> <i>P1: yeah</i> <i>P2: this school to (SLCN resourced provision). and it was always 'yep (SLCN resourced provision) is still what we want, we've seen other places and they're very different, but we always came back to (SLCN resourced provision) so it does feel like we made the right decision.</i> (Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 370-376)</p> <p><i>but then I've been back again just to reassure because Bob hasn't been just to reassure myself, that she is actually going to the correct place</i> (Marge, Int. 2, lines 394-395)</p> <p>Information from other people</p> <p><i>Talk to the children, also talk to children if there are any children that you do know that are going to the school, or are in the school, ask them too. If you have got friends with children who are going to that school, ask the parents, what is their experience of the school? Then you get a better,</i> (Marge, Int. 2, lines 859-862)</p>

Decision making strategies

Choice set

There's never been a wide choice in this area, you've got two high schools that are your allocated schools <...> and one special needs school so there's not a big wide variety and you can see why, it's because we don't live in a, we don't live in a huge metropolitan, if we lived in (city) we'd have a much bigger choice
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 927-932)

so there was a definite I don't want her to go there (local mainstream) but then it was like well if she isn't going there (...) where is she going to go?
(Sue, Int. 1, lines 47-48)

actually, obviously with Autism the only specialist one is er (ASD resourced provision) in around here others like (SLCN resourced provision) similar thing, but apart from that then what they do is er teachers from Hy visit the school and give them guidance and er help them er but it's not like a one to one or they have smaller groups or anything like that. So choice is there but it's limited
(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 438-441)

Weighing up and ranking attributes

P: I don't think it's one thing (..) I think it's all those things put together. You know, you've got to do the old pros and cons
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 1613-1615)

P1: In that time (special school) was actually our third place that I was going to go and look at, but then (special school) was our first choice in the end

I: yeah

P1: and was our only choice
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 341-344)

The child

I: what was the most useful thing in helping you be able to make a decision about which secondary school?

P1: probably the visits. Coupled with that, again going back, to that though of visualising Holly sat at the table, doing the work with the kids,

P2: and that initial discussion with A (SLCN provision) I think was really useful.
(Interviewer, Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 505-509)

P1: I think one of the best pieces of advice that we had, which I think came from A (aunty) originally, was when you go in don't look at the school from your perspective, imagine Holly sat at the tables... it's when you see the kids in there, doing their bit, just imagine Holly being sat amongst them and I think that helped quite a lot.

P2: Yeah that helped. It did.
(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 93-99)

P1: know your child's needs and then put yourself in your child's shoes and walk through the school.
(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 875-876)

P: and and just seeing this small classroom and (..) and I don't know, I could just imagine him sitting there with the rest of them and joining in and being focused and learning, you know...
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 489-490)

Intentionally attended to attributes
<p>Distance</p> <p><i>because of his medical conditions we needed him to be as near home as possible, going any further wasn't an option</i> (Sheila, Int. 5, lines 194-195)</p> <p><i>another consideration was that if he did make friends there, they aren't going to be local so he wouldn't ever be able to see them out of school,</i> (Paula, int. 3, 265-266)</p> <p><i>Mm and obviously there's that financial consideration, I can't be affording to do 30 miles a day. Well it would be more wouldn't it, 50 miles a day, more or less 50 miles, you know, 5 days a week, I just financially couldn't afford to do it, you know so that were a consideration.</i> (Lin, Int. 4, lines 848-851)</p> <p><i>I just thought all, and I mean this probably comes across as so wrong, would I rather drive through R and be stuck in traffic every day and be stressed to the yinyangs or would I rather drive just straight up B Road and we're there,</i> (Lin, Int. 4, lines 949-951)</p> <p><i>yeah this er it's er quite a few advantages for him as well and for us as well is that one it's very local, it's just up the road. Second thing...loads of children going from round here,</i> (Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 97-98)</p>
<p>Siblings</p> <p><i>reason was that because older brother was at SN, then dropping children off at that morning time was also difficult er so that was why we thought we would look around</i> (Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 121-122)</p>
<p>Schools size</p> <p><i>...it's quite a small mm small school, I think there's about 900 children as opposed to some of the other upper schools around here which have got over 1000, you know, 2000 children which we knew that he wouldn't be able to cope in something so big,</i> (Paula, Int. 3, lines 92-94)</p>
<p>Peers and socialisation</p> <p><i>and signings fabulous, but you try going to the coop if you're just a signer and not verbal and ask where the bread is and see how far you (laughing) get, in there. It's not the real world is it?</i> (Lin, Int. 4, lines 1423-1425)</p> <p><i>but I also left the school feeling that the understanding were there about her deafness, not just from the staff point of view but from the kids, because the kids have all mixed with a number of hearing impaired children, and physically impaired children, so there's that bit of empathy from the kids isn't there</i> (Lin, Int. 4, lines 1263-1267)</p> <p><i>We were scared initially about sending her to (special school) because (special school) do cater for a large spectrum of special needs children, from disabilities children through to severely autistic. We were worried because we didn't want her to sit in a class with severely autistic children. It would be more of a downfall,</i> (Bob, Int. 2, lines 153-156)</p>

... we had a really nice visit but initially, first impressions we felt within 10 minutes that it wasn't the right setting for him because we felt that educationally and emotionally he wasn't on the same level as the children there, they were much more severe than Robert was.

(Paula, int. 3, lines 238-241)

As Bob had said earlier is that there's a lot of disabilities, it's a wide range of disabilities, there's children there that can't walk, there's children there that are Down's syndrome. There's a lot of disabilities and I thought am I putting her in a place, in a classroom, where there's lots of different disabilities and it's just going to put her down or are they going to boost her?

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 403-407)

...they are more capable of looking after children the most severe, I think it's right, I think children with lesser problems should be given the high school is probably better, and they are around with other children who are normal maybe has a positive effect on them as well

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 198-200)

Facilities

...money had been spent, massive extensions, mm lots of really modern science rooms, food tech rooms, everything, you know, what were really good, really good facilities, you know, apple macs and iPads and stuff like that, all you know, really modern stuff.

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 911-913)

Academic achievement and opportunities for the future

... and the benefits for example, Tess probably won't get any GCSE's in Maths and English and Science, but she might get some entry level exams at those, ...now she's a very artistic, confident child so she might get a GCSE in Art or in performing arts or photography or media studies, but that's a lot more positive than the things that were being twittered about before, you know at other schools she probably would have left (mainstream) with nothing

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 399-405)

Individualised curriculum and support

...also being able to make the most of what she can do. I think one of the things that can sometimes happen is that some of the schools might have a bit more focus upon the things that she can't do. Whereas again at SLCN resourced provision with the discussion with SENCo and stuff it was more of a focus of making the most of what she can do so if she turns out to be really good at art, for example, or whatever else then they can put her into a mainstream for that subject and it was all around (...) I think probably more of a, it was an ongoing continual tailoring of her education

(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 494-497)

P1: ...what's nice is that they're not concentrating on what she can do and what she can't do. They're concentrating on

P2: developing Milly

P1: developing a curriculum just for Milly, so it's all the things she can do plus a little bit more. Not what she can't do and I think that's where she's going to

flourish	(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 168-175)
P1: tailoring the curriculum for her.	
I: yeah	
P1: it's going to be her own curriculum, it's not going to be Tom's, it's not going to be anybody else's, whoever is in her class, it's not going to be the other 9 children who are in her class, it's her curriculum	
	(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 554-581)
P: which obviously is important for him as well, was that they focus a lot on life skills...as well as education and that was the key for us because obviously it'll be great if he does get qualifications... but the thing that he needs most is life skills, for him to become an independent adult and they do a lot of that and they do trips out where they go and learn how to use public transport and learn how to do their own shopping and cooking and all sorts of things	
	(Paula, Int. 3, lines 188-195)
I: yeah, so what would you say is the most important factor that helped you make a decision?	
P: I would say the way that they were going to teach her	
I: mmhm	
P: that she wouldn't be expected to sit in the mainstream maths and English lessons because what's the point in her sitting in those when Tess is very much at the foundation stone level, <.....> Yes being pushed and challenged to be better, but at the level that she's working at rather than being expected to work at the same level as other kids in her year group, as other peers, definitely.	
	(Lin, Int. 4, 1290-1304)
...help children like that er. It was the smaller groups and er what is it special classroom for children for that children in the mornings and dinnertimes, they can ask a questions, they feel any trouble, they can go and see them so they're always around for them, to look after them if they're any problems occurring so that's why there for to look after children with disabilities so I suppose the main reason why out of the this high schools, I thought this one would be more suitable for him.	
	(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 249-254)
Affective response to influencing factors	
Influence of person showing round	
Yeah it was the first impression you see...so and it's difficult to break that isn't once you've had a first impression so yeah	(Paula, Int. 3, lines 550-552)
... we it were like, right well probably this isn't the right place for Tess to go to then. We really felt like that, so, that's probably why we ruled it out to be honest.	(Lin, Int.4, lines 894-896)
children seemed and meeting the teachers and getting a feel, you know, just that first impression,	(Paula, Int, 3, lines 647-648)
We met with one of them (SENCo) and she was lovely and she took us round all the school, we went into some of the classrooms, we went into the learning	

support unit and then, then we went through this huge list of questions and she had basically answers to everything that I was concerned about, <....> so we came out of (mainstream) thinking this is it, this is the school we want him to go to and we were really pleased with the meeting

(Paula, int. 3, lines 101-111)

Like I said the SENCo seemed really knowledgeable, you didn't have to sort of erm pre-empt anything, it were like she already knew what we were going to ask her and said it before we asked the question, erm so you know, things like that make you feel a bit more at ease don't they

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 235-238)

It was the three of us who went with the same list of questions and we sat in the office with this deputy headteacher and went through this list of questions and she really struggled to answer half of them (..) mm so initially we didn't get a really good first impression

Paula, Int. 3, lines 126-131)

and then just not allowing us to just sort of see the school and see how it functions and things so we didn't get the best impression for that.

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 562-565)

Well at that point I was, we were kind of thinking 'I don't think I need to see anymore now. I think we've already made our mind up.'...that this isn't the right place for him, so it felt almost pointless to ask the question 'can we see it?', you know...I think we'd already decided by that point from (...) (sigh) and I don't want to, obviously it's going to be anonymous,...but when you don't gel with somebody...and none of us gelled with the person who showed us round either. We felt like she was, I don't know, she just didn't seem very caring or she was just a little bit cocky (whispered voice)...and, and it was almost like 'I've done this and I've done this and I've done this' and I'm like, and we were like, 'we're not really bothered about that, we just want to know about your school and what you can do for our son'...so that's, so overall we didn't get the best impression,

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 390-399)

P1: the headteacher em said this would be the place for her.

I: okay

P1: and that's when I thought 'Yes, this is the place for her.' After that third visit that was it, that's where I wanted her to go.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 397-401)

Third one,...the headteacher, again very welcoming erm (..) really good listener like same again, same impression as we got as (mainstream), somebody who's very caring and wanted to know about him and his needs

(Paula, int. 3, lines 565-567)

... and he could go in whenever he wanted, any problems we have we can contact them straight away so they were very helpful in that situation and er so that was very encouraging, so once we left after the first visit we felt very confident, after the second one we decided that this will be best for him.

(Sufiyan, Int.6, lines 259-262)

P2: the headteacher at (special school) was very, very good.

P1: yeah she's brilliant, she really really is.

P2: every time we went and asked she said 'no no come along, no worries.'

(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 867-869)

They were very helpful when they were saying, if you have any problems we can go and see them,

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 305-306)

Influence of atmosphere

This time I went in and I got a feeling for what the children are actually like and one child actually came up and gave me a big hug! 'Oh Hello!' (laugh)

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 423-425)

We went initially to rule it out and came out with it as our first choice above (mainstream), because what I think what we'd decided as well after seeing that and how calm it was and how quiet and just lovely it was, that the chaos of a mainstream upper school would be too much for him, he wouldn't be able to cope with all the sensory overload

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 209-213)

...and I think I looked round, I did look round (local mainstream) a couple of times, like I said, the kids were all, when and and it were the same at (alternative mainstream) to be fair, when you walked in the classroom, the kids were all engaged, they were all looking, you could see the support were there next to the kids, mmm, everything were quiet and calm, you know and there sort of things that are conducive to to good listening for a hearing impaired child, you know you can't have a chaotic noisy classroom because it's just , overload isn't it.

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 766-771)

Influence of familiarity

Yeah well I think, I think when we went into his classroom because we saw one or two children that we knew, there was like I said, there was a boy that left emm P in Year 2, he was in this particular classroom we went in...and there was another boy who was in the year above Robert, who left, I think left probably in about Year 1 and he was in also in the classroom as well at the time, and mm because they mix the ages up at (special school), mm and they were just doing a lesson about viaducts and they had like a powerpoint and they were all drawing pictures of viaducts and they were all seemed really focused

(Paula, Int.3, lines 479-487)

...not on a very regular basis but when he's had long times off school because of illness then someone's been and just chatted to him and (..) so we were aware of that all that time, that that provision was there.

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 181-183)

Influence of previous experience

P2: even the overlays at the primary school, when they were identified, 'okay, we'll give her overlays.' then she didn't have any overlays.

P1: that was in Year 4

P2: Year 4

P1: and they still never materialised.

P2: okay so we'll get her some overlays, that didn't happen, they don't have it.

P1: I even said to them, 'can I buy it for you?', 'we'll let you know.' Never let me know. I was actually prepared to buy the stuff for her whereas now at (special school), I wouldn't have to buy anything.

(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 594-601)

Where we wanted him to go, whether we wanted him to stay, we didn't really want him to go to a special school because we wanted him to stay in mainstream because he's done so well in mainstream up till now so mm we decided that we would go and check out one of

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 78-80)

...support that she's had all the way through, Mrs A, they have a fantastic relationship, erm again it's been another brilliant school where they've done everything that they possibly could.

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 116-117)

Master theme 2: Perception of roles in communicating information

Constructs of parent role

I: yeah, what do you think it was, the kind of things you did that influenced that decision?

P2: it's the constant hammering, it's the constant, constant reinforcing it on her statement speaking to all the people in constant, constantly talking to A (EP), the speech and language therapist erm going through the process really, we were just constantly reiterating and almost pushing it, pushing it all the time.

(Bob, Int. 2, lines 180-185)

...don't give in, if you want something badly, don't just give in, you've got to fight for it.

(Paula, Int. 3, line 983)

...but I'd also made an appointment for the following day to speak to the director of the multi-academies trust because I needed, you know, sometimes when they've got these hierarchies of management, you know, the higher up the chain the less likely you want to speak to the minions, erm and they don't always know do they, what's going on...because they divert the problems off to other people, that's how it works now a days, they don't always know exactly what's going on, so I wanted to speak to the man himself.

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 384-392)

...well the reports you know at the annual review, you know, make sure that you've got your point across because I think some people will just accept it and it might not be the right thing for their child but you've got to think of them first, it's their, it's their future, you know, it's everything isn't it. So if you know, if you know exactly where you want him to go, you've just got to fight all the way, to get him that. So yeah, push, ring, make phone calls, find out as much information, do research, speak to other parents, you know, and write your reports and get your point across really.

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 987-993)

mm not with our, no just me, my mum and dad and my husband, spent hours and hours putting it together and tweaking it and changing it and adding this and taking that out, you know, until we felt it was the point had got across without being too lengthy.
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 803-805)

You know, maybe some of their parents aren't as you know, as strong willed as I am, that would fight tooth and nail to get the kids what they are and they're probably just like 'oh well as long, as long as you know they're going to school, then I'm doing my part of the bargain', I think some people really are like that when it comes to SEN and their kids...because they're just, it is hard being a parent, you know, of a kid with SEN especially with two...you have to fight for everything to get what should be the basic human rights.
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 449-458)

...so that really does need addressing. It, it felt like we were having to do lots of searching and chasing ourselves.
(Paula, Int.3, lines 708-709)

..if you know exactly where you want him to go, you've just got to fight all the way, to get him that. So yeah, push, ring, make phone calls, find out as much information, do research, speak to other parents, ...and write your reports and get your point across really.
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 987-993)

Role of professionals in communicating information

LA SEN team

I said, you know, the way that, the discussions that I've had, CWO was our key worker, mm at LA SEN team and she was absolutely fabulous, you know, telling me what things to say, erm you know, acting as a go between, between me and (mainstream) to get things sorted out, pointing out to them what they need to do by law
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 370-375)

P1: erm I think the first time that we met CWO, she's been my key..

P2: yeah of course

P1: support, she actually came here to the house and she said to me, 'because Milly's got the statement, this and this and this is what we need to do now'. I didn't understand any of the processes and she was the one that said to me, 'this is what we need to do now.' And she started it off and then once I started getting to know how the process worked, she was my back up.

P2: P1 deals with it, that's been her support and CWO.

(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 618-625)

CWO is my main, and she's Milly's caseworker and she said to me right in the beginning, 'if you need to know anything, if you want to ask me anything, just phone me and I'll be able to help you or redirect you in the right direction to get to know what you need done.'
(Marge, Int. 2, lines 643-646)

...it took her a long time because CWO does say it takes anything from 10-12 weeks for them to make a decision, because she's also fighting for Milly's place because she knows how much I've been asking her and things like that.
(Marge, Int. 1, lines 766-768)

P1: occasionally if we'd arranged stuff, there was an issue about people actually coming to the meetings as well so (..) not ideal.

P2: I think it always seems to be a bit of a struggle to get anybody from outside family or school to actually be involved.

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 130-133)

P2: I mean we've pretty much done it on our own, I think, us and school,

P1: well that's what we feel like

P2: us and school and aunty have pretty much ticked along erm yeah yeah

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, 782-784)

It's that offering up of information isn't it, rather than having to dig for it.

(Eddie, Int. 1, line 868)

It's always very reactive rather than proactive.

(Eddie, Int. 1, line 128)

So it has been a little bit frustrating just constant trying to grasp at the right information from the right people.

(Sue, Int. 1, lines 216-218)

P1: again as we've said before, there doesn't seem to be a huge amount of support there, there is but it's not freely available. It's not given up, it's not volunteered

P2: offered

P1: you've got to dig for it sometimes. Erm I think communications quite a big issue isn't it.

P2: yeah

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 548-552)

P1: it's that offering up of information isn't it, rather than having to dig for it.

P2: yeah and I think having aunty knowing about that has been able to help us ask the questions of LA, to get those answers rather than not being offered. I think that's a sort of overarching feeling of it all that there's just, it's been us that's done it really, us and school

(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 868-872)

...now CWO wasn't at the last meeting (..) and that meeting had been organised so she could be there but for some other reason, obviously things happen don't they...and you can't always...

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 457-460)

...maybe S(CWO) being there and what we would have to do sort of, but it was still a bit sketchy, it still wasn't overly clear about the process and the timings and how they made the decision, who got a place and who didn't and when we would find out. It was a bit, it was a bit fuzzy really to be frank

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 689-692)

so it was very frustrating, because we had to keep, we kept thinking we might get an answer, but then we were put off for a few more days and the for a few, and it was a very anxious time,

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 924-926)

I don't think anybody understood the importance of us knowing

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 493)

...but we only found out a week before all the other children found out and we had already started the process in Year 5 and everybody else had just filled in a form, sent it off
(Marge, int. 1, lines 770-771)

...it could have done to have been done even sooner, the transition.
(Sheila, Int. 5, line 637)

I mean this er the earlier you decide for parents is er I mean for Siaf I feel if decided possibly earlier in the first application he would have had more time, he would have gone there earlier. You know they could have started arranging for him to visit there earlier. I think things like that can make a slight difference.
(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 334-337)

P: I think it was er April

I: okay

P: normally the first one should have been in January

I: mm

P: but even then it was late, I think it was towards the end of February, March time before we found out

I: yeah

P: his teachers first told us that in January should get a letter, we were a bit worried, why has it not come through?

I: yeah

P: eventually we received it. I think it was the beginning of March time
(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 540-550)

P2: ah oo

P1: that took forever.

P2: yeah yeah we were

P1: that took about 10-12 weeks! Or something like that before we found out.

P2: yeah that is a slow process because when at the end of year 5 we said right and we sat down in the meeting and the SENCo and we had
(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 716-721)

...that we actually got this letter. You're your sensible head is always telling you that, you know, that they're moving children on and it's exam time, and it's a really important time for the children who are already there but you still need that information sooner.
(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 579-581)

P2: which sounds perfect but it's like why didn't you tell us that. So it took us getting upset and a bit distraught and you know and then

P1: it was fighting for the actual facts kind of things.

P2: fighting for ..yeah
(Sue and Eddie, Int. 1, lines 239-243)

...again going back to the letter that we had: mainstream place tick. It's like erm (nervous laugh) actually that's not quite the whole story but yeah the communication thing is a big thing
(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 553-555)

Erm but yeah it is difficult when you're only getting half a story. And the story

that you're getting isn't sounding so good. (Eddie, Int. 1, lines 272-273)

P: because of time on buses and and things like that and em when we finally got the letter to say he'd been given a place it just said highschool

I: right

P: it didn't say he had a place in the provision and every time I rang and asked 'has he got a place in the provision?' I kept getting told 'we can't give you that information yet.'

I: who was that?

P: in the provision the head of the provision

I: the head of the provision

P: yeah and it was only erm the Friday before half term

I: erm

P: that they actually said to me 'yes he has got a place in the provision'.

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 197-207)

that's why I said I need to know and they kept saying but I can't tell you erm and I kept thinking well he won't go to school, I'll just home school him if need be because he can't cope with that trauma. He's enough to do without the trauma of being in a big high school, where he's going to be lost completely, so that it has been really (emphasis) stressful. (Sheila, Int. 5, lines 215-218)

I can't, I can't criticise anyone really, it it's just that lack of information

(Sheila, Int. 5, line 606)

...now actually at that time it was very worrying because at that time we didn't know (mainstream with resourced provision for SLCN) had the same, similar facilities and that was very worrying at that time (Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 423-425)

...So that, that was a mess up either through the school or there was no communication between the school as well as the department, the special needs department. They hadn't phoned the school and said that they were doing it, but everybody (Marge, Int. 2, lines 796-798)

I said 'you frightened the hell out of us because now we've got this letter, that's been done, that's been done, everybody was in that meeting, you all told me not to send it, the letter, I've got it and here's that. (Marge, int. 2, lines 818-820)

I had a letter that came back saying 'you can't apply for special school this way', because I think I even put a note on the thing, but perhaps it got missed, so then I had to ring them up and say mm 'I got this letter, I understand but I was told that I had to still put in the application otherwise, it wouldn't be counted, his name wouldn't be counted or something'... so I had to go back through it with her, saying no I have, I sent the form off, I sent it off basically straight away as soon as he got it, and I've had a letter back saying this isn't the process to apply for it ...it could have been clearer on the form, you know, 'if you are applying for a special school, you still need to fill in this form, but this isn't the procedure to do it', you know, if there'd just been a little bit,...on the front just to say, otherwise I wouldn't have had to chase up school, I wouldn't have had to chase up parent partnership, do I fill it in, don't I? What

do I do? So again it could have been a lot clearer. (Paula, Int. 3, 1103-1134)

...that's the main thing that a statemented child and the parents of a statemented child need, they need somebody they can speak to that will help them, one person, not a whole group of parent partnership caseworker, LA here, LA there, whatever it is all these different bodies all over the place.

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 982-994)

P: because it's not clear at all (..) how, how it goes, how it happens you know

I: yeah

P: like how the names get put into a hat and who decides and what, why you know

I: mm

P: why some people are picked and why not and how long it takes and then (..) you know it's very fuzzy

I: yeah

P: so that really does need addressing. It, it felt like we were having to do lots of searching

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 701-708)

it's just more understanding of how it is for a parent and the whole procedure, and he's not just a number and a name, you know, there's a lot of emotions riding with an application and confusion and mm just that it's made clearer for us you know that it's really important because we have enough to deal with, like dealing with a child with special needs, that to have to have that worry put on top of us as well you know,

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 1140-1146)

...there was no information of the procedure, if there was a little booklet that came along to say you know, 'applying for a secondary school with a child with special needs'. If there was a booklet that explained all the options, like what there was out there, like mainstream, mainstream with provision, we've just found out along the way by talking to other parents and well school and that. And then this is the procedure, if you're going down this route, this is what happens, this is who gets involved, and this is how long it takes. And I mean I know it's all individual, it depends on when their annual review meetings are and... but even if you knew that you have a meeting, mm it then goes to this department, it then goes to this department, they make a decision, then it goes to this meeting and they make a...and then you get to find out, you know, at least you've got something to work at.

(Paula, int.3, lines 1083-1092)

...having some kind of letter going out saying these are the schools in your local area and these are the telephone numbers cos I mean like I said before, I was born and bred round here and I kind of know the area but I don't know all the schools.

(Eddie, Int.1, 801-803)

...and it really shouldn't be that way, there should be some sort of a guideline for parents because it's stressful enough having a child with special needs and having to apply and then wondering are we going to get him a place and then trying to find out how it all gets put together,

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 711-714)

It's been hard work, mm, a lot of time has been put into it and a lot of

confusion. It could have been, probably, it could have been made a lot easier, if there was just outlines of, like a time line, a bit more information from professionals about how you apply, who's involved, what they all do, how, who makes the decision, and what do they make it on...you know and the dates, how long it takes, and when you find out. The whole process from start to finish basically, we've just sort of fumbled along as we've gone along, it's never been made clear... so yeah, there was a lot of unnecessary stress. Let's put it that way.
(Paula, Int. 3, 1059-1068)

P1: erm and like I said earlier on, just some kind of a er initial letter to parents whose children are statemented or whatever, just to sort of say because your child is statemented you need to start the process earlier, you need to start go and look at schools, here's a list of schools in your area, here are the telephone numbers, give them a ring. Make an appointment, something as simple as that. List of schools with numbers.

P2 (at same time) : Here's a list of questions to ask...

(Sue and Eddie, Int. 1, lines 570-575)

You know frustration, disappointment. Erm (...) I mean we can assume that they are massively over worked and understaffed and all the rest of it, that's the nature of such things these days but you know, you know when your, you feel I kind of a bit alone don't you. You know you're trying to find out what's best for your child and trying to find out about the most suitable school and things and you're trying to ask them for help and it's like well.

(Eddie, Int. 1, 136-141)

Support services

P2: I mean how many speech and language therapists has she seen

P1: (sigh)

P2: four or five?

P1: four or five

P2: same with ed psych, a say we've had again four or five different ed psychs.
(Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 611-615)

...form that relationship so you get a truer picture is very important because then when that report does get written up is much more reflective of her and therefore might influence what feedback you do get about what schools would be appropriate.
(Sue, Int. 1, lines 607-609)

P2: anyway so the consistency of the actual people having input and not being able to spend the time needed to get to know the child.

P1: then again that might happen purely down to resource and things, when there's only so many people for a huge amount of kids.

P2 (at same time): well obviously it is, (Eddie and Sue, Int. 1, lines 627-631)

I don't know if that is the case or not, it's just a thought that you get people coming in and coupled with the fact that for a given service, the person who has potentially changed, that it might be the first time and sometimes the only time that they have come in and seen Holly, and only spent an hour with her. It's just the thought that there is no way that you can get to know Holly in that

amount of time. Therefore, the report that comes out of it, I can't, I can't see how that can possibly be accurate, and that's been confirmed on occasions when we've got reports back and we've had the discussions and it's the thought then that that report, inaccurate report, has then been used somewhere and if it's just, if it's been used for an assessment of children in the area or whatever then all be it potentially not correct, it's not it's not going to be used erm in a way that's going to have an impact as such on Holly, whereas if it's being used potentially to make decisions or to influence other things that are going to happen to Holly later on in life, like potentially advising which school she goes to or whatever, then then that is more of a concern.

(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 680-692)

erm (...) no, the educational psychologist, she'd been at some meetings so she'd been part of that process as well. I'm trying to think..but there was someone else (..) erm from education (..) I can't think of her name

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 438-441)

P: and then AB, who was head of the provision,

I: mm

P: had been to see us a few times and home and we'd had meetings at school and eh she'd said 'you know as far as I'm concerned he will be coming here, but at the end of the day it isn't my decision, it it's education authorities decision.' So, but then she left last summer so

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 224-228)

Parent partnership

I've spoken a little bit to parent partnership and I've spoken to, is it IPSEA...who are like an advice service for parents with children with special needs and speaking to SENCo's and speaking to outreach as well, sort of trying to collate all this information so in a way that is something that could really be addressed, is the process for parents.

(Paula, Int. 3, lines 694-699)

...you can't get hold of them. Half the time you can't get hold of them and when you eventually get to speak to somebody, you can't speak to that same person again which I think is a break in that link....If you're going to be using parent partnership there needs to be somebody like CWO, who only works on your case, not being handed to person to person to person to person and that's why I bypassed that process and I found out how I'm supposed to do it through another process.

(Marge, int. 2, lines 272-279)

Current schools

SENCo's or the head, the head's been very very proactive as well, she's been very supportive, mm, SENCO's,

(Paula, int. 3, lines 1072-1073)

I: okay, so how did you find out about how to choose a secondary school?

P: through school mainly, yes, yes

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 167-168)

...but er yes I think they did give us all the information that was needed, who to contact and discuss your problems if you want to, any help.

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 234-236)

...the first main thing was er the previous school which was P, they finded a statement and er they advise on now you have to look around which high school we want to, they said go as many as you want to look around and er if you need any help er, these are contact numbers if you need er because they gave us direct numbers of teachers er which we need to speak to

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 391-395)

I thought it was fine because from, obviously I know Tess from how she is at home, obviously I see a snippet of how she is at school, but they're the people who are with her for 6 hours a day, in an education environment, they know what things she finds difficult in school, what things she finds easy, what things she enjoys. They're all things I don't see because I'm not with her in class all day so I were fine about that...because they maybe would spot a difficulty that wouldn't I even think about, because I don't know do I, because I'm not with her all day at school. So I was fine about that, in fact I actually, it were a nice feeling that they cared... enough to want to be part of the decision making process if you like, you know, by sort of (Lin, Int. 4, lines 1064-1074)

Prospective schools

I just wish that they'd probably said a long time ago, if they really felt that they couldn't meet her needs or they weren't willing to, you know, there could have been a way that they could have gone about it without leaving themselves open, like they have done because ultimately, it's come to the point where they've discriminated against her, mm, that they'd have just said, way back then that they couldn't handle her and then I would have gone somewhere else instead of saying 'oh yeah we can' and then it not happening.

(Lin, Int.4, lines 1361-1366)

...really negative when we came out. All the other, you know, the current SENCo, the teachers for the deaf, everybody were like 'oh god, you know, they don't want her, they don't want her.' And even, you know, the SENCo, ...was saying 'can't we keep her here.' So we, you know, everybody was sort of got a bit into panic mode.

(Lin, int. 4, lines 300-303)

So we sat in this little office and she said 'well I've got some of your information here and I've looked at it and we can't really put all that stuff into place for your daughter so I do suggest maybe (other mainstream) would be better.'...I was disappointed..., if they'd said to me 'yes we can put this in place, we can help you with that.' She would have gone to (mainstream with ASD resourced provision) because my oldest daughter is there

(Marge, Int. 2, lines 325-331)

I think that, that probably taught us a lot of questions to ask at the other school, I think that kind of set the benchmark of the kind of things we needed to find out and it was offered up there, where as you know other places it was kind of ...squeezed out (laugh).

(Eddie, Int. 1, lines 510-512)

...head teacher because they're not going to say, 'well yeah we're really good at getting exam results up and this that and the other, they're not going to say but actually we dis-apply most of our SEN kids from tests and things like that

and we've not really got good attainment levels for our SEN kids and stuff, they're not going to say about the negatives are they... they'll only tell you, they'll big the school up but they won't tell you how it

(Lin, int. 4, lines 1597-1603)

Role of informal sources in communicating information

P1: I work with a SENCo as well and if I've got any information that I'm not 100% sure about, I'll ask her and if she doesn't know, she'll be able to find out for me and then get back to me so there is a SENCo that I work with at the school that I work in, the headteacher I work with

P2: having inside knowledge

P1: there's a lot of inside knowledge working in a school. And also working with a statemented child too, I've got to go through the process so now that's also

P2: a massive back up now.

P1: it's a backup system.

P2: and P1 had asked the right questions, P1 would get the inside information and then direct those questions to CWO and CWO answer them, it's being able to ask the right questions. We wouldn't have known if you weren't involved at school. We wouldn't have asked the right questions.

(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 626-637)

what I didn't know was that erm I actually know one of the governors at the school and I didn't know, didn't know S was a governor <...>but S had had spoken to the other governors and said 'Sheila really needs to know what's going on, it's not a straight forward case' (..) and I'd seen H(S's daughter) on the Thursday and then on the Friday, I'd sent this letter into school saying 'look I want to know what's going on' and then I went to pick Dominic up from school and then when I came back there was a message (laugh), which is typical isn't it (laughing).

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 540-556)

It has been an absolute roller coaster, and I don't know how people cope, we've said this so many times, without an Auntie, we've been so lucky that you know, she's the experience and the knowledge that she has that she can bring, that's just been perfect.

(Sue, Int. 1, lines 257-259)

...maybe speak to other people, you know, who have kids at these schools, and because I'm always a firm believer, you're better off speaking to somebody that's living it, rather than, we can all go and listen to a member of staff that bigs the school up and says how fantastic it is, but like I said again, you're better off speaking to parents who're actually living there and experiencing what it's like for your child in that school is like, so we're part of a couple of support groups

(Lin, int. 4, lines 695-702)

...we'd spoken to other people who had, we we know a lot of people with children with autism, erm and other problems like downs syndrome as well and people had told us about their experiences at the various schools they were at

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 314-316)

parents obviously, because they know first-hand how their child's done at the

school, how they've come on educationally, emotionally, socially, <...> mm speaking to her mum, she said that done really well at (special school) and she'd really come out of herself and she's just really blossomed, like socially
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 505-517)

...other parents as well as, although I didn't find mm like the timescales so helpful there because the parents I was speaking to had older children and so they're a few years down the line from where we were
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 1073-1078)

Master theme 3: Emotions and Reflections

Importance of decision

It's concern for the kids themselves and what's best for them cos it might sound a bit dramatic but at the moment this is their whole future being formed, they go to the wrong school and they don't get the best support, then they don't get the best education for them and that's their entire future determined, I mean job wise and all the rest of it, but yeah it it's a big concern for the kids definitely.
(Eddie, int.1, lines 834-838)

It's er a difficult process but er it's something you have to go through and er we were very decision. It was not easy, and it's not easy for anyone, and it's a big decision for any parent to make...so it wasn't very easy but eventually you have to go through it...
(Sufiyan, int. 6, lines 504-509)

..that was in Year 5, because of course with her being statemented you have to start thinking about it a full year before any other parent does
(Marge, int. 2, lines 235-236)

Marge and I had long conversations about where we're going with this and how we're going to make a decision where where we're going to try and get a secondary education for our child.
(Bob, Int. 2, lines 501-502)

And then there were lots of discussions at that time and they said well this and that and then when we moved, mm, we got this house thinking well it's right near (ASD resourced provision) that'll be even easier for him to get into the autism provision.
(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 139-141)

Yeah we started back in September and I thought, you know, let everybody get settled back into the new school year, and then I'll start and look around places,...sort of within that Autumn term, knowing that around May time would have been the transition meeting...where we'd be saying...which school we thought so again I wanted to give plenty of time to do my research
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 690-696)

We had a bottle of champagne in the fridge (laugh), I remember we were just so pleased to find out eventually
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 929-931)

The wider impact

...but he's (partner) been there to support me. And there's been times where, he's wanted to, you know, probably say something that would have been out of line, you know, mm, because he's been so frustrated because he's seen how frustrated and upset I've got about things and you know, same with like some of her current teaching staff, they were frustrated about how things weren't happening
(Lin, Int. 4, lines 473-477)

...you know since April, he's (partner) been back at his mums because it has been so stressful. I mean he has two children of his own, which are just normal, you know, you send them off to school, they do what they're supposed to do, they get good reports at the end of the year and he's never had any experience with any of this...so it's been a massive shock to him. He's been to quite a lot of these meetings, which he's found difficult because he doesn't understand a lot of the language and stuff that are being used, because it's not been part of his world ever before
(Lin, int. 4, lines 458-471)

...also I was thinking about with Milly's needs and things like that do I actually want my eldest daughter to be looking out for her younger sister when the teachers should be doing it

I: mm

P2: yeah

P1: it's not her job

I: and you felt that's what she would end up doing?

P1: that's what she would have ended up doing because the teachers wouldn't of done it and that's also why I decided okay go and have a look at...
(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 332-339)

...er but its er going in to high school (laugh), it's a big er worry for him. He didn't want to leave the school cos he's so used to it now with all the teachers looking after him and everything so its been a difficult situation in that sense especially for him to get ready for high school...wasn't easy
(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 37-42)

and you know, then you're not sort of thinking about it, because it completely consumes you, night and day I was thinking about it, you know like, are we going to find out today, have we done enough, is there anything more we can do to try and help the process you know, and help the decision...so that rules in our favour for him,
(Paula, Int. 3, lines 1093-1098)

...so this transition to schools been really stressful for us as a family... very stressful
(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 82-84)

Post-decision emotions

... but yeah, it's been, it's been a difficult time,...but I think that we're in the right place now definitely, definitely, like I said it's just a shame...that it didn't happen but I suppose I am a bit of a believer that things happen for a reason, just when you're going through it, it doesn't always feel like it.
(Lin, Int.4, lines 613-619)

...however, now, it probably, it is probably for the best because under the current management at the other school she wouldn't be getting the support that she's going to get, she wouldn't be leaving with, you know, the qualifications that she's going to get...at (sensory resourced provision), you know, she's not gonna, she wouldn't have been getting the support there

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 1356-1360)

..because again they're pulling back, trying to cut money on how many statements they're giving out, and it's a big massive catch twenty two and I think the government will find in a few years from now, that it's been a massive failing, that you know, some of these kids are going to leave school and not be economically viable, that they're going, you know, but then they're pulling funding on disabled day centres and things, so what are these, you.. know, young adults expected to do later on in life? It's crazy, the world's gone mad it really has, they just don't think of the bigger picture. It's all about getting elected in, and it's all about pulling back this surplus and austerity measures but these are people

(Lin, Int. 4, lines 1707-1714)

... er feel possibly made the right choice. One near home so it's just er a couple of minutes away. The other thing which possibly might have some effect to him that local children

(Sufiyan, int. 6, lines 83-84)

I: okay yeah, who do you feel makes that final decision about where a child with a statement going to be going to school?

P: I think it's the education authority, isn't it, yeah. Mm

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 656-658)

...own opinion, I mean obviously the decision was ours but they could also give us choices

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, line 278)

I think, I feel very strongly that we've made the right choice...knowing everything we know now, mm it's the right place and we've made the right choice, and we've been very fortunate, so mm I'm quite happy with that.

(Sheila, Int. 5, lines 788-791)

...it's a bit more difficult, so at the end of the day we believe we made the right decision and hoping for the best (laugh) for him.

(Sufiyan, Int. 6, lines 294-295)

When asked how they were feeling about September now, Eddie responded, ...better than initially I think <...> I think now I've had a bit, a bit more time to think about it and sort of process it

(Eddie, int. 1, lines 8-10)

P2: Very positive

P1: positive, if Milly's positive, then we're positive about it, she seems really happy.

(Marge and Bob, Int. 2, lines 164-165)

Appendix 13: Example annotated interview transcript with initial noting and emergent themes for Interview 2 (See attached CD)

Appendix 14: Table of Superordinate themes for Interview 2 (See attached CD)