

**How Can Educational Psychologists Help to
Strengthen Parents' Agency When Their Child Moves into
Alternative Provision?**



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Declaration

This thesis is being submitted for a Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology award. I declare that this work is my own and has not been previously submitted for any other purpose. I have acknowledged where the material used is the work of others.

Words

18,992

Overarching Abstract

This thesis provides an account of the interplay between parents' agency and educational systems, specifically in decision-making processes when their child with special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) moves educational setting.

Chapter One begins with a systematic review of existing published literature to explore whether parental agency is reported to influence decision-making when choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND. Five peer-reviewed papers are used to conduct an integrated thematic synthesis, drawing from the descriptions provided by the primary authors. The outcomes indicate the influence of parents' agency upon their decision-making and suggest this influence operates through a series of decision-making pathways connecting parents' forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness to their experiences. Many parents experienced dilemmas' in selecting a school for their child, which was affected by structural influences, impacting parents' autonomy and, thus, their freedom of agency.

Chapter Two links my thematic synthesis (Chapter One) and my empirical research (Chapter Three). This chapter is also a reflexive account of my ontological and epistemological beliefs as an 'emerging' critical realist, the influence this has on my assumptions and beliefs about agency, and my methodological choices. An exploration of the ethical considerations undertaken during my decision-making is also provided.

Chapter Three narrows the focus of my research to parents' agency when their child moves into alternative provision (AP), such as pupil referral units. The empirical research aims to understand what can help strengthen parents' agency when their child moves into AP and the implications of this for educational psychologists. Following a qualitative approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews with five parents whose children had moved into AP. The interview transcriptions were coded and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Central organising themes were generated using a combined approach to reasoning; these link to parents' agency in the process, parents as advocates for their child and parent-professional relationships. The fluidity of agency is discussed alongside opportunities for strengthening parents' agency when their child moves to AP. The possible limitations of this research are discussed as well as opportunities for future practice and research.

Chapter Four is a reflective dialogue of how my research journey and the outcomes generated from this have influenced my development and professional practice in both my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) and as researcher. The implications for my future practice and those for the broader educational psychology practice and research community are discussed.

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1. Chapter One: Is Parental Agency Reported to Influence Decision-Making When Choosing an Educational Setting for Their Child with SEND?

Abstract

Parents are reported to have greater choice than ever when selecting a school for their child. However, it is suggested that greater agency in selecting a school is not the lived experience of some parents, particularly those with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). In this chapter, existing published literature is reviewed to explore whether parental agency is reported to influence decision-making when parents are choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND.

To address this aim, literature about parents' experiences of selecting a school for their child with SEND is reviewed using thematic synthesis. The process of developing exclusion criteria, searching and selecting papers is described. Five peer-reviewed papers are used to conduct an integrated thematic synthesis, drawing from the qualitative descriptions provided by the primary authors. Data is used to develop initial codes, which are synthesised to generate descriptive and analytical themes.

Explicit accounts of 'agency' are not found in parents' direct reports but can be identified within their accounts using Bandura's description of agency. The outcomes indicated the influence of parents' agency upon their decision-making and suggest this influence operates through a series of decision-making pathways connecting parents' forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness to their experiences. Many parents experienced dilemmas in selecting a school for their child, which was affected by structural influences, impacting parents' autonomy and, thus, their freedom of agency. The outcomes are discussed in relation to the wider literature.

The outcomes of this review highlight the interplay of influence between the agent and the structures they encounter. As part of this structure, educational psychologists must be mindful of their responsibility to promote parental agency. These outcomes also highlight the need for further research into how parental agency can be strengthened when parents select an educational setting for their child with SEND.

1.1 Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE; 2011) states that the range of educational settings and continua of available provisions strengthens parental choice of school for their child. Many parents worry about making the 'right' choice of educational setting. They are influenced by many factors, such as what is available in their locality, school reputation and league tables (Burgess et al., 2011). Parents of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have additional considerations, such as finding and seeking a place at a school that can offer provision to meet specific medical or learning needs, which can add complexity to decision-making (Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi, 2014). This chapter focuses on parents' agency when choosing a school and the influence this may have on their decision-making.

Educational Settings and Provision for Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability

According to the 2014 Children and Families Act (Section 20), a child is considered to have SEND if they have 'a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her'. This definition of SEND has been adopted within my systematic literature review (SLR).

Across Great Britain, children deemed as having SEND can attend a broad range of educational settings, ranging from 'mainstream' to 'special'. Within my SLR, I intend 'setting' to mean the physical environment in which a child is educated, whereas 'provision' refers to the approaches offered toward meeting the educational needs of the children.

Special schools are said to offer tailored provision specifically for pupils with SEND (Department for Education, 2023a). An Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) is generally required to secure a place in this setting type. 'Mainstream' schools do not provide exclusively for children with SEND. Children who are on the SEND register in mainstream settings may be considered as requiring 'SEN Support' or may hold an EHCP. Mainstream settings can offer SEND provision in various forms, such as personalised curricula, targeted interventions, additional adult support, or, in some settings, onsite Resourced Provision or SEND Units.

Parental Choice of Educational Setting for Their Child with SEND

Within my SLR, I intend 'parents' to mean those with primary responsibility for the care and decision-making related to a child (Gov.UK, 2023). Parental decision-making about their child's education was brought to the fore through the 1988 Education Reform Act, which focused on school marketisation and parent choice. Since then, a focus on parent choice in their child's education has emerged in government guidance, policy and initiatives (Department for Education, 2014, 2018a, 2018b; Department for Education and Employment, 1997; Department for Education and Skills, 2003).

My initial scoping searches were related to parental agency in decision-making when their child moves into alternative provision; however, there was not enough literature in this topic area to conduct an SLR. Therefore, I opted to broaden my focus to parents' agency when choosing a school for their child with SEND.

My initial searches informed me that most existing studies into parental choice of school for their child with SEND were conducted outside of Great Britain (e.g., Jessen, 2013; Mann et al., 2016; Tah, 2019). International literature suggests parental choice of setting is influenced by offers of provision such as small class sizes, specific teacher skills, communication systems and school ethos (Byrne, 2013; Mawene & Bal, 2018). One English study suggested that parents of children with SEND seek educational settings that can offer provision such as small classes, specialist facilities and specially trained staff (Bagley & Woods, 1998). Furthermore, inconsistencies in provision across settings make it difficult for parents to know what to expect from their local educational settings (Department for Education, 2022, 2023b).

Although the evidence is mixed (Broomhead, 2013), parental dissatisfaction with current SEND provision has been reported (Mitchell, 2021; Parsons & Lewis, 2010). It has been argued that a rising demand for special school places may reflect negative perceptions of mainstream SEND provision (Bagley & Woods, 1998; Satherley, 2020). Many parents seek EHCPs for their children to secure specialist SEND provision through a special school setting (DfE, 2022). In this way, parental 'choices' of setting for their child may reflect limitations in SEND systems and barriers to making informed choices rather than agentic parental decision-making.

Agency

Many theories of varying levels of complexity attempt to define and describe agency (e.g., Ahearn, 2001; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Oswell, 2016). According to Bandura (2018), agency can be recognised through forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (see Table 1). Bandura (2006) argues that agency is 'the capacity to intentionally influence one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions' (p.164). I believe this provides hope that the individual agent can have an influence on structural barriers, but whether Bandura believed this influence varies between persons is unclear.

Table 1: Summary of Bandura's core features of agency (2006; 2018)

Forethought	Self-reactiveness	Self-reflectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporal focus (relating to time): provides direction, coherence and meaning. • Anticipatory self-guidance governed by visualisation of goals/anticipation of likely outcomes. • Anticipation of likely outcomes guides actions. • Shaping the present to realise desired futures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making choices and action plans (rather than sitting back waiting) and motivating and regulating the execution of action plans. • Linking thought to action. • Managing behaviour by self-government through the development of behavioural standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-examination of functioning. • Reflecting on personal efficacy, soundness of thoughts and actions and their values/morality. • Addressing competing values. • Making corrective adjustments if necessary. • This is considered a metacognitive capability.

I do not believe individuals have fixed agentic capacities; indeed, these might play out differently across different contexts and times in a person's life. However, I believe theories that describe the interplay between society and agency (e.g., Bhaskar, 1978) and its fluidity across context and culture (e.g., Archer, 2003) or time (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), do not adequately describe how we might identify agency in the first place. The production of an all-encompassing definition or description of agency may not be possible or even appropriate. Therefore, I propose a working description of agency based on the

properties described by Bandura (2018), its interplay with existing structures (Amos & Schoon, 2017; Archer, 2003) and fluidity across context and time (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019).

Parental Agency in Decision-Making for their Child with SEND

Parental agency can be defined as 'actions by parents on behalf of their child' (Rautamies et al., 2019, p.896). Parental agency, within the context of educational decision-making, is reported to enhance conditions for children's development and learning (Murray et al., 2015), bringing about positive outcomes for the child, such as individual wellbeing (Koskela, 2021) and educational mobility (Schoon et al., 2021). Parent forethought can be permeated by a deficit view of disability (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2008). Parents' ability to take an active role is also reported to be impacted by power differentials in the context of working with professionals (Lucas, 2019) and a lack of knowledge of their rights (Koskela, 2021). This can negatively impact parental self-reflection on their identity as decision-making agents in their child's education (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2008).

Through this research into existing literature from Great Britain, I aim to explore whether parental agency is reported to influence parents' decision-making when they are choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND.

1.2 Method

SLRs should be undertaken with the methodological rigour expected of primary research (Gough & Thomas, 2016); therefore, process transparency is paramount (Heyvaert et al., 2017). This section outlines the steps and key decisions that I took during this process, informed by Boland et al. (2017; See Table 2).

Table 2: SLR 'Roadmap' as adapted from Boland et al. (2017, p.9)

Step	Description	Step	Description
1	Plan the review	6	Select full-text papers
2	Perform scoping searches	7	Data extraction
3	Literature search	8	Quality assessment
4	Screen titles and abstracts	9	Analysis and synthesis
5	Obtain papers	10	Write up and edit

Step 1: Planning the Review

The planned purpose of this SLR was two-fold: (a) to synthesise existing primary evidence linked to what is reported about parental agency when selecting an educational setting for their child with SEND; (b) to explore themes that arise from the data to inform follow-up empirical research about parental agency when their child moves into Alternative Provision.

SLRs are said to sit along a continuum, with aggregative and configurative approaches at opposing ends (Gough & Thomas, 2016). Aggregative reviews assume a reality that can be reported, whereas configurative reviews tend to examine the variation of conceptualisations (Gough et al., 2012). In this SLR, I aimed to set out the outcomes of primary studies alongside each other to develop a 'whole' picture, together with summative commentary; therefore, I argue that this SLR lies between both ends of the continuum.

In aiming to answer the research question, I hold two main assumptions: (a) that agency exists; and (b) individuals might experience and report this differently. These assumptions align with a critical realist philosophical position (Bhasker, 2008), and it is from this position that my SLR was conducted.

Steps 2 and 3: Scoping and Searching

I derived my search terms from those employed within key papers identified through my scoping searches and used these to draw synonyms from database thesauri.

To further refine the search terms and develop an optimal search strategy, I consulted a specialist librarian from Newcastle University, as recommended by Heyvaert et al. (2017). Following this, I removed synonyms such as 'carer' (for parent), which drew high numbers of

papers from other fields of study. The term 'agency' created this issue, but I retained this because of its centrality to the review question. Properties of agency such as parental 'forethought', 'self-reactiveness' and 'self-reflectiveness' (Bandura, 2018, p.130) were identifiable within the papers found during the scoping searches. However, they were not necessarily referred to under the overarching term of 'agency'. Therefore, I included the search term 'agency' as desirable but not essential. The final search terms and Boolean operators used are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Key search terms used for SLR

Boolean Operator	Key Terms and Synonyms
	parent*
AND	choos* OR chose* OR select* OR decision* OR decide OR prefer*
OR	choice* OR agency OR influence OR option*
AND	school OR "educational provision" OR setting*
AND	"special education* need*" OR SEN OR statement OR "Education*, Health and Care Plan" OR EHCP

My scoping searches provided a brief overview of the type and volume of existing literature (Boland et al., 2017). Few relevant papers linked to the review question were written in the last ten years. However, following my scoping searches for papers published after the publication of *Every Child Matters*, which promoted parents as equal partners in educational decision-making (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), I identified two relevant papers (Parsons et al., 2009; Satherley & Norwich, 2021) which I used to help me to refine my inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 4). I set search limiters to peer-reviewed articles focusing on participants from Great Britain (GB). I selected papers published post-2003, after the release of *Every Child Matters*, which promoted joint working with parents.

To ensure this SLR reflected a breadth of findings (Harden & Thomas, 2005), I included primary research from qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method disciplines. Some challenges of this are discussed under 'Thematic Synthesis' (p.20).

A comprehensive, systematic literature search was conducted using six electronic databases: British Education Index, Education Database, ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science. I then used Microsoft Excel to collect, organise and manage the references electronically.

Table 4: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for SLR

Criteria for inclusion	Criteria for exclusion
Peer-reviewed journal article	Non-peer-reviewed journal article
2003-2022	Pre-2003
GB participants	Non-GB participants
Parent participants included	Parent view is not separable from other views.
Parents of children with SEND	Specific focus on an area of SEND
Focus on parents choosing an educational setting and parental agency in the process.	Focus on home school, exclusion, non-attendance
Empirical research	Review articles
Mainstream or special school settings that accommodate children from the age of 2 years old.	Post-secondary settings

Step 4: Screening Titles and Abstracts

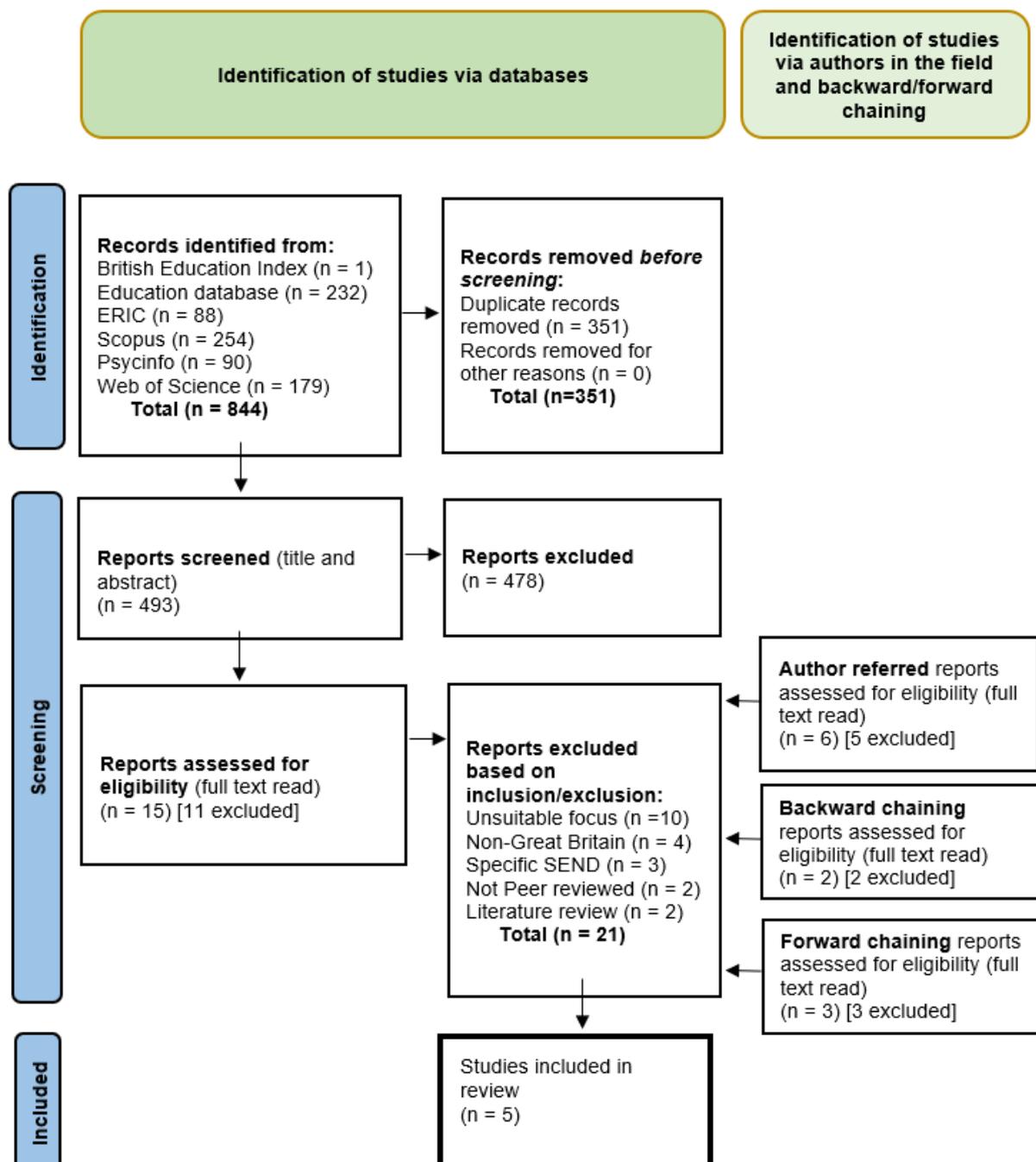
Following duplicate removal, I identified 493 papers and used the inclusion criteria to determine their relevance to the review question (Heyvaert et al., 2017). Those that did not report parental choice of educational setting for their child with SEND were immediately eliminated. Studies that focused on a specific area of SEND, such as Autism-Spectrum-Disorder, as opposed to a wide range of SEND, were also eliminated to enhance participant heterogeneity.

To support saturation, I scanned reference lists and conducted forward citation searches to check for any relevant papers that were not identified through the previous steps. This process yielded five possible papers. Leading authors in the field were also contacted, which led to the identification of six additional possible papers.

Steps 5 and 6: Obtaining and Selecting Papers

I conducted the final screening through a rigorous application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria to check each paper's relevance in answering my review question. A PRISMA flow chart (Page et al., 2021) summarises the number of papers I identified and included and my reasons for exclusions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram, as adapted from Page et al. (2021)



Following this process, I identified five papers for the final selection. Two of these could be described as qualitative (Rogers, 2007; Runswick-Cole, 2008), and two employed a mixed method methodology with confirmational qualitative and quantitative elements (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Satherley & Norwich, 2021). One paper could be described as quantitative (Parsons et al., 2009), but a detailed narrative summary supported all numerical data. Except for Satherley and Norwich (2021), all papers were published before 2010.

Step 7: Data Extraction

I piloted a data extraction table to refine and summarise the research papers (Boland et al., 2017). Each full paper was reread, and I mapped out relevant descriptive data and outcome summaries in my finalised data extraction table (see Table 5). This step gave me a valuable picture of similarities and differences between the studies, which informed my synthesis method for addressing the research question (Gough & Thomas, 2016).

Table 5: Descriptive Data Extraction, adapted from Heyvaert et al. (2017)

Author and publication year	Flewitt & Nind (2007)	Parsons et al. (2009)	Rogers (2007)	Runswick-Cole (2008)	Satherley & Norwich (2021)
Phenomenon of interest/Study focus	Processes of choice making, parents' expectations, and 'perspectives of combining special and mainstream services for their children in the early years'. (Flewitt & Nind, 2007, p.425)	Parents of children across a broad range of SEN or disabilities were surveyed on 'key aspects of provision, such as choice of school and influence of attitudinal and environmental factors'. (Parsons et al., 2009, p.19)	The experiences, 'hopes and expectations' when choosing a school for parents who have children identified with special education needs (Rogers, 2007, p.55)	To explore influences on 'parents' attitudes to mainstream and special schooling' in England. (Runswick-Cole, 2008, p.173)	To 'examine the views of parents of pupils in special schools... [to explore] their reasons for choosing special school, the extent to which they felt they had an independent choice and their views on alternative provision'. (Satherley & Norwich, 2021, p.1)
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 parents (questionnaires) • 5 (of 19) parents (interviews) • Parents of children (EYFS setting) with diverse SEND. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 256 parents • Parents of children on the SEN list (Range of mainstream and special settings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 parents (21 mothers, 3 fathers) • Parents of children (4-19) from a broad spectrum of SEND (Range of mainstream and special settings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 parents (17 mothers, 7 fathers) • Parents of children with a range of SEND 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 57 parents • Parents of children (Special school setting following mainstream) with diverse SEND
Location/context	England	Great Britain	Great Britain	England	England

Author and publication year	Flewitt & Nind (2007)	Parsons et al. (2009)	Rogers (2007)	Runswick-Cole (2008)	Satherley & Norwich (2021)
Theoretical lens	The social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2010)	Interface model of disability implied arguing 'for the importance of recognising both social and individual factors in discussing needs' (Parsons et al., 2009, p.43)	Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social model of disability • Inclusion 	Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977)
My interpretation of the authors' philosophical assumptions based on their written accounts and methodological approach. (Informed by Barnett and Page, 2009, p.5)	Approach and assumptions align with a critical realist stance, through a mixed method approach to understanding reported external realities (e.g., inclusion) whilst acknowledging and seeking out differing perspectives to 'reveal rich detail'. (Flewitt & Nind, 2007, p.425)	Approach and assumptions align with a scientific realist stance. E.g., Through a quantitative approach to uncovering 'the true extent of dissatisfaction' in the face of widely different reports from parents (Parsons et al., p.19).	Approach and assumptions align with a critical realist stance. E.g., Through a qualitative approach to ' unpack ' the ' lived experiences ' of parents' (Rogers, 2007, p.57). States 'the experience at a micro social level dramatically affects' (p.66) individuals (suggesting an interplay between agent and society).	Approach and assumptions align with a critical realist stance, through a qualitative approach to understanding external realities through individual perceptions. E.g., 'parents' attitudes to the inclusion of their children'. (Runswick-Cole, 2008, p.173)	Approach and assumptions align with a critical realist stance. E.g., Through a mixed method approach to exploring 'parents' experiences of making decisions' in the context of structural (e.g., policy) influences (Satherley & Norwich, 2021, p.1)

Author and publication year	Flewitt & Nind (2007)	Parsons et al. (2009)	Rogers (2007)	Runswick-Cole (2008)	Satherley & Norwich (2021)
Study design	Mixed	Quantitative	Qualitative	Qualitative	Mixed
Data collection methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires (forced choice & open) • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postal questionnaire (scaling & yes/no questions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case study • Interviews 	Interviews (narrative approach)	Online questionnaire (scaling & open questions).
Data analysis methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics • Thematic analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chi-square analysis • Factor analysis 	Narrative summary	Thematic analyses	Cross-tabulation & description (numerical data); Content analysis (textual data)

Author and publication year	Flewitt & Nind (2007)	Parsons et al. (2009)	Rogers (2007)	Runswick-Cole (2008)	Satherley & Norwich (2021)
Summary of main findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents wish for the best of both worlds (mainstream and special). • Placement can involve trial and error. • Parents want to do the right thing. • Choice influenced by belonging. • Parents want reassurance. • Other influential factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Staff attitude ○ Resources ○ Staff ratios ○ Ability to meet specific needs. ○ Onsite skilled professionals ○ Geographical factors. 	<p>Influence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School support (e.g., blaming of LA, progress and satisfaction with school). • Legislation. • Autonomy (e.g., the parent having enough information to decide about school and able to choose what to do next). • Effect of difficulties (e.g., on aspirations). • Accessibility (e.g., physical accessibility of the school/ extracurricular activities). • Parental within-child view. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmet parental expectations of their child's acceptance into mainstream. • Parents may encounter prejudice. • Differences in views about the effectiveness of 'inclusion'. • Mainstream education is not an easy/straightforward path. • Parents veer towards mainstream education; However, difficulties are encountered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ mainstream practices ○ large classes ○ differentiation of work ○ school ability to manage 'difficulty'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents who want mainstream - beliefs: the social model of disability, focus on barriers, place value on own knowledge, accepted difficulties. • Parents who move their child to special school report: a lack of flexibility and resources, hostile school cultures, and inflexible teaching style. • Special school is considered the 'best chance' of a 'normal life' (p. 179) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental choice influenced by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Their views of mainstream inclusion. ○ How informed they feel. ○ Support from professionals ○ Extent of 'real choice' (p.8) • Extent to which views were facilitated. • A dilemma is experienced. • Parents view the system of choice as needing improvement. • Choice of special school based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School atmosphere. ○ Caring approach to pupils. ○ Class size.

Step 8: Quality Assessment

The general purpose of Quality Assessment (QA) is argued to appraise how well a study has been conducted and how far it can be trusted (Heyvaert et al., 2017). Given the qualitative-heavy nature of the data in this SLR and the debated approach to qualitative QA (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Pawson et al., 2005; Thomas & Harden, 2008), I emphasised the study's relevance in answering my review question alongside the quality of the researchers' approach. Therefore, the Weight of Evidence (WoE) was used (Gough, 2007), informed by the TAPUPAS (Pawson et al., 2003; see Table 6) to combine judgements based on generic elements of quality and those specifically related to my SLR question. As part of this process, I considered the extent to which I perceived the voice of the parent participants to be present in the studies (Garside et al., 2010; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Table 6: Weight of Evidence, adapted from Gough (2007) and Pawson et al. (2003)

Weight of Evidence (Gough, 2007)	WoE A: The soundness of the study (regarding its research question)	WoE B: Appropriateness of the study for answering this review question	WoE C: Relevance of the study for this review question	WoE D: The overall weight of evidence
<i>Informed by...</i> TAPUPAS (Pawson et al., 2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency • Accuracy • Accessibility • Specificity 	Purposefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utility • Propriety 	
Flewitt & Nind (2007)	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Parsons et al. (2009)	HIGH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Rogers (2007)	LOW MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LOW MEDIUM	LOW MEDIUM
Runswick-Cole (2008)	HIGH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Satherley & Norwich (2021)	HIGH	HIGH	MEDIUM	HIGH

The purpose of QA was to describe what was observed in the studies to use this information in determining the weight that would be placed on the findings of each study during synthesis

(Heyvaert et al., 2017). I acknowledge the subjectivity of my QA; therefore, Appendix A provides a documented example of the decisions made during this QA process to enhance the transparency of my approach.

Step 9: Thematic Synthesis

Selecting a synthesis method can be complicated (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009), influenced by the research question and the primary study data. The primary papers in this SLR provided me with data that arose from a range of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies. Study heterogeneity is argued to exacerbate the challenge of selecting an appropriate synthesis method that is logistically and theoretically viable (Heyvaert et al., 2017). However, while methods of synthesis that include mixed data are relatively underdeveloped (Lucas et al., 2007), they are emerging as a recognised and valued approach (The Joanna Briggs Institute, 2014). Indeed, it is argued that the objectivity provided through numerical data is complemented by the subjectivity offered through its perspective-oriented counterpart (Stern et al., 2020), creating a more informed and less theoretically polarised union (Heyvaert et al., 2017; Sandelowski et al., 2012).

The quantitative and qualitative data within the primary studies in my SLR could address the same research question making an integrated analysis appropriate (Heyvaert et al., 2017; Stern et al., 2020). The quantitative data in papers had been richly described meaning qualitisation was not required. Therefore, I was able to integrate the already-qualitised data using the existing labels, factors, categories and narratively described findings provided by the authors. This process was facilitated using a thematic synthesis (TS) approach.

As Thomas and Harden (2008) described, TS is a qualitatively-borne approach that is argued to be flexible enough to draw together the findings across mixed-data studies (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). TS involves line-by-line free coding and translation of concepts across the papers through the development of descriptive themes. Analytical themes are then developed to interpret the merged data, which 'go beyond' the primary studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008, p.8). In this way, TS is argued to lie between the opposite ends of the integrative-interpretive continuum, aligning TS with a critical realist approach (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009) and with the aims of the SLR research question.

Coding and Development of Descriptive Themes

For these stages in the process, I used an inductive approach to line-by-line data coding to avoid the influence of my preconceptions (Thomas & Harden, 2008). 'Data' were drawn from the findings or results sections to keep the data as close as possible to the participants' accounts.

As I progressed through the free coding, I added new codes or applied previous codes where the data held the same meaning. As reported by Thomas and Harden (2008), the process was highly iterative and, following the coding of the last paper, I reread the papers to check coding consistency throughout the process. Using NVivo, an initial list of 112 free codes was developed, which I refined by checking the matching data extracts to merge duplicate codes and split some codes to draw out nuanced differences. I translated the codes into a final total of 12 descriptive themes (see Table 7), which were directly traceable to the primary study data and presented across at least two primary studies (see Table 8).

Table 7: Descriptive theme content

Descriptive themes	Content (drawn from original codes)	Match with core feature/s
Parental aspirations	Future vision; equipping for life; life chances; pathway to adulthood inclusion	Forethought
Autonomy	Ability to affect change; decision-making freedoms; feelings of value; sense of power/control	Sits outside Bandura's core features of agency
Consulting others	Seeking out views outside of professionals; conflicting views within and between families; and recommendations	Self-reflectiveness Self-reactiveness
Dilemmas	No ideal path to future; feeling equipped to make hard choices; seeking out combined alternatives, no real choice for meeting complex needs; inevitability of difficult decisions	Relates to all core features of agency-process related
Information	The desire for more information; parents seeking information for themselves; parents feeling well informed; seeking reassurance	Self-reflectiveness Self-reactiveness
Legislation	Legislation awareness; legislation impact	Self-reactiveness
Placement availability	Limited or no 'real choices' (funding and/or local authority variation); sense of urgency; parents paying for placements	Self-reactiveness
Parent perceptions of setting inclusivity	Confusing discourse about inclusion; expectation to attend mainstream/only specialist settings considered	Forethought Self-reactiveness
Parental conceptions of individual difference	Perceptions that children's ability to cope in mainstream school is impacted/not impacted by their SEN	Forethought
Parents' previous experiences	Trial and error; failed (ended) placements; negative and positive experiences; virtual exclusion (practical/intellectual/emotional/social); child's self-esteem; satisfaction; disappointment	Forethought Self-reactiveness
Professional input	Influence of professionals; helpful/unhelpful professional input; fighting for choices	Self-reflectiveness Self-reactiveness
School features	School ethos/atmosphere; curriculum content and approaches; high staff-to-pupil ratios; physical resources and accessibility; specially trained staff; setting variation	Forethought Self-reactiveness

Table 8: Contribution of primary studies to each descriptive theme

Descriptive theme	Studies contributing to the theme				
	Flewitt & Nind (2007)	Parsons et al. (2009)	Rogers (2007)	Runswick-Cole (2008)	Satherley & Norwich (2021)
Aspirations	✓			✓	
Autonomy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Consulting others	✓			✓	✓
Dilemmas	✓		✓	✓	✓
Information	✓	✓			✓
Legislation	✓	✓		✓	
Local placement availability	✓		✓	✓	✓
Parents' perceptions of setting inclusivity	✓		✓	✓	✓
Parental conceptions of 'difference'	✓	✓		✓	✓
Previous experiences	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Professional input	✓			✓	✓
School features	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Coverage across each paper	12	6	6	11	10

Analytical Theme Development

It is argued that synthesis moves beyond the original data to produce a new interpretation (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Xiao & Watson, 2019). According to Thomas and Harden (2008), this phase of TS is focused specifically on answering the SLR research question, which moved my synthesis in an interpretive direction (Heyvaert et al., 2017) because it required me to view the phenomenon through my interpretive lens, influenced by my conception of agency.

Furthermore, in considering these outcomes, it is important to note the heterogeneity of parental experiences and perspectives; therefore, a range of themes are reported but not presumed to be experienced in the same way or reported consistently across the participant population.

1.3 Themes and Discussion

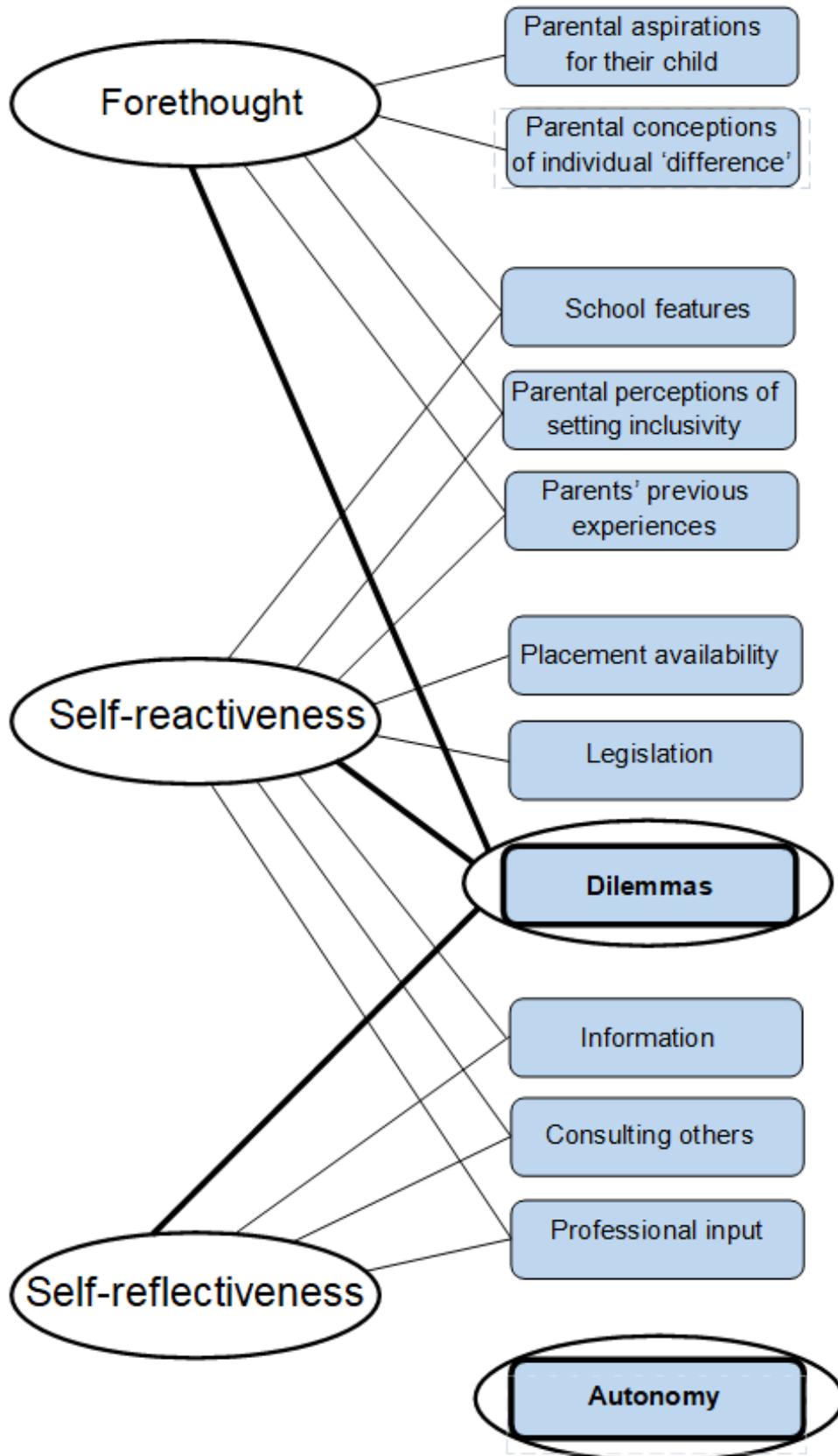
Figure 2 is a visual representation of the outcomes generated through the TS, representing the descriptive codes generated and where they link, or do not link, to Bandura's (2018) three core features of agency.

On the figure, two of the descriptive themes are highlighted as distinctive from the others; these are, 'Dilemmas' and 'Autonomy'.

A distinguishing feature of 'Dilemmas' was that this was the only descriptive theme to map across all three of Bandura's (2018) features of agency. Additionally, 'dilemmas' appeared to suggest something related to agentic processes which moves beyond Bandura's (2018) description of agency. Conversely, 'Autonomy' did not directly relate to any of Bandura's (2018) features of agency which also made this theme distinctive.

Overall, the themes of 'Dilemmas' and 'Autonomy' could be described as 'anomalies' because they are distinctive from the rest of the data. Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that anomalies in our data are not something to disregard, instead they should be valued as they can provide new and interesting insights. In this way, I believe the themes of 'Dilemmas' and 'Autonomy' have something different to tell us about agency. Therefore, these descriptive themes were 'promoted' to overarching themes and the relevance of these will be discussed further in this section.

Figure 2: Map of Descriptive Codes, informed by Bandura's (2018) features of agency.



Overarching Theme One: Forethought

According to Bandura, forethought is a temporal property of agency. The anticipation of likely outcomes is argued to give direction and meaning to decisions, which can motivate later actions (Bandura, 2018).

Two descriptive themes were generated linked to the property of agentic 'forethought:

- Parental aspirations for their child
- Parental conceptions of difference

This theme was characterised by parents' desire to equip their children to give them the best life chances (Flewitt & Nind, 2009; Runswick-Cole, 2008). Parents reported the influence of their imagined future for their child on their beliefs about whether mainstream or special education would be most appropriate, but views on this were varied (Parsons et al., 2009; Runswick-Cole, 2008). Some parents were unsure of what this future vision could look like, making them hesitant about their decision-making direction. This outcome aligns with Honkasilta et al. (2015), who suggest that uncertainty about the future can negatively impact an individual's perceptions of their agency.

Some parents' aspirations were influenced by their conceptions of their child's difficulty or disability and the anticipated impact of this on their life chances (Parsons et al., 2009; Runswick-Cole, 2008). This concurs with claims that some parents can feel a loss of aspiration when their child is regarded as having SEND (Honkasilta et al., 2015; Rix & Paige-Smith, 2008). However, it is important to note that many parents reported 'fighting' the system to get what they believed their child needed to secure a positive future, suggesting that parental agency can be activated in response to challenging situations (Griffiths et al., 2004; Rautamies et al., 2019).

Overarching Theme Two: Self-reactiveness

While forethought describes the anticipation of agentic actions on future outcomes, Self-reactiveness is related to agents' ability to make decisions and take action towards realising these outcomes (Bandura, 2006). This overarching theme highlighted the interplay between parents' active agency as well as organisational and societal structures.

Five descriptive themes were subsumed under this theme: school features, parental perceptions of setting inclusivity, parents' previous experiences, placement availability and legislation.

Three of these five themes were linked to both 'Forethought' and 'Self-reactiveness':

- School features
- Parental perceptions of setting inclusivity
- Parents' previous experiences

School features, such as the availability of specialist facilities and equipment, level of staff training, staff ratios and school ethos were reported to influence parental decision-making in all five papers. Enabling inclusionary practices were also highlighted as an influential factor (Rogers, 2009; Satherley & Norwich, 2021).

At times, parents' expectations of a setting were unmet, forcing them to revise their plans and move their child elsewhere (Flewitt & Nind, 2008; Parsons et al., 2009; Rogers, 2007; Runswick-Cole, 2008). For some parents, this led to a 'trial and error' approach to finding a new setting (Flewitt & Nind, 2008). Rautamies et al. (2019) argue that this approach can lead to despair, and some parents might experience feelings of self-blame (Honkasilta et al., 2015). Indeed, regret and self-doubt were evident in some parents' accounts (Flewitt & Nind, 2008). In this way, some parents may find themselves in a pattern of experiences which decreases their energy to exert their agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Vincent & Martin, 2002).

Two further descriptive themes linked to 'self-reactiveness' in parental agency were generated:

- Legislation
- Placement availability

Aligning with Koskela (2021), confusing and ambiguous local and national legislative discourses were reported to create a barrier to some parents' understanding of their options (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Rogers, 2007).

A lack of adequate setting choices in some localities was a prevalent theme across the studies. Some parents reported that they needed to modify their expectations in response to the availability of appropriate settings (Runswick-Cole, 2008; Satherley & Norwich, 2021). The unsuitability of mainstream options in meeting some children's needs meant that some parents felt pressurised to settle for a special school for their child; in this way, the 'decision was not theirs' (Satherley & Norwich, 2021, p. 8).

Some parents reported having to take agentic actions such as 'fighting' for their rights or moving out of the local area to get an appropriate placement for their child (Flewitt & Nind, 2007; Runswick-Cole, 2008; Satherley & Norwich, 2021; Rogers, 2007). While these actions

indicate the deployment of parental agency, they were taken as an alternative to parents' original wishes and, therefore, exemplify how structural constraints can influence the direction of decision-making (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Overarching Theme Three: Self-reflectiveness

Three descriptive themes were linked to parental 'Self-reflectiveness':

- Information
- Consulting others
- Professional input

All three themes are also linked to 'Self-reactiveness', suggesting that these two overarching themes are closely linked.

Choosing a setting was reported to be a confusing process, and some parents spoke of wanting reassurance from others that they were making the 'right' decision (Flewitt & Nind, 2008; Satherley & Norwich, 2021). The extent to which parents felt informed appeared to influence the meaningfulness of their decision-making (Parsons et al., 2009).

Some parents enacted their agency by seeking out information, which helped them take decisive actions (Satherley & Norwich, 2021); this aligns with the claim of Honkasilta et al., that proactively involved parents can gain 'strong agency and authority' (2015, p.680). Interestingly, Runswick-Cole (2008) found that many parents who preferred mainstream tended to be more sceptical of professional input into their decision-making. However, some parents found information from professionals supported their decision-making, particularly those considering special school placements (Flewitt & Nind, 2008; Runswick-Cole, 2008; Satherley & Norwich, 2021). For some, perhaps this was linked to conceptions that professionals, through their specialist training and experience, were more competent to make such decisions (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). One parent reported, 'We're trying to do the best we can - and when someone has a lot of experience - that's a big influence' (Flewitt & Nind, 2008, p.433). There is an argument that professionals can sometimes promote this type of thinking through their approach (Tveit, 2009). Certainly, some parents reported feeling 'pushed' into decisions (Satherley & Norwich, 2021, p.8), aligning with a 'professionals know best' attitude to parental involvement in decision-making (Schnee & Bose, 2010). In this way, parents' sense of agency within decision-making processes may be hindered by perceived power imbalances between parents and professionals (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2008; Satherley, 2020).

Overarching Theme Four: Dilemmas

The theme of 'Dilemmas' was initially generated as a descriptive theme. However, I argue that its role in connecting the previous overarching themes of Forethought, Self-reactiveness and Self-reflectiveness makes this theme distinctive as it suggests a *process* within agency rather than a *description*. Therefore, 'Dilemmas' was promoted to become an overarching theme, which goes beyond Bandura's description of agency, to describe what might be happening within parents' agency when they are selecting an educational setting for their child with SEND.

Reports of dilemmas suggest decision-making can be fraught with challenge. Figure 3 represents how the agentic features of 'forethought', 'self-reactiveness' and 'self-reflectiveness' (Bandura, 2018) are interconnected during decision-making processes. The bidirectional lines between the features of agency represent the divergent pathways through which I believe parents' agency operated and evolved when they were choosing a school for their child with SEND. Decision-making was often reported to move back and forth through these pathways, indicating that dilemmas were occurring. I believe such dilemmas could be explained, in part, by the tension between parents' desire for their child's wider inclusion and their wish for them to feel belonging amongst peers with similar needs (Norwich, 2008; Koutsouris, 2014).

In this model, agency is assumed to be fluid, aligning with life course proponents (e.g., Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Unfortunately, for some parents, there appeared to be a disadvantaging interaction between their agency and influencing structures, supporting the argument of the reproductive impact of the interplay between structure and agency (Archer, 2003). For example, further dilemmas occurred when parents try to find a viable or alternative decision in response to structural barriers, such as school features, placement availability or lack of information. The references to dilemmas amongst the primary papers suggests this is a prevalent issue. Indeed, Norwich and Koutsouris (2017) argue such tensions are common in educational decision making linked to children with SEND. Building on this claim, the outcomes of the SLR suggest that tensions are characterised by parents having to make difficult choices and take risks, particularly where they perceived there to be no ideal path.

Overarching Theme Five: Autonomy

The descriptive theme of 'Autonomy' did not directly relate to any of Bandura's (2018) features of agency which made it distinctive in this research. Additionally, this theme was associated with all five primary papers indicating a prevalence that made it of further interest. Therefore, 'Autonomy' was promoted from a descriptive theme to an overarching theme.

The term 'autonomy' refers to 'regulation by the self' (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p.1557). However, as with agency, the concept of autonomy is one of debate, particularly with regard to whether the locus of its control resides internally or externally (e.g., Alkire, 2005; Oshana, 2006). A more contemporary argument is that individual autonomy is impacted by social and contextual factors, creating an 'interdependence' between the agent and structural elements (Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2021, p.248). I argue this 'interdependence' describes the interplay between the agent and structure argued by Archer (2003) and Bhaskar (1978). This SLR aligns with this perspective, highlighting a tension between parents' personal autonomy as agents and the structural factors that enhance or hinder this (see Figure 3). For example, where parents' aspirations for their child are hindered by the types of setting available to them. Therefore, in this research, autonomy is understood as 'freedom of agency' (Doyle & Gough, 1991, p.60) within social or systemic contexts. I argue that it is within these contexts, where opportunities exist to enhance parental autonomy and, consequently, their agency. However, the accounts of the parents across the primary studies in this SLR suggest these opportunities are not occurring equitably for parents across Great Britain.

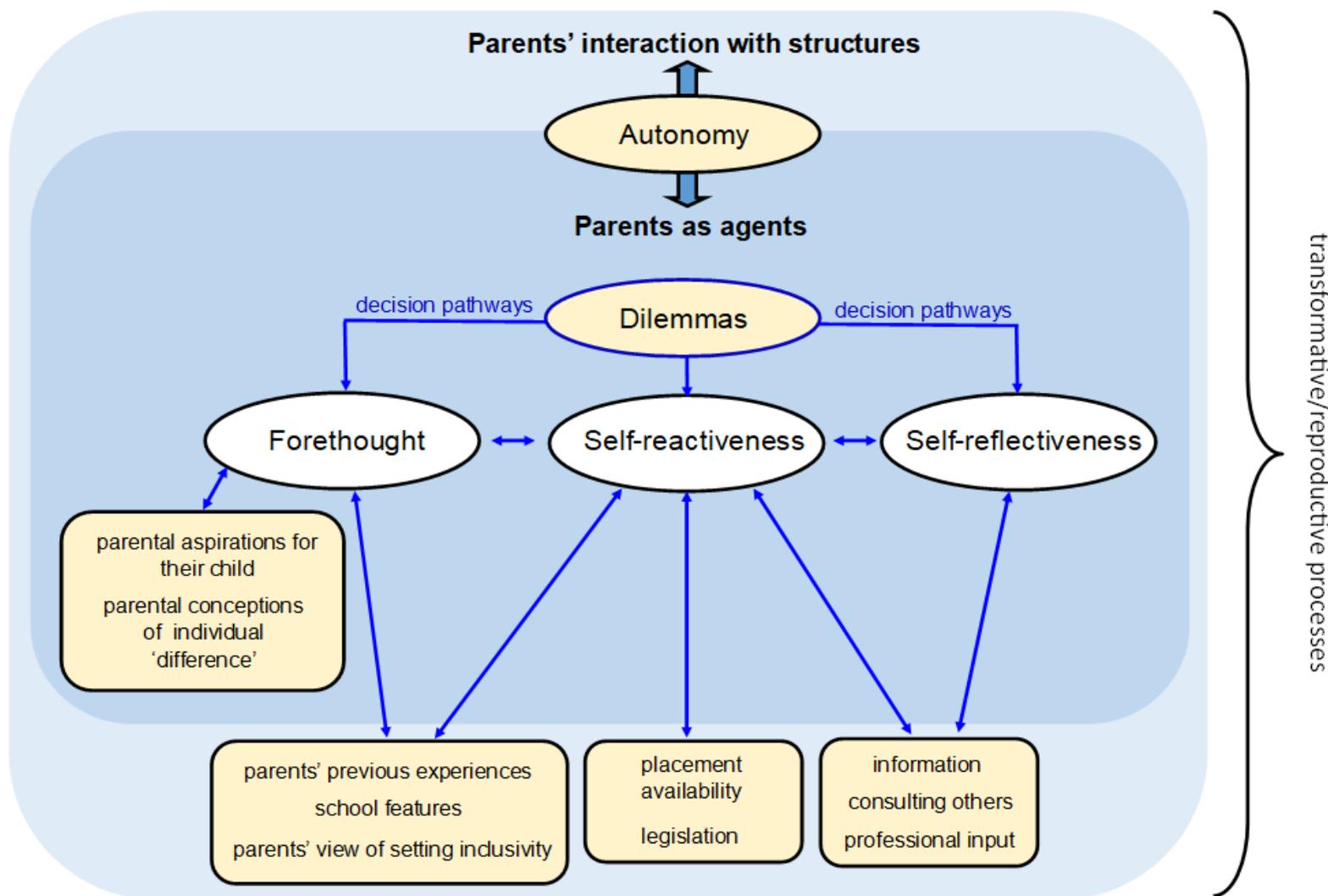
Summary of Overarching Themes

Overall, the overarching themes of Forethought, Self-reactiveness and Self-reflectiveness were closely linked. With the exception of 'Autonomy' (discussed later in this section), the descriptive themes generated through this SLR matched directly with at least one or more of these overarching themes, with the theme of 'Dilemmas' matching all three, making it distinctive and, therefore, an overarching theme in itself. The outcomes of this SLR bring renewed awareness to the dilemmas that exist during decision-making around the education of those with special educational needs (Minow, 1990) and, in particular, the risks parents feel they must take when undertaking such decisions.

While many parents reported feeling confident and satisfied with their decisions (Parsons et al., 2009), some parents faced challenges with envisioning what the future could hold for their

child and lacked information about their options. I argue these barriers presented a direct challenge to their autonomous decision-making, which links to the fifth overarching theme generated through this SLR: 'Autonomy'. Dworkin (2015) argues that individuals can only exert their autonomy when they are able to identify with the motivators for their actions. In this way, challenges some parents faced in envisioning their child's future in the face of limited and confusing discourse around their options provided a barrier to their autonomy, or 'freedom of agency' (Doyle & Gough, 1991, p.60). In some cases, this is likely to have led to uninformed decision-making and may have encouraged some parents to rely on professionals to help them in fear of making the 'wrong choice' (Alkire, 2005), further impacting their autonomy. Castillo (2009) argues that autonomy is an essential part of full participation. I argue that any approaches to inviting parents to make choices without adequate information or support represents little more than 'tokenism' (Hart, 1992, p.8) rather than the promotion of true participation. A consequence of which is the alienation of parents from being true decision-making partners in the education of their child (e.g., Burke, 2012; Pusher & Amendt, 2018; Spear et al, 2021).

Figure 3: The operation of parental agency when choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND



1.4 Limitations

SLRs can be used to influence policy and practice, meaning I have an ethical responsibility to review any claims made (Suri, 2020).

I acknowledge the outcomes generated through research are impacted by choices made during the research process. For example, to enhance participant heterogeneity, I opted to exclude studies that focused on a specific area of SEND, selecting those that focused on parents with children with a wide range of SEND types. However, this decision reduced the number of eligible studies, which may have led to the exclusion of specific insights into parental experiences.

I was the sole researcher responsible for developing and synthesising themes in this SLR, meaning that decisions were based on individual judgement, introducing subjective bias. For example, drawing data from various methodologies made this SLR more epistemologically balanced (Heyvaert et al., 2017). However, my philosophical preference is towards rich qualitative data, which may have guided my focus during the data synthesis process. Furthermore, I acknowledge that 'agency' is an interpretable concept (Archer, 2003), meaning that any outcomes are based on my subjective understanding of the properties and influences of agency. By following an explicit process (Boland et al., 2017), I endeavoured to mitigate the impact of my biases through the transparency of my decision-making (Nowell et al., 2017), as recorded at key decision-points within the SLR write-up and my personal reflexive decision-log.

Another important consideration is that SLRs are limited by the author's choice of extracts and their research purposes. I noted that where there was a specific agenda, such as inclusivity, the reported parental experiences of mainstream settings tended to be negatively inclined (Flewitt & Nind, 2008; Rogers, 2007). While I have outlined any relevant context (see Table 5), I concede that integrating such data might have blended such biases into the SLR.

One aim of conducting an SLR is to minimise the influence of bias (Daniels, 2019), but Denyer and Tranfield (2009) question the extent to which author and researcher bias can be eliminated. The primary studies were inevitably impacted by what parents chose to report, as viewed through their own interpretive lens. In this way, any knowledge generated is 'ever fallible' to the agents' understanding and interpretation of observed and unobserved events (Archer, 2003, p.15), whether parent, author or researcher. This SLR acknowledges this and embraces subjectivity as an inevitable aspect of the human experience (Bhaskar, 2008).

1.5 Conclusion and Implications

The research question guiding this SLR asked, *'Is parental agency reported to influence decision-making when choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND?'* This SLR provides an account of how parental agency can influence decision-making and how structures encountered during the decision-making process can inhibit, enable or activate parental agency.

I argue that the absence of the word 'agency' in parents' direct reports does not demonstrate the omission of agential influence, but instead aligns with the argument that it is an unobservable mechanism influenced by, and influencing upon, the structures that individuals directly observe and report (Bhaskar, 2008). That is not to say that individuals have no awareness of their agency, but that they are more likely to think of themselves as persons navigating their context by whatever means they can, rather than as 'agents'.

Implications for Educational Psychology Practice and Research

The outcomes of this SLR suggest that structural influences can have an unequal impact on parental agency. This results from the complex and context-bound interplay of influence between the agent and the structures they encounter. Given this reciprocal but imbalanced influence, I believe it is important for educational psychologists (EPs) to recognise their role as part of the influencing structure. For example, EPs are well-placed to deploy their skills and resources to enhance parents' agency during decision-making when a child is transitioning between settings (Morris & Atkinson, 2018). While existing research points to a need for enhancing parental agency during SEND decision-making processes, there is a dearth of research exploring how this might be addressed.

While it is argued that individuals' ability to act agentially can be enhanced within the bounds of their context (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015), more research is needed to determine how EPs can help. Without further research, only tentative suggestions about the form and place of EP input can be provided. Parents have expressed dissatisfaction with the current SEND system (Department for Education, 2022, 2023b), and I believe we should respond to this. Further research needs to be undertaken into parental agency when choosing a setting for their child with SEND, including those whose options are limited by the circumstances leading up to them needing a different setting. I believe the most meaningful way to do this is through the direct voice of the parents whose agentic encounters inform, and are informed by, structural influences, which forms the approach to my empirical research (see Chapter Three).

2. Chapter Two: A Reflexive Account of Research Methodology and Ethics

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a 'bridge' between my SLR (Chapter 1) and my empirical research (Chapter 3) and to outline the influence of my motivations and assumptions.

While I have aimed to highlight reflexivity throughout my thesis, this chapter focuses on my ontological and epistemological stance and the influence of these on my methodological choices. Ethical considerations are also outlined, specifically focusing on ethicality linked to parent participants' agency throughout my research.

From My SLR to Empirical Research

My SLR and my empirical research both focus on parental agency in SEND processes, specifically parental decision-making when their child moves into a new educational setting.

My empirical research maintains this focus but, in light of the recent SEND Review (Department for Education, 2022, 2023b), narrows it further to explore parental agency when their child moves into Alternative Provision (AP).

This research aims to explore what parents say would support them to have more agency when their child moves into AP. Through this research, I aim to add to the existing literature by directly eliciting the views of parents through the lens of agency. From the parents' perspective, this might include narratives and understandings of their sense of agency when their child moved into AP, including what they reported was, or could be, helpful in this process.

My empirical research question is: *How Can Educational Psychologists Help to Strengthen Parents' Agency When Their Child Moves into Alternative Provision?*

2.2 Why Is This Research Important?

Why Is This Research Important to Me?

My interest in parents' decision-making within SEND processes, particularly linked to their child's educational setting, was prompted by my reading into the importance of parental

involvement and engagement (e.g., Barbour et al., 2018; Goodall, 2013; Harris & Goodall, 2008). My experiences on professional practice placement suggested that some parents may not be as involved in decision-making as hoped, given the emphasis on parent choice in government SEND policy (e.g., DfE, 2014). One mother described a frustrating situation in which she reported feeling "worn down". She believed she had limited capacity to make choices as her son entered AP, which provoked me to consider my role in supporting parents in such a situation. The Department of Education has called for greater clarity of roles and responsibilities across bodies of professionals within the education sector and local authorities (DfE, 2022), suggesting an implication for EPs. However, the literature in this area failed to guide me on how to support parents through my role as EP, highlighting a responsibility to extend the impact of this research beyond my immediate practice to reach a wider audience through my researcher role (Topping & Lauchlan, 2013).

Why Should This Research Be of Current Interest to Others?

SEND policy and guidance emphasises parent choice (e.g., DfE, 2014). This is supported by the statutory Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessment process which names the child's school and agrees local authority funding towards the placement. Where an EHC needs assessment is agreed, a 40-week process is initiated, giving parents time to consider their decisions, whilst providing them with an agreed date for when the placement will be decided. Their child's placement then exists until phase transfer age, or a change of setting is requested through the statutory review process. However, parental decision-making agency about their child's setting may not be as strong as might be hoped making it of interest to parents, local authorities, and policy makers. For example, while parents can state their preference for special school, their choices can be limited by SEND panel decisions to turn down requests for special school placements if they believe mainstream placement remains appropriate, or by limited special school availability (Mawene and Bal, 2018).

In situations whereby school placements have broken down to the point where an AP referral has been made, even greater strain is likely to be placed on parents' ability to exercise their agency. For example, a child's transfer to AP is not a statutory process, meaning that parents do not have the same reassurances about the time it will take to place their child or the duration of the placement once they have moved into AP. Furthermore, while involving parents in AP referral and induction processes is regarded as good practice (Trotman et al., 2019; Department for Education, 2016), the extent to which parents are fully involved in decision-making has been questioned (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019; Macleod et al., 2013; Page, 2021). Although parents can state a preference for an AP setting, referrals are generally led by a school's governing body (Department for Education, 2016) and final decisions are made by the local authority, AP academy or AP free school, depending on locality arrangements. Where the AP placement is agreed privately between the school and the AP, parents can be given no say about the setting their child is placed in. Decisions about the type of AP selected often relate to the reason for placement breakdown. For example, an AP 'hospital' setting may be selected, or one that focuses on social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Furthermore, in the case of exclusion, action is demanded from the sixth day of exclusion (Gov.UK, 2023) which means that AP referral processes can occur with urgency, leaving parents with little opportunity to have their preferences heard.

It is reported that, in cases where parents do not agree with AP referral decisions, they can choose to express their agency by declining the offer of an AP placement (Pirrie, 2011). In

this way, parental involvement and agreement with placement decisions may contribute to the success of AP referrals.

The Department of Education's green paper, *SEND Review: Right support, Right place, Right time: 2022*, suggests a lack of parental agency in AP processes. The SEND system is reportedly confusing and 'difficult to navigate' for families (DfE, 2022, p.10).

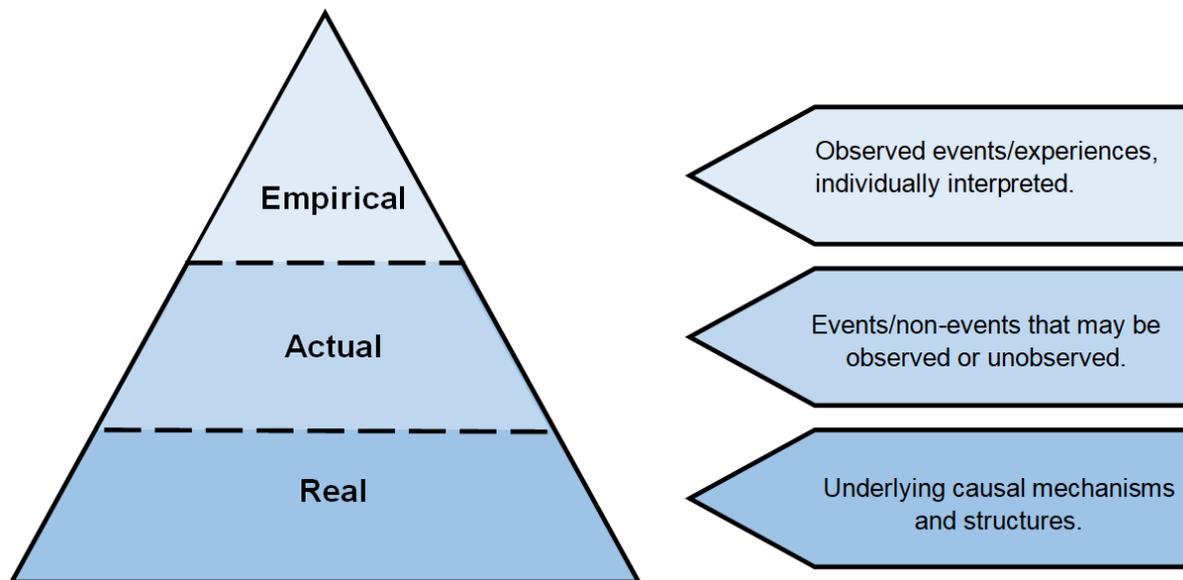
As a newly acknowledged part of the SEND system, there is a need for clarity about the functioning of AP, including engaging parents in transparent and collaborative decision-making linked to their child's placement (DfE, 2022, 2023b). I argue that this will likely affect parental agency during AP referral processes. A dearth of published research into this area means that adequate attention has yet to be drawn to this issue, including how it can be addressed by practitioners such as EPs (DfE, 2022, 2023b).

This research will explore the impact of parents' agency on the extent to which parents can engage in this process and what can be done to enhance this. This section outlines the rationale for my research. The following section will explore the ontological and epistemological influences on how my research was designed and conducted.

2.3 The Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings of This Research

It is argued that a researcher's ontological and epistemological underpinnings should be transparent to help others make sense of their reflections and approaches (Grix, 2002). My philosophical stance and, subsequently, the approach to this research is argued to be influenced by critical realist philosophy. Critical realist ontology is separated into three domains (see Figure 4): (a) the Empirical Domain, which is concerned with people's felt experiences and perceptions; (b) the Actual Domain, which describes events or non-events, that may be observed; (c) the Real Domain, which comprises the mechanisms or structures that enable or impede events or actions in the Actual Domain (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011; Bhaskar, 2008; Fletcher, 2017)

Figure 4: Stratified layers of critical realist ontology, adapted from Fletcher (2017)



Ontologically, by asking what can help parents have more agency, I am assuming that 'agency' is a social reality (working within the Real Domain), existing irrespectively of human perception, which impacts world events (the Actual Domain). Critical Realists assert that underpinning causal mechanisms and structures in the Real Domain are enduring or intransitive (Bhaskar, 2008) and can take the form of unconscious psychological or psychosocial structures or mechanisms (Willig, 2013). I believe agency to be one of these mechanisms.

Epistemologically, both my SLR and empirical research presume that agency is experienced, recognised and reported differently by individuals (the Empirical Domain), mediated by the individual's historical, social and cultural position (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 1978). Any knowledge is, therefore, argued to be a product of the context in which it is developed (Elder-Vass, 2021), both for the researcher and the participants. My perception of knowledge as relative to the knower, rather than absolute, describes a relativist epistemological stance. Therefore, in adopting a realist ontology and a relativist epistemology this research aligns with critical realist thinking.

2.4 Rationale for Methodology

It is argued that the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the researcher should align with the methodological approach they take (Mills et al., 2006). Methodology concerns

a researcher's general approach (Grix, 2002). Sayer (2000) stated that 'Methodological choices should depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it' (p.19).

As with my SLR, the knowledge I aimed to generate through this research and my assumptions about what can be known, and how I believe it can be known, align with a qualitative methodology (Willig, 2013). However, I acknowledge that the complex relationship between ontology and epistemology means there are some overlaps (see Table 9). To make clear the alignment of my methodological approach with my philosophical stance, I have structured this section using an adapted version of the three epistemological questions proposed by Willig (2013, pp.11-12).

Table 9: Epistemological Questions, adapted from Willig (2013, p.11-12)

Willig's original epistemological questions	My amended questions
What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?	What kinds of assumptions does my methodology make about the world?
What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?	What kind of knowledge am I aiming to produce through my methodology?
How does the methodology conceptualise the role of the researcher in the research process?	How does my methodology conceptualise my role in the research process?

What Kinds of Assumptions Does My Methodology Make About the World?

The methodology for this research assumes that the world comprises of intransitive mechanisms, including psychosocial mechanisms such as agency, that influence real-world events and actions (Archer, 2000; Collier, 1994), which can be explored to develop theory about causal explanations (Elder-Vass, 2021). I hold the assumption that the existence of such mechanisms can be recognised and reported by the researcher (Willig, 2013). This assumption differs from a positivist orientation in that I do not believe causal mechanisms (e.g., agency) to be directly observable, which means that data must be gathered to explore existing mechanisms indirectly through the accounts of participants. In selecting a qualitative

methodology, I aim to explore influential mechanisms retroductively, through the reported accounts of the parent participants.

What Kind of Knowledge Am I Aiming to Produce Through My Methodology?

This research explores what parents say would support them to have more agency when their child moves from mainstream to AP. Aligning with qualitative ambitions, this research is concerned with capturing parents' experience of the AP referral process, particularly their reports about managing their role and influence. In capturing subjective experience, I acknowledge that arising themes are socially constructed. While this would present some challenges to naïve realists, this continues to align with a critical realist view (Willig, 2013). It is conceded that knowledge produced through this research will be impacted by participants' conceptual interpretations (Elder-Vass, 2021). In this way, I believe that it cannot be proclaimed that this, or any, research can draw theories of existing underlying mechanisms with any certainty or absolute accuracy (Archer, 1998). Knowledge is derived from what participants experience and report through the processes within the Actual and Empirical Domains (Fletcher, 2017). Therefore, what we can hope to gain through speaking to parents is a view into what might be happening at a given time, in a particular context and through the lens of others. Therefore, in applying a qualitative approach, I aim to describe and explain the richness of participant experiences but not to produce broad generalised predictions (Willig, 2013). From the parents' perspective, this might include narratives and understandings of their sense of agency when their child moved into AP, including what they reported was, or could be, helpful in this process. Given the subjective nature of participant accounts and experience and the influence of researcher interpretation in qualitative approaches, theorised causal mechanisms will only be described as 'tendencies' in this research (Collier, 1994, p.62).

How Do I Conceptualise My Role in the Research Process?

Willig (2013) argues that qualitative research assumes the researcher to be 'implicated in the research process' (p.12). Identifying and describing emerging knowledge about an existing influencing mechanism that is not directly observable requires me to apply some level of interpretation (Willig, 2013). My interpretation will inevitably be shaped by the conceptualisations and theories I hold true (Danermark et al., 2019; Elder-Vass, 2021). Theories are conceptualisations that evolve and are vulnerable to challenges from conflicting theories (Danermark et al., 2019). In line with a critical realist epistemology, I believe that

knowledge of influencing mechanisms, as described through reports of participants and interpretation of the researcher is 'fallible' (Gorski, 2013, p.665). However, I believe that fallibility should not deter researchers from seeking to generate theory (Danermark et al., 2019); instead, it should be embraced and addressed through a researcher's judgemental rationality (Bhaskar, 2016).

Judgemental rationality describes the researcher's role in explaining their judgements in the face of competing potential meanings or theories based on the most credible or plausible explanation (Bhaskar, 2016; Rybczynska-Bunt et al., 2021). This aligns with epistemic relativism in that defensible, but inevitably fallible, conclusions can be reached (Elder-Vass, 2021).

Axiology

Axiology is concerned with values, including those that guide and influence the researcher and the perceived value of the research.

In adopting a relativist epistemology, my worldviews and experiences will likely influence my research. A value that guides me and has influenced the design of this research is the importance I place on promoting parent choice in the sphere of educational processes. Parent choice is generally agreed to be an important part of SEND processes (Department for Education, 2014, 2022; Department for Education and Skills, 2003). However, there needs to be more literature about how to enable or promote this, particularly in the research linked to AP.

This research aims to add to the existing literature by directly eliciting the views of parents whose accounts I believe lack adequate representation within the research linked to AP. I believe this to be an important step towards developing a better understanding of what might help parents have more agency when their child moves into AP. Intrinsically, this could be regarded as knowledge for understanding. However, the research aimed to step beyond this to impact the practice of others by disseminating my findings to a broader audience of parents, academics and practitioners within the field of educational psychology and beyond.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to Interviews

To enhance the ethicality of my approach during my research's planning stage, I drew on the guidelines provided by the British Psychological Society (BPS; 2021a, 2021b) and the Health and Care Professions Council (2018). Information documents, a poster, consent forms and debrief information were drafted outlining the purpose of the research, their potential role and my responsibilities, including maintaining confidentiality. My proposals and associated documents were submitted to the Newcastle University Ethics Committee, and enhanced ethical approval was obtained in March 2022 before participant recruitment. Potential participants were informed of the research through flyers, AP family liaison staff and word of mouth. Seven parents showed interest in being involved in the research. I spent time talking to potential participants face-to-face or on the telephone, according to their preferences, about the research and making space for them to ask questions or withdraw from the interviews. Five parents consented to take part in the interviews. The interview schedule was sent to all parents prior to interviews to allow them time to prepare their thoughts (see Appendix D)

During Interviews

It is argued that actions within the research process can also impact participant agency (BPS, 2021), which meant that my consideration of participant agency needed to extend beyond obtaining signed consent (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In this way, signed consent was considered as 'initial consent'. In alignment with my focus on parental agency, I wished for parents to remain agentic throughout their involvement; therefore, ongoing consent was not presumed as participants entered the interview process. The right to withdraw from participation without negative consequence was outlined clearly in all written documentation as well as verbally before and after interviews had been conducted. Participants were informed that they were not obliged to take part in the research either as an obligation to me or any gatekeepers in the AP setting.

While the BPS (2021a, 2021b) guidelines supported me in planning my approach's ethicality, I was aware of the importance of remaining reflexive to ethical issues as they arose during my interactions with participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For example, during some interviews, parents disclosed what I believed was highly sensitive information about themselves. In these instances, I was mindful of checking whether parents wished this information to be included in the data.

2.5 Analysis and Reflexivity

In selecting a method of analysis for this research, approaches such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2017) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were discounted due to inappropriateness to this research question and my philosophical orientation. Thematic analysis (TA) was selected as an appropriate method of analysis for identifying themes across my data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and aligned with my critical realist stance. TA is argued to provide a way of representing participants' perceptions and the meanings they attach to this (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which makes it compatible with my aim of eliciting the direct view of parents' sense of agency in the AP referral process. A reflexive form of TA was selected specifically for this research to allow theoretical freedom and variation of approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reflexivity requires the researcher to critically assess their involvement in the research process (Willig, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2021) assert that the theoretical freedom and scope for variation allowed through Reflexive TA means that the researcher must carefully reflect on their decision-making. Reflexive TA is argued to provide a method of analysis rather than a prescribed methodology or set of procedures to follow (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this way, I was enabled to forge my own path through the analysis, which placed additional importance on my ability to reflect critically on the impact of my decision-making and assumptions on the outcomes of this research (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Willig (2013) argued that reflexivity can be 'epistemological' or 'personal' (p.10). Epistemological reflexivity requires the researcher to consider how their selected methods impact the resulting understanding of the phenomenon. For example, how my decision to adopt a critical realist approach has impacted my assumptions about agency.

Personal reflexivity acknowledges the researcher as inseparable from knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Personal reflexivity also encouraged me to critically question my views and interpretations and how this impacted my decision-making during research and analysis. This meant routinely scrutinising the potential origins of these assumptions by reflecting on my values, experiences and perceived professional identity. For example, during interviews, I was aware that I was beginning to make initial formulations based on previous experiences of speaking to parents whose children attend AP. Reflexivity required me to challenge the origins of these assumptions in a way that acknowledged researcher subjectivity.

My reflexive thinking is highlighted in this chapter, but it is a process I engaged with throughout my research. Indeed, Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that reflexivity should occur throughout the process rather than being a stand-alone activity. Using my research journal and regular research supervision sessions supported me with exercising and developing my reflexivity in a way that I believe enhanced the transparency and robustness of this research.

3. Chapter Three: How Can Educational Psychologists Help to Strengthen Parents' Agency When Their Child Moves into Alternative Provision?

Abstract

There is an emerging body of evidence suggesting many parents' experiences of their child's referral into alternative provision (AP) is negative, characterised by structural barriers. The purpose of this empirical research is to generate an understanding of what can help to strengthen parents' agency when their child moves into AP. This research follows a qualitative approach to generate rich insight into what happens to parents' agency during the AP referral process, generated through the direct accounts of parents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five parents whose children had moved into AP. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, drawing on a hybrid abductive-retroductive approach viewed through the lens of agency. Three overarching themes linked to a central organising theme of parental agency were generated: Parents' Agency at Play, Parents as Advocates for Their Child and Parent-Professional Interactions. These outcomes suggest that parents act as proxy agents for their children, but their experiences can impact their agency during the AP referral process. Negative experiences appeared to lead to 'forced agency', which impacted parents' resilience. It is suggested that self-efficacy, motivation and autonomy were underlying drivers for parental agency in this context. The possible limitations of this research are discussed. Overall, there are implications for educational psychologists through their skills in systemic approaches, relational working and access to information. To enhance EPs' impact, barriers to their involvement must be addressed through negotiation of the EP role and strengthening of EP knowledge of local AP systems.

3.1 Introduction

Alternative Provision

Alternative Provision (AP) refers to a diverse range of programmes intended to provide education for those for whom schooling, through special or mainstream school, is no longer appropriate (Pennacchia & Thomson, 2016; Putwain et al., 2016). AP can involve full or part-time, or short or long-term placements (Cockerill, 2019; Pennachia & Thomson, 2016), online or in-person in a setting (Smith, 2021), or placements across multiple settings (McCluskey et al., 2015). AP settings are highly heterogeneous, existing in the form of AP academies, hospital schools, independent AP schools, or local authority pupil referral units (PRUs), the latter of which is the most common AP type (Malcolm, 2022; Mills & Thomson, 2018). The continua of AP available and inconsistent terminology associated with this is argued to provide a challenge for families who are placed in the position of navigating their way within the AP referral system (Lawrence, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2015).

The most common reason for referral to AP is a child's permanent exclusion or risk of exclusion (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018; Malcolm, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2015). However, other circumstances can also lead to AP referral, such as a student's refusal to attend school (Putwain et al., 2016), physical or mental health issues (Cockerill, 2019), or circumstances where a suitable placement is not yet available, sometimes due to dispute with a school or placement availability (Pirrie et al., 2011).

The stated purpose of AP is to provide a supportive environment (Pennachia & Thomson, 2016) to 'enable children to make rapid personal, social and educational progress, and go on to attain qualifications or re-integrate back into mainstream or special schools' (DfE, 2018a, p.12). Atkinson and Rowley (2019) state the aim is for placements to be short-term, although this is often not the reality (Lawrence, 2011).

The Involvement of Parents When Their Child Moves Into AP

Parental involvement is a named part of the process when a child moves into AP, particularly at the induction phase. However, little is described about parental involvement during the AP referral stage, other than contributing to forms and information gathering about the child's needs. For this research, the term 'parents' refers to those with main responsibility for the care and decision-making related to a child (Gov.UK, 2023).

Parents' Decision-Making Agency When Their Child Moves Into AP

Within this research, a working description of agency indicates actions that imply 'forethought', 'self-reactiveness' and 'self-reflectiveness' (Bandura, 2018, p.130). Agency is assumed to be fluid (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) and influenced by situational factors (Bhasker, 1975; Archer, 2003). See Chapter One (p.9) for further discussion of the term 'agency'.

An initial review of the published literature focusing on AP highlights a general shortage of literature on AP, let alone parental agency when their child moves into AP. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on the lead-up to exclusion (Daniels & Cole, 2010; Parker et al., 2016), the perceived protective factors or barriers once an AP placement has already been established (Jalali & Morgan, 2018; Michael & Frederickson, 2013; Solomon & Thomas, 2013), or what might support reintegration (Jalali & Morgan, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Furthermore, most of the research linked to AP is drawn predominantly from the perspectives of professionals and pupils (e.g., Bagley & Hallam, 2017; Malcolm, 2022; Thomson & Pennachia, 2016).

Articles that refer to parental decision-making during their child's transfer to AP indicate matters related to parent-professional partnership and relationships, limited control or choice, and they were provided with inadequate information.

Parent-Professional Partnership and Relationships

According to Mills and Thomson (2018), schools report that inviting parental involvement at the beginning of the referral process is a usual practice. However, some parents report their involvement was not sought (Mills & Thomson, 2018). Disregarding parental involvement in decision-making 'sends powerful messages' about the importance of their contribution and role in the process (Harris, 2006, p.34).

It has been reported that some parents do not feel that they can be fully involved when their child moves into AP because of tensions that may have arisen in their experiences leading up to their child's referral to the AP (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019; Macleod et al., 2013). Some parents report experiencing stigma and judgement, which can 'dehumanise' them leading to exclusion from decision-making processes (McDonald & Thomas, 2003, p.117).

Page et al. (2021a, 2021b) highlighted examples of how AP settings work sensitively to develop relationships with parents throughout their child's time in the setting, recognising them as respected and capable partners. However, it is reported that parents are sometimes seen

as part of the issue by some professionals who perceive that parents are not equipped to make appropriate decisions (Adkins-Sharif, 2017), positioning them as 'problematic' (MacLeod et al., 2013, p. 398). For example, parents can be perceived as pushy in their efforts to secure appropriate provision for their children (MacLeod et al., 2013). Indeed, Mills and Thomson (2018) highlighted that, where parents initiated an AP referral, the process was reported to take longer and placed greater demands on them to press for arrangements. This aligns with Harris et al. (2006), who suggested that parents' perceptions of their agency can falter when contending organisational roadblocks.

Limited Control or Choice

It is reported that parents often feel that control over decision-making lies predominately with professionals (Embeita, 2019). Sometimes, parents are reported to be simply informed of their child's AP placement (Mills & Thomson, 2018; McDonald & Thomas, 2003) without agreement about its suitability in meeting the child's needs. In this way, parents can develop a sense of powerlessness that can begin during the exclusion process (McDonald & Thomas, 2003) and continue through to their child's referral to AP (Adkins-Sheriff, 2017). Furthermore, Pirrie et al. (2011) state that restrictions on placement availability and suitability impact the extent to which parents can have genuine agency over decisions.

Inadequate Information

Mills and Thomson (2018) argue that parents should have sufficient information to make decisions. Evidence for the value that APs place on reciprocity in information sharing suggests that this is an important part of AP placement success (Page, 2021). Yet, parents reported a lack of information or preparation for meetings (Embeita, 2019), which hindered their readiness for making informed decisions.

Why Should This Be of Interest to Educational Psychologists?

While articles that directly reference parents' agency during AP processes are scant (Pirrie et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2006), accounts of parental decision-making during AP referral processes highlight tensions between parents' agentic decision-making and AP referral processes.

There is a shortage of research on what educational psychologists (EPs) can offer to improve AP systems. However, it is argued that EPs can play a role in supporting managed moves,

whereby a new setting is sought by the local authority, often in the face of a placement breakdown (Bagley & Hallam, 2017). In this way, a parallel between managed moves and AP referral can be argued, which I believe could warrant a similar approach from EPs. For example, EPs could play a role through their understanding of systemic working, relational skills and solution-oriented approach (Bagley & Hallam, 2017). However, managed moves can differ from AP referrals in that they are described as a 'fresh start in a new school', agreed by all parties including parents (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p.10). Therefore, the extent to which these approaches could apply to AP referrals may be constrained. However, I believe EPs have a role to play through their multi-agency working, supporting communication in the early stages of the referral which could ensure appropriate AP placement in meeting the child's needs (Trotman et al., 2019), enhancing the chances of AP placement success.

Introduction Summary and Research Focus

Given that parental choice has featured as an important aspect of government literature for the last two decades (e.g., DfES, 2003; DfE 2014, 2022, 2023b), it is surprising that parental decision-making during referral into AP is not a more prominent focus in published literature. The DfE (2022) concedes that an increase in parental confidence in SEND systems is required, including a need for co-production, to be valued in decision-making processes and to have access to support without a 'fight' (p.27). Through the National Strategy proposed for 2025, the DfE plan to inform us *what* they will do to address these issues (DfE, 2023b); however, *how* this will be enabled remains unclear. My research intends to explore how this might be done through the lens of parental agency by asking: *How Can Educational Psychologists Help to Strengthen Parents' Agency When Their Child Moves into Alternative Provision?*

My research will focus on generating insight into the following:

- What experiences interact with parental agency during the AP referral process?
- What could be done to help, and how?
- What role could EPs play?

3.2 Method

Sampling

Bhaskar (1998) asserted that 'actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point of social inquiry' (p.16). Accordingly, this research draws from the direct accounts of parents whose children have been referred to AP. A sample of five parents participated in this research, which was determined naturally by the availability of participants at the point of recruitment (see Table 10). While qualitative methodologies generally do not emphasise optimum sample size (Boddy, 2016), the potential limitations of limited samples will be discussed later.

Table 10: Participant biography

Parent Pseudonym	Most recent/current AP setting attended by their child	Currently attending an AP setting	Attended two or more different AP settings up to date
Abbie	'Home to hospital' (extended PRU offer)	Yes	No
Beth	PRU	Yes	No
Callie	PRU	No	Yes
Danielle	PRU	Yes	Yes
Ellie	AP College	Yes	Yes

Ethical Considerations in Recruiting Participants

Given that enhanced parental agency was the intended outcome of the research, I believed that it was important that this value was also reflected throughout the process.

The British Psychological Society (BPS; 2021) states that valid informed consent is required to enable agentic decision-making about participation. However, it is argued that, often, participants do not fully understand the study they are contributing to or their role within it (Montalvo & Larson, 2014; Nusbaum et al., 2017). To address this potential issue, I developed several approaches to providing information. The first was a participant information and consent form. It is argued that the 'readability' of such documents should be assessed

(Hadden, 2017, p.361). Therefore, these documents were refined through the advice of Newcastle University's senior Research and Ethics Committee staff. A poster was also created, giving a succinct summary of the information already provided. This included my contact details so I could discuss the finer details over the telephone (see Appendix B). All participants were given the opportunity to discuss the research before agreeing to participate. Through these different approaches, I endeavoured to provide as much information as possible to allow parents to act autonomously and agentially in their decision-making about participation (BPS, 2021a).

Semi-Structured Interviews

In alignment with a qualitative methodology, I selected semi-structured interviews to explore participants' statements. My final interview schedule (see Appendices C & D) consisted of five initial questions that were followed up with supplementary questions to explore, in more depth, the topics that arose through the participants' responses. The content of my questions was influenced by the outcomes of my SLR (see Chapter One) as well as guidance on developing a semi-structured interview agenda to allow the generation of new insight beyond the focus of the SLR (Brinkmann, 2020).

In alignment with critical realistic thinking, I developed questions that explored events, experiences, and possible underlying processes (Brinkmann, 2020; Smith & Elger, 2014). According to the parents' preferences, interviews were undertaken in the family homes. Interviews were audio-recorded to allow my engagement with the parents so I could ask relevant follow-up questions. Interview responses were transcribed in readiness for analysis.

Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. An outline of the reasons I selected reflexive TA is outlined in Chapter Two. The steps that I undertook during this process are described in Table 11. Steps 1 to 4 are outlined within 'Methods', and Steps 5 and 6 are outlined in 'Outcomes and Discussion'.

Table 11: Reflexive Thematic Analysis Phases, informed by Braun & Clarke (2021, p.35)

Phase	My actions during each phase
1. Familiarisation with the data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immerse myself in the data by reading and rereading transcripts. • Make brief notes about emerging insights or ideas related to data items and the whole dataset.
2. Coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work systematically through the dataset, identifying data relevant to my question. • Capture single meaning with each code. • Deploy a combination of semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) coding.
3. Generating initial themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to identify 'shared patterns of meaning' across the dataset. • Compile clusters of codes that shared an idea to generate 'candidate themes'.
4. Developing and reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the fit of candidate themes to the data by looking at the entire dataset. • Check my themes to make sure they made sense in relation to the coding and the full dataset. • Revise my themes accordingly by grouping, splitting, adding or deleting themes. • Consider my themes in relation to the existing literature.
5. Refining, defining and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the boundaries of each theme were clear and centred on a clear core concept. • Consider the 'story' the themes can tell us about the data. • Write a description of the themes. • Revise my themes where appropriate.
6. Writing up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin a formal written account from Phase 3 when my candidate themes are generated. • Combine my analysis and data to tell a coherent story that answers my research question.

Data Familiarisation, Coding and Development of Themes

A reflexive TA approach allowed me the theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clark, 2021) to take an iterative abductive and retroductive approach to reasoning during coding and theme generation, working between the data, theory and literature (see Appendices E and F). In this way, the flexibility of reflexive TA permitted me to offer accounts of parental agency that lay across the latent-semantic continuum (Braun & Clark, 2021). A description of the reasoning and where it occurred during the reflexive TA and the SLR is summarised in Table 12.

Table 12: Reasoning types, informed by Danermark et al. (1997) and Meyer and Lunnay (2013)

Reasoning Types	Reasoning description	SLR/Reflexive TA Phase
1. Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the 'real' event/situation to be explored. • Begin to consider reflexive thinking and the role of my subjectivity in my research. • Initial coding to begin with using a priori codes developed through SLR and theoretical frameworks of agency (deduction). Allow the coding system to develop reflexively by coding data that appears to lie outside the theoretical framework (see Appendix E), or do not link clearly to it, to allow theoretical fluidity (abduction). See Appendix F for examples of decision-making during the coding process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior to TA (Chapter 2) • Familiarisation and coding (TA 1-2)
2. Analytical resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruct the phenomenon (agency). • Properties of agency identified through a critiquing of theory. • Specific areas of focus within agency identified that inform my empirical (i.e., parental agency on their child's move into AP). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLR • Prior to TA (Chapter 2)
3. Abduction/theoretical redescription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse data that is distinctive or falls outside of theoretical frameworks of agency. • Interpret and redescribe theoretical frameworks of agency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLR • Coding, theme generation and refinement, write-up (TA 2-6)

Reasoning Types	Reasoning description	SLR/Reflexive TA Phase
4. Retrodution (through counterfactual thinking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the circumstances (constituent factors) required for agency to exist. • Consider what agency could be like given different structural circumstances, or in the absence of a specific structure. • Contrast constitutive factors with incidental ones. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme generation and refinement, write-up (TA 4-6)
5. Comparisons between different theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider other theoretical concepts that could explain this event and how they might relate, or not, to agency. • Explore potential conceptual phenomena that may be complementary to agency and might also be at play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme refinement, write-up (TA 5-6)
6. Concretisation and contextualisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress the importance of contextual conditions when interpreting outcomes - consider 'tendencies' viewed within a given time, situation and culture rather than truths. • Explore the significance/meaning of agency within this context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write-up (TA 6)

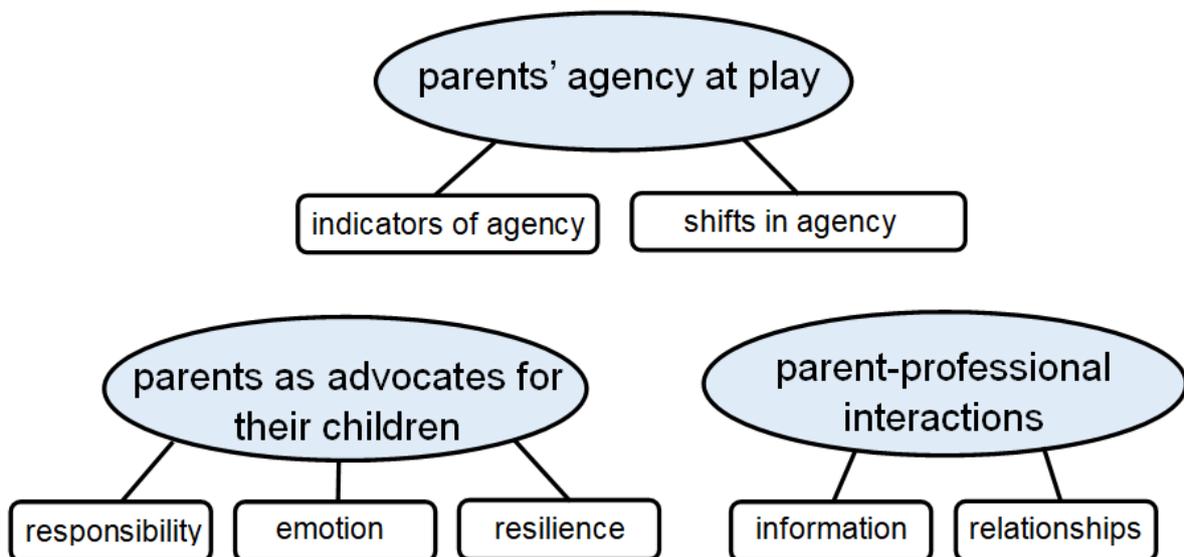
3.3 Outcomes and Discussion

These themes were developed through the stages described in Table 11. By moving iteratively between the data, my coding and the wider research question, I set out to refine, define and name shared patterns of meaning.

Three main themes were generated (see Figure 5):

- Parents' agency at play
- Parents as advocates for their children
- Parent-professional interactions

Figure 5: A thematic map of the outcomes generated through the TA.



Each theme is intended to be distinct, but all themes relate to agency, meaning there will be some overlap or links between themes and subthemes.

Theme One: Parents' Agency at Play

This theme was generated abductively (see Table 12), influenced by the outcomes of my SLR (Chapter One) while allowing for the development of further insight.

Indicators of Agency

Indicators of agency were represented through parental accounts that implied forethought, self-reflectiveness and self-reactiveness (Bandura, 2018). See Chapter One, p.10 for further description).

There was a recurring focus on how parents' aspirations for their children could be realised given the disruptions in their learning; associated with this was a sense of panic. Self-reflectiveness was identifiable in some parents' confidence about their capacity to make reasoned and informed decisions about their children's move: *'[I had] loads of questions, like literally from the not going to school, to waiting to see if there was a place for him at the PRU...I didn't know how it all worked, nothing'* (Beth). For some, this hampered parents' self-reactiveness through their worries about doing the 'wrong' thing. Parents' decision-making freedom also appeared to be limited by reduced placement choices related to the circumstances that resulted in their child's referral to AP. However, self-reactivity could be identified; for example, all parents talked about taking action to compensate for what was described by one parent as a *'system that is flawed on every level'* (Carrie).

Shifts in Agency

Fluctuations in the strength of parents' agency throughout the referral process were reported. The reported direction of change varied between parents and within the same parents across different points in the process. However, most parents described an overall strengthening of their agency from the beginning of the process to their current point, as illustrated by Danielle: *'I learned a lot of lessons on how to speak up...I feel like I'm in a much better place now'*.

Discussion of Theme One

As parental agency is relevant to both my SLR and this research, it is not surprising that there were some overlapping outcomes in terms of indicators of agency. A comparison between outcomes of the SLR and the empirical work is discussed in section 3.5.

Overall, parental accounts of shifts in their agency, both positive and negative, throughout the AP referral process indicate that parental agency can be fluid, aligning with life course theorists (e.g., Bernardi et al., 2019; Elder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). However, given the lack of a universally agreed definition of what 'life course' is, it should be noted that outcomes in this research suggest changes in parental agency occurred as a response to insights gained through life experiences, as suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1997). I argue this fluidity provides hope for strengthening parental agency in the AP referral process.

Theme Two: Parents as Advocates for Their Children

This theme relates to parents' description of their perceived duties, their ability to maintain these during the referral process and the impact on their emotional wellbeing.

Responsibility

There was a sense of parents feeling they had a distinctive duty to protect their children. Parents reported feeling best-positioned for recognising and advocating for the needs of their children: *'I was having to stand up for what his needs were so that the people who were doing the provision got it right'* (Danielle). However, some parents reported feeling conflicted between their duty to provide emotional safety and their responsibility to ensure their child was educated: *'You just want to be their mum, you want to nurture them, you want to do nice things with them. You don't want to be on their back, so that is what it does'* (Beth).

Emotion

Parents talked about negative emotions such as frustration, anger and fear; this could be overwhelming: *'I'm sitting there absolutely sobbing in a big meeting, where you feel a bit of a fool but it's my child and I love him and whatever they do, everyone's going to have their children's back'* (Ellie). Some of the parents expressed that positive approaches from staff in the proposed AP helped them to develop their sense of hope in an otherwise adverse situation. Those who had come to the end of their AP referral journey expressed enormous relief and joy: *'I just automatically loved the place...she's the happiest I've ever seen her!'* (Abbie). Unfortunately, this was not the case for the parents whose children were not yet settled in a setting that met their needs.

Resilience

The subtheme of 'Resilience' relates to the impact of complex and lengthy processes and failed attempts to find appropriate AP on parents' emotional energy: *'All I just remember is being in amongst that process of trying to find the alternative form of education and just thinking, my God! Why is this so hard?'* (Beth).

The compounding pressure of concurrent processes, such as applying for EHCPs and dealing with diagnosis, was also reported to impact parents' strength. This left some parents unable to manage the strain of other parental responsibilities, such as supporting their other children, dealing with adverse life events and balancing work commitments. One parent discussed a previous attempt to end her life under mounting pressure, demonstrating the importance of interviewee debriefing and signposting.

Discussion of Theme Two

This theme relates closely to the concept of 'proxy agency' (Bandura, 2018, p.131), which involves those with greater means of acting on behalf of another. In this case, parents were involved in acting on their child's behalf. From the parents' accounts, there was a sense that the parental role was distinctive and one of protection. Aligning with Pirrie et al. (2011), most parents found this duty came with a high level of responsibility for parents to remain 'strong' for their child: *'It's enough to tip a parent over the edge and it is not what the parent needs because who has that child then got?'* (Beth). While parents appeared to 'battle' through this, for some it came at the cost of their emotional health.

The reciprocal link between emotions and individual agency has been acknowledged in previous studies (e.g., Honkasilta et al., 2015; Hökkä et al., 2017, 2022). However, I believe it is important to note that associated terminology such as 'powerless bystander' (Honkasilta et al., 2015, p.683) does not align with my conceptualisation of agency as fluid. A more fitting account of the link between emotion and agency is provided by Rautamies et al. (2019), who linked emotions to different types of agency, rather than 'type' of person.

Rautamies et al. (2019) associated anger and fear with confrontational agency, which could have contributed to the overall strengthening of agency reported by parents across the duration of the referral process, as illustrated by Abbie: *'If they said, "Oh, we're going to take her out of the new school, "I'd be like, "You're not, you're just not" '*. This aligns with Honkasilta et al. (2015), who discusses 'forced strong agency' (p.678), which, in this research, appeared to develop through parents' experience of the challenges associated with their children's AP referral.

In summary, parents appeared to perceive themselves as having a distinctive role as the person who should defend their child's rights. In the context of AP referral, some parents appeared to feel less confident about their ability to perform this role and their efforts were reported to impact their emotional resilience.

Theme Three: Parent-professional Interactions

This theme relates to the fluctuations in parents' agency due to interactions with professionals.

Information

All parents expressed that information from professionals about the referral process needed improvement, making it difficult to make informed decisions. Parents' readiness for decision-making tended to be hindered by a lack of appropriately-timed information: *'I kind of learned a lot of things as and when they were about to happen. I wasn't given time to consider my options'*. (Danielle). This led to regretful decisions for some: *'I wish I'd known what [the AP] actually was, because that was the biggest mistake ever, sending him there!'* (Carrie).

Parents also expressed a desire for information about who was responsible for supporting them through the process: *'If you know people who know things, you can find out a lot more'* (Carrie). Professionals most commonly referred to were school or AP staff, but some parents mentioned social workers, Early Help officers, parent support agencies, and two parents mentioned educational psychologists. However, not all parents had equal access to external professionals: *'They wouldn't even help us with any information, and I thought, well, if I had problems, you would be along helping us straightaway'* (Abbie).

Relationships

All parents expressed the importance of good working relationships. However, some parents reported that their experiences leading up to their child's referral to AP impacted the value they placed on professional involvement; residual anger towards school staff was referred to by most of the group. Feelings of shame arising from perceived judgement from professionals were also a commonly reported factor: *'I felt like I had done something severely wrong, and I was made to feel like I hadn't done my best for my child'* (Beth). For some, struggles to build relationships were compounded by the fleeting involvement of various professionals during their child's move to AP.

Some positive views were expressed about encounters with professionals whom parents had found helpful and supportive: *'If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have been in this [better] position'* (Abbie). Some parents reported feeling valued and 'genuinely heard'. A sense of validation from professionals appeared to enhance the quality of parent-professional partnerships. Yet, other parents reported that professionals failed to acknowledge the challenges the family were

facing: *'I really think they need to dig deeper and see the person, the actual family; the mum, the dad who are bringing up the child'* (Beth).

A lack of genuine welcome into decision-making was a recurring topic. Most of the parents expressed that they found themselves intimidated in the presence of multiple professionals during meetings. Some parents reported professionals changing their approach once parents had 'stood up' against them, opening up more choices: *'Be assertive and hold your ground, because there are always other options...you might not know about it, but there are'* (Carrie). The topic of 'fighting' arose in the accounts of all parents, suggesting a perceived need to work against professionals rather than with them to get what their child needed: *'It's been a battle and a half, and I'm still battling now'* (Danielle).

A lack of transparent communication led some parents to lose trust in professionals. Suspicions about 'hidden agendas' were particularly evident in some parental accounts. Carrie said, *'I think it would be helpful for the parents to have somebody with them at these meetings initially who aren't part of the process, so not from school, not from the alternative provision'*.

Discussion of Theme Three

Lack of information about SEND processes and placement options has been recognised as an ongoing issue for enabling parent choice (DfE, 2022; MacLeod et al., 2013; Parker et al., 2016), and this was highlighted in this research. A lack of information led to confusion which is argued to hinder parents' decision-making agency. Rautamies et al. (2019) argue that learning can bring increased agency. I argue that parents having access to information about their child's rights and the options available is important for supporting agentic decision-making.

This theme also highlights the relational aspect of parental agency in AP referral processes, as argued by Rautamies et al. (2019). Successful parent-professional relationships are argued to be a protective factor for successful AP placement (Hart, 2013), and parents in this study acknowledged the importance of this. However, like other reports (e.g., Trotman et al., 2019; MacLeod et al., 2013), residual ruptured relationships with professionals impacted the extent to which they felt their contribution was valued. Some parents reported feeling stigmatised or inferior, which McDonald and Thomas (2003) argue leads to feelings of disempowerment during interactions with professionals. For some, it felt like their invitation into decision-making was tokenistic and that 'real' control over decision-making often lay

predominately with professionals, aligning with Embeita (2019). This supports claims that despite the emphasis on parental voice in SEND policy, many parents continue to feel in a position of disempowerment (MacLeod et al., 2013).

Overall, the theme of parent-professional interactions points to an interplay between structures and agency (Archer, 2003). I argue that, in this context, professionals represent the structure they operate within, such as the school, the local authority or the government, which I believe links individual life course learning to the layered systems around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Where parents' experiences differed, such as when greater access to supportive professionals was available, parents tended to demonstrate more proactive agency. I believe the theme of parent-professional interactions also points to a meso-systemic interaction that has the potential to impact the agency of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), which I believe highlights the importance of good parent-professional partnership.

3.4 Overall Discussion

Summary of Themes

Overall, parental agency fluctuated as parents moved through the AP referral process. At times, fluctuations produced either hindered or strengthened parental agency and were in response to parents' direct experiences. A lack of information, reduction of choices available, complex systems and broken-down relationships with professionals, often brought about through their prior experiences of SEND systems, presented barriers to parental agency. Most of the participants gave examples of other parents who are in a state of reduced agency.

Parents are expected to act as proxy agents for their children, which is a distinct responsibility that comes with an array of strong emotions. Parental agency appears to play a part in mediating constraining factors (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Schoon et al., 2021). However, where parents' agency was 'forced', there was a sense of fatigue that sometimes impacted their wellbeing and ability to manage other parental responsibilities. This can follow previous periods of lowered parental agency, such as during permanent exclusions or when seeking a diagnosis, suggesting the reproduction of reduced agency for some parents. Systemic thinking tells us the ultimate impact will likely be upon the child's agency.

What Can Happen to Parents' Agency During the AP Referral Process?

The outcomes of this research align with beliefs of an interplay between individual agency and structure (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 1978). In this way, parental agency is both a product of, and an influence upon, the structures in which it operates. For all parents, this changed across different experiences within the referral process, demonstrating that individual agency is fluid and situation bound.

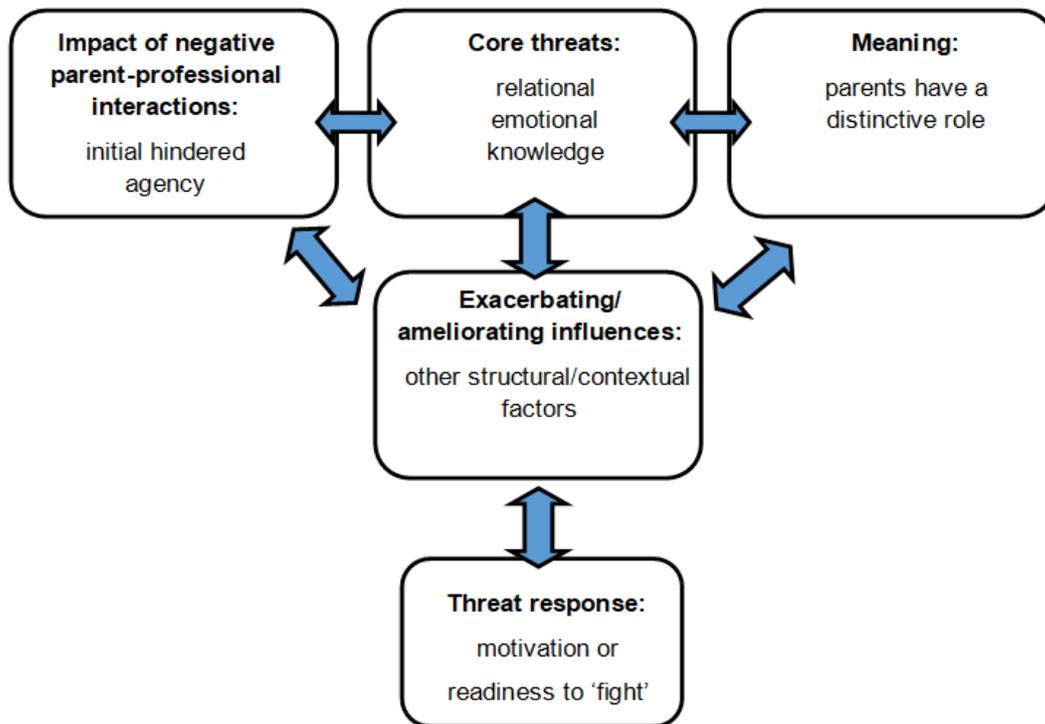
Regarding parents' self-reactivity, Archer (2010) claims that individual reflexivity, through internal deliberation, is a mediator between the agent and structural mechanisms. This aspect of Archer's work aligns closely with Bandura's conceptualisations of 'forethought', 'self-reactiveness' and 'self-reflectiveness' (2018, p.130). However, the processes that drive individual agentic reflexivity during the AP referral process are less clear.

Drivers of Agency

Motivation

Existing studies point to a relationship between agency and motivation (Bandura, 2000; Code, 2020; Heckhausen et al., 2019). Indeed, the cumulative experiences of the parents in this research appeared to boost their motivation. For some parents, emotions that arose through lack of, or negative, interactions with professionals appeared to result in increased motivation, for example, through their passion in advocating for their child against perceived adversity. This element of the data aligns with thinking related to power-threat meaning theory (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), in that parents' emotional response to their initial hindered agency tended to lead to an overall increased motivation to 'fight'. Figure 6 represents the motivational impact of encounters that initially hindered parental agency. However, all parents reported times when mounting pressures led to exhaustion which hindered their motivation, and, consequently, their strength of agency at that point, as illustrated by Beth: '*I wanted to just go along with whatever they suggested - because I was exhausted!*' Where strengthened agency was motivated by negative experiences, it was reported to lead to emotional fatigue and a strain on parents' emotional health.

Figure 6: Increased parent motivation in the face of adversity, as represented through the Power-Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018)



Self-efficacy

A connection between agency and motivation provides some explanation for parents' sense of strengthened agency when their actions, informed by their learning, led to change, aligning with life course conceptualisations of agency. However, I believe motivations in parents' agency in this context were also connected to their self-efficacy, as exemplified by Abbie: *'If I had any concerns, they know for a fact I would just start ringing and chasing everyone. Obviously, I don't sit back now'* (Abbie). Bandura (2006) refers to the role of self-efficacy in motivating individuals by enhancing their sense of belief in their actions. In the case of these parents, information availability tended to impact self-efficacy, which, in turn, impacted motivation, highlighted through parents' proactive agency, where more information became available. At times, this appeared to impact parents' relationships with professionals, either positively or negatively, depending on the professionals' response to parental agency. I believe it is likely contextual or situational constraints on self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1991; Burke et al., 2009; Jones & Prinz, 2005) may have hindered parents' motivation at points during the AP process. For example, where several influences were impacting simultaneously.

Autonomy

For the purposes of this research, autonomy is understood as ‘freedom of agency’ (Doyle & Gough, 1991, p.60) in the context of social or contextual bounds (see pp. 31-33 for further discussion related to this definition).

The outcomes of this research indicate that structural barriers such as lack of information and breakdowns in relationships with professionals impeded parents’ participation in decision-making processes, thus impacting their strength of autonomy. In this way, there was a tension between parents’ personal autonomy and the structural context (see Figure 7), which aligns with a ‘social relational’ perspective of autonomy (Oshana, 2006).

I argue that autonomy is impacted by an individual’s perception of how capable they are in making decisions or taking valid actions (e.g., Bandura, 1988; Ryan & Deci, 2006). In this way, parents may be more likely to participate in decision-making or in taking agentic actions if they believe them to be worthwhile, linking autonomy to drivers of agency such as self-efficacy and motivation.

Furthermore, autonomy is generally understood to be a ‘psychological need’ (Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2021, p. 245), necessary for engagement and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Therefore, a lack of adequate autonomy in the face of structural barriers may have contributed to some parents’ feelings of fatigue and hopelessness at times during AP referral processes.

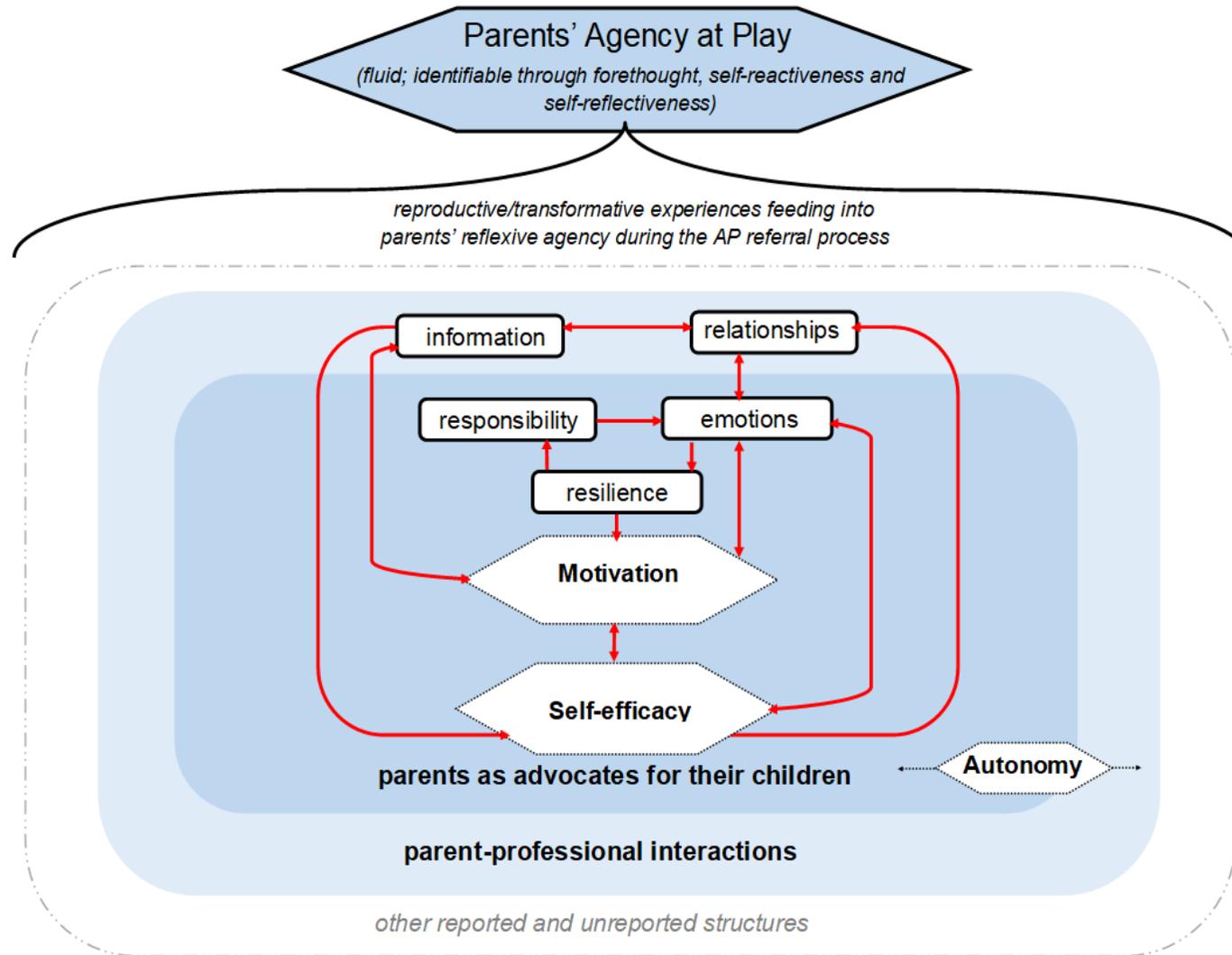
A Conceptualisation of Parents’ Agency at Play

Figure 7 is a visual conceptualisation of the dynamic processes that occur within parents’ agency. As in the outcomes of the SLR (Chapter One), agency can be identified through forethought, self-reactiveness, self-reflectiveness. Latent concepts, such as agency and autonomy are represented through the hexagonal elements in the figure.

The sections below ‘Parents’ Agency at Play’ represent the experiences feeding into parents’ agency during the AP referral process and the influences they can have upon and within each other. The themes of responsibility, emotions and resilience relate to parents’ internal experiences in their role as advocates for their children, while information and relationships are related to interactions between parents and professionals. In this way, the figure represents micro and meso-systemic interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 2004) and how they can impact parents’ agency through their influence on their motivation, self-efficacy and autonomy. In alignment with critical realism (e.g., Archer, 2003) and life course theory (e.g., Biesta & Tedder, 2007) I believe these interactive processes are what lead to the reproduction and

transformation of parents' agency during AP processes. Figure 7, therefore, represents my conceptualisation of how the relationship between self-efficacy, motivation and autonomy can mediate parental agency in the context of the AP referral process.

Figure 7: The dynamic interplay between parents' agency and contextual factors during the AP referral process



3.5 From SLR to Empirical: Parental Agency within SEND Systems

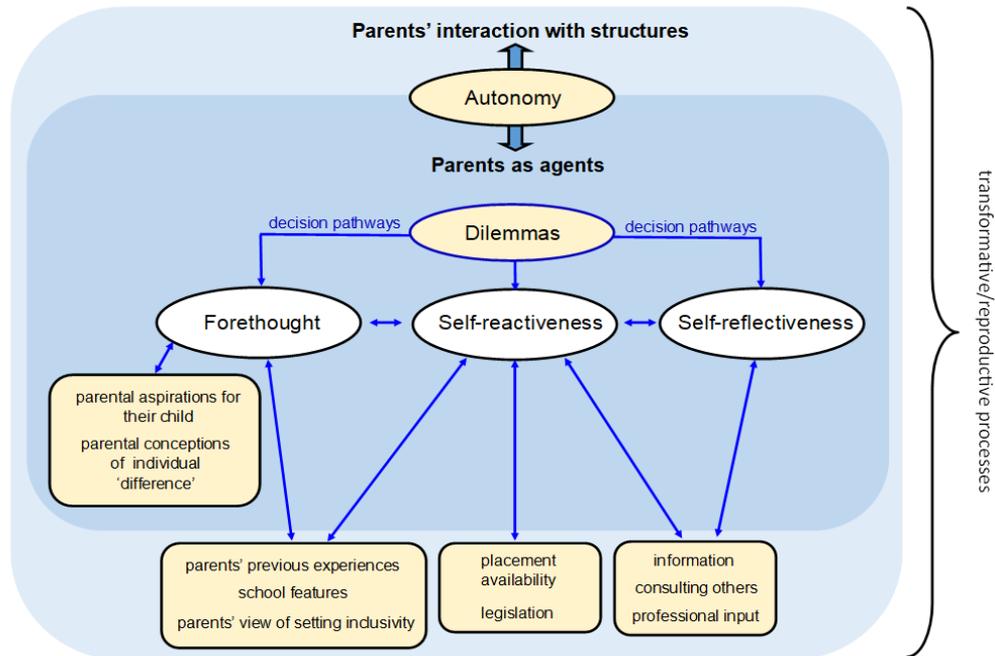
Figure 8 provides a comparison between the operation of parental agency when choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND (see Chapter One) and the dynamic interplay between parents' agency and contextual factors during the AP referral process. As parental agency was relevant to both my SLR and this research, it is not surprising that there were some overlapping outcomes. For example, both pieces of research generated outcomes indicating parental agency. Furthermore, interactions between parents, as agents, and the structural mechanisms and processes that impacted the freedom of their agency (autonomy) were prevalent across both the SLR and empirical research.

There were, however, some nuanced differences in the outcomes between the outcomes of the SLR and this empirical research. For example, while 'dilemmas' during decision-making was a prevalent issue for parents selecting schools for their children with SEND, the experiences of parents during AP referral process were more focused on structural barriers. For example, parents' experiences of repeated placement breakdowns and the impact of this on their options, as well as on their endurance over time. In this way, while parents selecting settings for their child with SEND appeared to face dilemmas related to 'What choices do we have?', a more pertinent issue for those whose child was moving into AP is 'What choices do we have *left?*'.

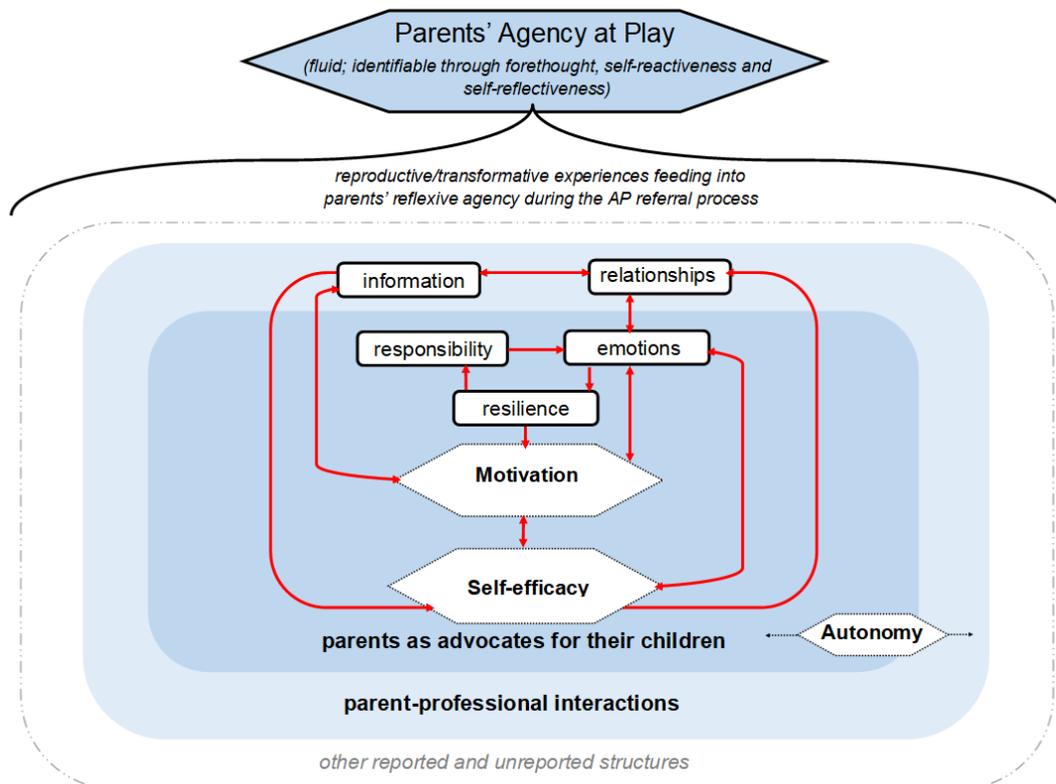
I argue that the balance between agents and structure tended to be 'tipped' in a way that placed greater disadvantage on parents during the AP referral process. The outcomes of this research indicate an impact on parents' self-efficacy and motivation which could have a transformative or reproductive effect on parents' agency. This aligns with the findings of Pirrie et al. (2011), who argue that placement availability and suitability restrictions impact the extent to which parents can have genuine agency when their child moves into AP. However, the impact was highly variable due to the diversity of agents and structures; indeed, there were some accounts where parents talked about actively searching for viable alternatives, indicating resourcefulness and agentic action in the face of adversity. Therefore, experiences were highly individualised and context dependent in the outcomes of both pieces of research.

Figure 8: A comparison of parental agency when choosing an educational setting for their child with SEND and during the AP referral process.

SLR



Empirical



3.6 Limitations

The outcomes generated in this research were drawn from the subjective accounts of the parents as viewed through my own lens. The extent to which we should try to eradicate subjectivity from research, however, is contested (Bumbuc, 2016). Indeed, subjectivity is reported to be an essential part of reflexive TA, which encouraged me to reflect actively on what could influence my interpretation.

It should be acknowledged that the outcomes of this research may have been affected by the sample of parents who were willing to participate. This means I could not hear the accounts of parents who were uncomfortable engaging or did not have time to become involved with this research, potentially missing the voice of those experiencing lowered agency. Perhaps this could be avoided by developing a short online questionnaire that may have been more accessible than an in-person interview for some. The directions of the arrows in Figure 7 represent the links made through the parents' reports in these interviews. Interviews with other participants could have presented different themes or tendencies. Therefore, the outcomes of this research represent my interpretation of tendencies in *this* dataset. Furthermore, in Figure 7, other influencing structures and mechanisms are acknowledged through the broken line. This is in recognition of the complexity of individuals and the systems they interact with; therefore, this research can only claim to provide a 'window' of insight into the influences on parents' agency.

At any given time, parents are managing their agency in other life contexts, and the impact of this on parents' strength of agency during AP referral processes cannot be ruled out under the remit of this research. Indeed, life course theories are subject to criticism due to their focus on microsystemic influences (Hutchison, 2019). In this research, other unreported influences are acknowledged but not reported in detail, such as the impact of legislation and policy. However, a focus on the microsystem in this research is justified by arguments that this system has the strongest influence on the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2004) and is the system in which EPs directly operate.

I acknowledge that the agency of professionals also plays out within the bounds of structural influences, and this was recognised by the parents interviewed. Therefore, my intended focus is not one of blame on any professionals; instead, I wish to explore the part that EPs can offer in working with professionals and parents to bring about change that could strengthen parents' agency during their child's referral to AP.

The following section outlines some suggestions and areas for further reflection on how EPs can help to strengthen parents' agency during AP referral processes. Suggestions were influenced by the contributions of the parents interviewed to ensure their perspective was included throughout the research, including within any implications. Parents' suggestions were supplemented through feedback following the dissemination of my research outcomes to EP colleagues to locate them within the context of EPs involvement,

3.7 Implications

Strengths of Agency

Figure 9 represents various levels of agency as reported by the parents in this study. The parents' reports in this study suggested that agency tended to fluctuate throughout the process but increased overall through experience. Despite an overall strengthening in agency, most parents did not report levels of agency beyond what could be described as 'information exchange' (see Figure 9). Indeed, a tokenistic approach to involving parents, providing them with little opportunity to formulate their decisions (Hart, 1992) was commonly reported. Therefore, for many, strength of agency and participation in the AP referral process were directly related. At times, parents reported coercive behaviours such as threats to exclude their child unless they 'agreed' with decisions to move them into AP, hindering their decision-making autonomy (Alkire, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2006).

While parental agency tends to increase towards the upper end of Figure 9 as parents' participation in decision-making increases, I believe agency can also be demonstrated through decisions to *not* take certain actions (Pirrie et al., 2011; Schnee & Bose, 2010). For example, not all parents would necessarily wish to be placed in a position where they are expected to initiate and direct decisions. Indeed, most parents who were interviewed expressed a wish to work with professionals to make decisions together, drawing on the expertise of all parties, which describes the 'Co-production' level on this continuum. In this way, I believe strengthening of agency is concerned with having the options to act according to what feels appropriate for the individual parent.

Figure 9: Examples of variations in parents' agency during the AP referral process (adapted from Hart, 1979, 1992; Holder, 2022)

Parent-led	Parent initiates and directs decisions.
Co-production	Parent involved in co-production of decisions alongside professionals.
Information exchange	Information shared between parties, but parents ultimately informed of decisions.
Tokenism	Tokenistic consultation and parents informed of decisions.
Coercion	Ultimatums or misleading information given and placement assigned.
Alienation	Placement not yet assigned; no consultations or information.

Implications for Educational Psychology Practice

Acknowledging the Role of Preventative Approaches

This research does not ignore the valuable role that EPs play in preventative work to strengthen schools' graduated approach; indeed, this proactive approach is my preferred role as a trainee EP. Nor does it disregard the efforts demonstrated by some schools and AP professionals in welcoming and supporting parents (Hart, 2013; Malcolm, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2015). However, there are circumstances where placements break down,

and I believe EPs should be involved in supporting families and professionals to work together through these periods of crisis.

Enhancing Parent-Professional Relationships

The outcomes of this research suggest a breakdown in effective joint professional-parent working. According to the DfE (2023b), co-production should be at the core of decision-making, but how this should translate into everyday practice is unclear. I argue this provides a role for EPs through their skills in using psychological approaches to developing parent partnerships (Day, 2013; Morris & Atkinson, 2018). For example, in unpicking beliefs and developing psychological formulations about underlying issues (Parker et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019), as well as bringing together different viewpoints to find ways forward (Cameron, 2006).

There remains a clear need to build parents' trust, but school staff do not always assume responsibility for this (Tyson, 2011). EPs can play a role in relationship development by bringing a new perspective (Lee & Woods, 2017) based on their understanding of all stakeholders' challenges in managing structural constraints (e.g., Ainscow et al., 2006; Cameron, 2006; Lindsay, 2007). Farrell et al. (2007) discuss the EP role in bridging gaps between different agencies, and I think this should apply to parents and professionals too (e.g., Squires et al., 2007; Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020).

Supporting Informed Decision-Making

Transparency should be at the core of decision-making (DfE, 2023b; Morris & Atkinson, 2018); however, this research suggests that parental decision-making agency is hindered by a lack of accessible information about choices, rights and access to support during AP referral processes. This can exclude parents from making meaningful contributions (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013).

Clearly, there is a place for signposting to SEND Local Offers and parent advice service. However, I believe EPs are appropriately placed to support parents in making informed decisions, for example, by providing information about available provisions and assessing needs, so parents can identify the appropriateness of specific settings (Bagley & Hallam, 2017).

Raising Parental Self-efficacy and Motivation Throughout the Referral Process

Parental struggles to achieve agency within complex and lengthy AP systems can impact their sense of self-efficacy and, consequently, their motivation and emotional wellbeing. Parental self-efficacy is known to impact child development and wellbeing (Albanese et al., 2019; Meunier et al., 2011), which I believe makes it of interest to EPs. EPs are trained to use appropriate approaches to consultation, asking curious questions and supporting parents to be heard in a way that is genuine, validating and relational (Bagley & Hallam, 2017). I argue this is especially important in this context, where parents are known to experience a decreased sense of value in the process (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011). Parental efficacy can increase through positive feedback (Cassé et al., 2015), something which is generally lacking for parents in this situation (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011). EPs are trained to 'revive positive feelings' (Cameron, 2006, p.300) by reframing problems more positively (Ashton & Roberts, 2006). To support this, EPs can draw flexibly on psychologically-informed approaches to engendering positivity (e.g., Seligman, 1999; Joseph, 2017; Rees, 2017) to support parents in maintaining their hope and energy in this challenging situation.

Addressing Systemic Barriers

While EPs reported to me that there are opportunities for their involvement in supporting the AP referral process, it is acknowledged that fuller involvement can be a challenge under current SEND systems and within the traded context. EP involvement tends to be provided to those in the EHC assessment process, which presents an ethical issue about the equitability of access to EP services (Lee & Woods, 2017).

The DfE (2022) has pledged further investment in training additional EPs until at least 2025 to increase EP capacity. While investment in training additional EPs is welcomed, any investment must extend to supporting local authorities with funding arrangements for supporting year two and three trainee EPs (British Psychological Society, 2022). Furthermore, the focus of the investment is primarily upon early assessment of needs and increased efficiency of the EHCP process. The EP continues to be viewed as a gatekeeper to additional SEND funding, meaning that offers such as working with parents can take less precedence (Lyonette et al., 2019). This is particularly pertinent for local authority-employed EPs who are bound to statutory-related duties.

Negotiation of the EP Role

I believe EPs have lots to offer as part of a recognised 'specialist workforce' (DfE, 2022, p.46). For example, through their training in systemic work, reaching beyond traditional assessment-focused perceptions of the EP role. However, I believe a significant challenge lies in negotiating a wider EP role within schools and local authorities so EPs can be released for this valuable work. Therefore, EPs must actively promote the value of working jointly with the systems closest to the child. I believe an investment in EP support in facilitating co-produced decisions during the referral process would ultimately benefit the local authority by enhancing the chance of placement success.

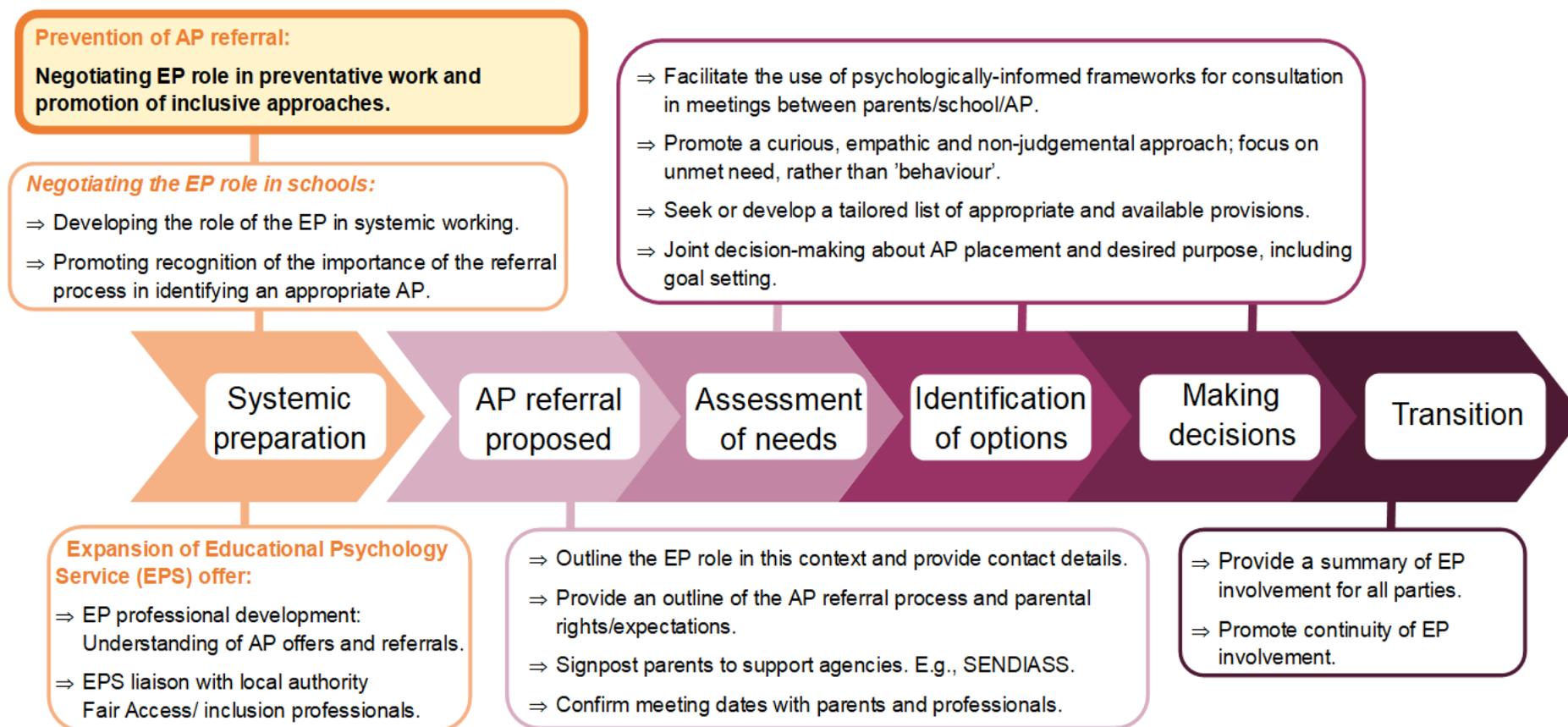
In many cases, key decisions are reported to have already been made before parents are invited to contribute their views. Therefore, caution needs to be given to avoid EP involvement through a 'tick-box' exercise or for legitimising decisions. Instead, it should be about finding a positive way out of crisis which requires EPs to be explicit about the remit and boundaries of their involvement with schools and parents (Bagley & Hallam, 2017). To support this, I believe EP services should develop their understanding of local AP pathways and their potential role in this, particularly now that AP is a recognised part of the SEND system (DfE, 2022).

A Model for EP Practice

In respect of parents' wishes to have their voices heard, the following model has been informed by the suggestions and issues raised by parents as well as EPs (see Figure 9). This model is designed to translate the outcomes of this research into a picture of what the EP's role in strengthening parental agency could look like in practice. This model begins with suggestions for EP practice at a systemic level before moving on to specific approaches that EPs could offer to support parental agency through different phases of the AP referral process. See Appendix G for a more detailed version of this model.

This model is informed by those with direct experience of this process, but I acknowledge that contextual variations require a reflexive approach. Therefore, this model provides a starting point for EPs to plan and negotiate their approach in their unique context.

Figure 10: Proposed Model for Educational Psychologist Involvement in the AP Referral Process



Implications for Research

Currently, the voice of parents in AP research is far outweighed by other stakeholders. Perhaps this is partly linked to parent capacity to manage the demands of participation alongside the challenges they are already facing in their everyday lives. Therefore, opportunities for further research should explore ways of making parent participation in research more accessible (Wilson, 2020). For example, social media recruitment is recognised as an effective way of contacting those who can be less easy to reach (Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017). I argue an approach that explicitly values parent contributions in research is required to avoid mirroring the tokenistic approach to parental participation within SEND systems that are discussed in this research.

Furthermore, while the DfE has sought to explore parent experiences through their 2022 *SEND Review*, I believe more research is needed on what parents believe will support their autonomy (freedom of agency) in decision-making, and to how they wish this to be implemented. This research provides a small window into parental views about what can help them to participate with greater agency in making decisions for their child, and I argue this can be expanded through the development of further research, with more parent participants, across the SEND system and on a national scale. Only then, can we move away from the ideological to the practical to bridge the gap between SEND policy development and what is effective in real-life contexts (Doucet & Pont, 2021).

Additionally, there is scope for further research and discussion into where the proposed 2025 SEND reforms sit alongside other educational policies. Norwich and Koutsouris (2017) argue that tensions and dilemmas between conflicting educational policies should be acknowledged so we can begin to explore and address them, such as those between inclusive education and curriculum standards. I believe that such transparency at a policy level will support those at the 'ground level' such as parents and those who work closely with them to make autonomous decisions within SEND processes. Access to this relevant information can support parents to engage in open questioning about the decisions that directly impact them, supporting their agency in processes across the SEND system, including during AP referral.

Wicked Problems

Addressing issues such as agency could be described as a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber, 1973). It is hard to define its boundaries, what else contributes to it, or predict how it might evolve with intervention. This type of problem has been described as 'messy, devious, and

they fight back when you try to deal with them' (Ritchey, 2013, p.1). I believe that challenge in research, however, should not be a reason to avoid it, as positive change can only occur if we remain hopeful enough to enter the mess to seek out new directions (Cook, 2009).

3.8 Conclusion

This research emerged from the stance that individual agency is fluid (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), with the unique aim of exploring how parents' agency can be strengthened during AP referral processes. For the parents in this study, agency tended to be strengthened through cumulative experiences throughout the process. However, structural factors such as information availability and parent-professional interactions often limit agency. The weight of pressure resulting from parents' forced agency (Honkasilta et al., 2015) in the face of contextual limitations is concerning, particularly given the distinctive responsibility that these parents reported in advocating for their children. As a recognised part of the SEND system, support into AP falls under the remit of EP work. However, this is an underdeveloped area of focus in EP practice and research, particularly concerning the AP referral process. The suggestions made through the outcomes of this research are not designed to replace preventative work but have been developed to provide an effective EP response to the crises occurring for many families under current AP referral systems.

4. Chapter Four: A Reflexive Account of My Research Journey

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by evaluating reflexivity in my research process and how this changed through experience. I reflect on how the research process has informed my practice and values as a research practitioner. The chapter concludes with a summary of implications for wider research and practice in educational psychology.

Key learning will be discussed relating to the following:

- My developing understanding of subjectivity
- My personal learning in relation to my research
- The challenge of the 'mess' in research (Cook, 2009, p.289)
- Transferring my learning to real-world issues

4.2 My Developing Understanding of Subjectivity

In considering my influence as a researcher, I must acknowledge the importance of reflexivity. Reflexivity in research refers to a researcher's evaluation of their stance (Fook, 2002; Shaw, 2010a) and how this impacts their decisions. Reflexivity can be considered from both an epistemological and personal viewpoint, whereby researcher methods can impact the understanding generated about a phenomenon in a way that means the researcher cannot be separated from the production of knowledge (Willig, 2013).

The influence of my assumptions

According to a life course perspective (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), our thoughts and assumptions are impacted by our life experiences. I recognise that my role as a mother, previous experiences as a teacher, and more recent experience as a trainee EP will influence my thinking. Through supervision and keeping a reflexive log, I was encouraged to consider the assumptions that fed into my research in a way that I had not explicitly done before. For example, when planning my approach to speaking to parents, my decision to choose interviews instead of focus groups was influenced by my assumption that some participants might not feel comfortable sharing their experiences in the presence of others. This was based on my experience of consulting with parents about sensitive issues in my trainee EP role. However, following my interviews, most participants expressed looking

forward to hearing what others had to say. While my role as a researcher is not one of a therapist, I did wonder whether a group-based discussion could have allowed parents to feel heard and validated by those with shared experiences.

Furthermore, I wondered whether a group discussion might have allowed participants to build on each other's responses, creating a more cohesive 'picture'. However, it could be argued that an individual approach may have had the benefit of highlighting differences in experience. Nonetheless, this demonstrates how my prior assumptions are likely to have impacted the outcomes of my research.

4.3 The Importance of Acknowledging Interpretation

In bringing a critical realist stance to this research, I am aware that I introduced assumptions about what can be 'known' through my research (see Chapter Two). For example, I assume agency exists but believe that it cannot be observed directly and, therefore, must be inferred through the reported experiences of others. In this way, the outcomes generated are not intended as irrefutable 'truths' but reflect my interpretation and the influence of my focus on agency.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the knowledge generated in this research depended on what the participants reported and how they chose to report it. For most of these parents, there was a background of broken relationships with school professionals, which guided the focus of their accounts. This presented me with a dilemma about how school professionals were presented in the research and the potential impact of ignoring situational factors. Transparency of reflexivity is argued to support the reader to apply their critical reflections to research outcomes (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Indeed, (Butler, 2005) argues that reflexivity is an ethical responsibility as it serves as a reminder of the subjectivity of human experience and interpretation. In this way, this research enhanced my understanding of the ethical implications of transparent reflexivity.

4.4 My Personal Learning: Researchers are Human Beings Too

The research process is demanding and fraught with challenges, which is known to place strain on researchers' physical and emotional energy (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2017). This claim

resonates with me, related to the demands of the research process (discussed below), but also due to my emotional responses in relation to hearing the parents' experiences.

Challenges of Connecting to the Research

Exploring parental agency directly through the voice of parents is a value that I held close during this research. This was likely driven, at least partially, by my own position as a parent. In conducting this research, I could identify with some of the experiences outlined by the parents. It is argued that an emotional response to research is a commonly recognised factor in qualitative research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). However, I needed to maintain professionalism in the face of 'triggering' accounts. This created tension in ensuring I managed my internal emotional responses to allow me to empathise with the parents while maintaining an appropriate professional distance.

Some Benefits of Researcher-Participant Connectivity

Walkerdine & Melody (2002) argue that, to understand the thinking of others, we need to be able to engage with our thoughts and reactions. Supervision and reflexive log entries supported me to see how this situation, which initially presented as a challenge, provided me insight into the benefit of engaging with my emotional reactions, for example, in recognising how negative experiences might impact motivation. I believe the communication of genuine empathy enhanced the authenticity of my responses, helping me to connect with participants and make better sense of their experiences (Hubbard et al., 2001).

Before beginning this research, I may have had reservations about reflecting openly about such experiences for fear of revealing my inexperience as a novice researcher. I now believe that to deny the 'human' side of my reflections would be to ignore the contextual influences on the outcomes of this study. Furthermore, Widdowfield (2000) argues that, in discussing this, an open account can be provided to reassure others that research is an inevitably human activity. This experience has led to a shift in my views towards the value of my role in bringing 'humanness' into my research.

4.5 Navigating My Way Through 'The Mess'.

Topping and Lauchlan (2013) argue that research plays a vital role for educational psychologists, particularly in building the evidence base from which we work. The research process is demanding which can impact the wellbeing of researchers (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2017). Indeed, the research process has been one of challenge for me, predominantly because there is no established 'right way' to go about it. While a critical realist approach guided me, I was also mindful of making decisions that aligned with this and, where I felt they did not, needed to justify my choices. For me, this presented so many options and reflections that I was, at points, unable to move my research forwards. The only way was to forge a path forward through discussion with my supervisor, taking a reflexive approach to justifying my choices. As my research progressed, various factors were demystified, and I began to understand that meaningful research meant creating my unique path. The following extract illustrates this:

The 'messy area' is not an easy place to be. The road in and out is not clearly defined and is unlikely to be direct or smooth. The 'messy area' itself is unsettling, worrying, exciting and challenging. The purpose of entering this mess is to enable and allow new directions to emerge.

(Cook, 2009, p.289)

The development of my research was enhanced through the support of the researchers in the field. For example, when established researchers responded to my enquiries with encouragement and support. These interactions supported me to begin viewing myself as part of a wider community of researchers, rather than someone who was just 'doing research'.

4.6 Considering the Relevance of Research in Everyday Contexts

In linking research to real life, I acknowledge my misconceptions that the organisations and parents I contacted would be interested in participating because my study topic related to their experience. Initially, this impacted my perception of the value of my research. On reflection, I suspect that difficulty recruiting participants was more likely to have been impacted by the experiences discussed by parents in this research, such as emotional fatigue and parent-professional relationships. In my eagerness to source participants, I

neglected to consider how my agenda was not of high focus for others. This was a difficult but necessary lesson on the importance of making my research relevant to those it concerns.

This led me to reflect on how relevant research is to those who are the focus of it. A disconnect between researchers and practitioners (Marshall, 2014) as well as between practitioners and parents (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018) is reported to create distance between the research and those it is intended to impact. Marshall (2014) describes this as a 'disconnect between the ivory towers and the swampy lowlands' (p.2), which engenders an uncomfortable dissonance for me in my roles as parent, practitioner and researcher. Arising from this is an enhanced sense of responsibility to avoid practice that might lead to the 'othering' of parents, practitioners or researchers. During my interviews, one parent described themselves as a 'researcher' in their endeavours to explore their options. While I was initially surprised by this paralleling of our roles, I was intrigued by the idea and humbled by the reflection that we were both striving towards the same aim: to bring about positive change in the context in which we operate. This also highlights the potential for working in partnership to navigate complex systems. I believe an approach that acknowledges and values connectivity between practitioners and participants is required to do this.

4.7 Implications for Reflective Practice and Conclusions

While reflexivity refers to stance, I use the term reflective practice to describe the process of thinking about how my critical experiences can enhance and inform my practice (Malthouse et al., 2014). However, I acknowledge some overlap and reciprocal influence between these concepts. Collins and Cooper (2014) suggested that a practitioner approach that enhances our connection with others is essential to good research practice. While their suggestions focused on enhancing the researchers' practice, I argue there is an overlap with reflective trainee EP practice. Informed by Collins and Cooper (2014), Table 13 summarises some of my key learning for reflective practice as a researcher and in my wider role as a trainee EP practitioner.

Table 13: Summary of Implications, informed by Collins and Cooper (2014)

Criteria	Reflective practice in research	Reflective practice as a TEP/EP
Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting on their assumptions. • Communicating the value and limitations of the study. • Awareness of impact of researcher identity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in meaningful consultation to challenge any assumptions I might hold. • Remaining mindful of the preconceptions that others may hold of me as an EP.
Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withholding assumptions at first allows the participants the freedom to express their views. • Open sharing of views where appropriate. • Balance the need to listen to participants and to learn from them through appropriate follow-up questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge explicitly, that individuals are the experts of their lives. • Foster a 'safe' space where others can explore their conceptions and ideas, balancing opportunities for active listening in the context of professional agendas.
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating gratitude for participation. • Understand the bounds of the researcher role but recognise the potential therapeutic benefit of the experience for the participants. • Signposting is to be provided where appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise the privilege of being allowed a 'view' into the lives of others. • Recognise the limitations of my expertise, signposting where relevant. • Demonstration of warmth and value of others.
Power and politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a safe space for participants to share their experiences and views. • Checking in with participants to ensure consent is valid for personal disclosures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make transparent the role of the EP, providing opportunities for clarification and negotiation. • Recognise the vulnerability of others in sharing personal views and experiences.

Overall, I agree that research that explores the human experience requires reflexivity (Shaw, 2010b). This learning has brought to the forefront of my mind the potential that research holds for shaping the researcher (Palaganas et al., 2017) and that the researcher has in shaping the research.

According to Malthouse (2014), reflection must consider the circumstances that impact how, or the extent to which, an individual acts on their reflections. Considerations might include 'immediate personal constraints', 'locus of power' and 'issues beyond the organisation' (Malthouse, 2014, pp.604-605). These differ for all practitioners and evolve rapidly through organisational change and government policy. In this way, while this research focuses on the interplay between parental agency and structural influences, I have also begun to reflect on the structures in which I work and the importance of seeking opportunities for enacting my agency in the context of these. The dissemination of this research marks my action towards making a difference through my role as a practitioner-researcher.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Example of a Completed Weight of Evidence Quality Assessment

QA for Satherley & Norwich (2021), adapted from Gough (2007) and informed by Pawson et al. (2003)

Weight of Evidence (WoE) category (Gough, 2007)	Criteria (adapted from Gough, 2007)	Rating and commentary
<p>WoE A: Soundness of the study (with regard to its own research question)</p> <p><i>TAPURAS associated with WoE A:</i></p> <p>Transparency (clarity of purpose)</p> <p>Accuracy</p> <p>Accessibility (understandable)</p> <p>Specificity (method-specific quality)</p>	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Explicit and clear rationale for the study. ○ Clear definition of terms outlined (e.g., SEND, parents). ○ Detailed method and results section (e.g., description and justification of data collection and analysis methods). ○ Interpretations are clear and warranted (supported by the data). ○ Outcomes measured in a way that is reliable and valid. <p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rationale provided but not detailed. ○ Some main terms (e.g., SEND, parents) defined/explained. ○ Methods and Results section outline the data collection and analysis but is described in little detail. ○ Limited acknowledgement/consideration of reliability and validity issues. ○ Limited warrant for interpretations. <p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ When WoE A Criteria for High or Medium has not been met. 	<p style="text-align: center;">HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Purpose of the study is made clear early on in the introduction. Rationale justified by drawing on existing literature. ○ Detailed methods section outlining steps clearly, including questions used during data collection and modifications to the process following the initial pilot. ○ Some main terms explained (e.g., SEND, EHC, school types). ○ Method, data collection, and analysis appropriate to the authors' research questions. Breakdown of figures is given and supplementary appendices for further information. ○ Draws on both qualitative and quantitative data, and using different data collection methods, such as open and closed questions and follow-up interviews. ○ Data and interpretations are presented alongside each other, making links clear.

Weight of Evidence (WoE) category (Gough, 2007)	Criteria (adapted from Gough, 2007)	Rating and commentary
<p>WoE B: Appropriateness of the study for answering this review question.</p> <p><i>TAPURAS associated with WoE B:</i></p> <p>Purpose (fit for purpose method)</p>	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parent voice is the main focus (parents of children with SEND). ○ SEND types outlined clearly. ○ Parental choice of school for their child with SEND is the main focus. ○ Indicators of agency may be explicitly referred to. ○ Data collection and analysis methods are appropriate in answering the review question/ justified. <p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parent voice is included in the study in a way that is separable from other views (including analysis). ○ SEND types briefly outlined. ○ Information gathered about school choice but not the main focus. ○ Indicators of agency may be implied but not referred to directly. ○ Data collection and analysis methods not justified. <p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ When WoE B Criteria for High or Medium have not been met. 	<p style="text-align: center;">HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sole focus of the study is on parental voice (specifically parents with children with SEND). ○ Focus on parental choice (feeling listened to, feeling informed...), 'markets' and parental dilemmas (implied impact of agency but not explicit). ○ SEND types outlined clearly and percentages given for further clarity. ○ Parental choice of school is the main focus of the study. This is broken down further into aspects of choice such as 'dilemmas' and sense of 'real choice'...etc ○ Data collection and analysis methods appropriate for breaking down each element of parental choice/ research question focus.

Weight of Evidence (WoE) category (Gough, 2007)	Criteria (adapted from Gough, 2007)	Rating and commentary
<p>WoE C: Relevance of the study for this review question.</p> <p><i>TAPURAS associated with WoE C:</i></p> <p>Utility (provides relevant answers)</p> <p>Propriety (legal/ethical research)</p>	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ All findings deemed relevant to this study's context (e.g. England and Wales parents, parents of children with SEND, sole focus on choice of school). ○ Identifies a gap in the existing literature. ○ Ethical considerations have been highlighted and explored. ○ The study and write-up are ethically and legally sound. <p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The research findings discussed parents of children with SEND drawn from England and Welsh sample but also includes outcomes drawn from other stakeholders (e.g. professionals). The outcomes are recorded in a way that allows a separate understanding. ○ Parent choice of school for their child with SEND was included in the findings but not the sole focus. ○ The study helps provide some information about the review question. ○ Ethical issues have been considered but explanations of how these have been dealt with are unclear/omitted. <p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ When criteria for High or Medium have not been met 	<p style="text-align: center;">MEDIUM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Findings were drawn from a GB context (England); all parents had children who were deemed as having Special Educational Needs and/or Disability, focus on school choice making it relevant for this study. ○ Influences on choice reported. However, focus specifically on special schools- narrowed focus specific to this setting type- a brief acknowledgement of other data such as reasons for the choice of other school type. ○ Gap in existing literature identified and addressed through the research, as well as trends across time and political backdrop. Acknowledgement of further research needed - e.g., larger scale research, nationally representative samples and extending to those who secured mainstream provision. ○ Methods and write-ups suggest ethicality in the design of the research and conduct of the researchers. ○ Ethical considerations addressed in terms of using the research to promote inclusion. ○ Ethical clearance was explicitly declared.

Weight of Evidence (WoE) category (Gough, 2007)	Criteria (adapted from Gough, 2007)	Rating and commentary
<p>WoE D: Overall weight of evidence</p>	<p>High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ High in all WoE (A-C) categories ○ High in two categories and Medium in one <p>Medium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rated Medium across all WoE categories. ○ Rated as Low, Medium, High and across the categories. ○ Medium in two categories (the remaining category will determine whether the study is low/medium or high medium) ○ Borderline <p>Low</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Low across all WoE categories ○ Low in two of the categories and medium in the remaining category 	<p style="text-align: center;">HIGH</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Rated High in WoE A and WoE B and Medium in WoE C)</p>

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

'What can help parents/guardians with making choices when their child moves into Alternative Provision education?'



.....

My name is Deb and I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist at Newcastle University. As part of a research project I would like to speak to parents/guardians of young people who have moved into Alternative Provision education.

.....

Taking part in this study would involve a one-to-one chat with me about your thoughts and experiences. You can choose whether you would like to meet in person, virtually or over the phone.

.....

If you choose to take part, your information will be anonymous and will be stored securely.



If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact d.l.allen1@newcastle.ac.uk

THIS STUDY HAS ETHICAL APPROVAL FROM THE
NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY ETHICS BOARD

Appendix C: Interview Schedule (interviewer guide)

Interview schedule

- *Thank the participant.*
- *Explain consent and their right to withdraw.*
- *Explain how the session will be audio-recorded and discuss secure storage and anonymity.*
- *Explain that the interview will take about 45 minutes, but they can have much/little time as they need.*

Initial questions: Questions to be presented visually and verbally. Initial questions are to be followed up by supplementary questions.

1. What did you know about the AP referral process before your son/daughter moved there?
2. What did you believe your role to be in the AP referral process?
3. Were your views and opinions welcomed during the referral process? If so, how?
4. What involvement from others helped/might help you make decisions?
5. Is there anything else about the process that you would like to talk about?

Appendix D: Interview Schedule for Parents

Interview schedule

- Thank you for your participation 😊
- When we meet, I will talk again through the information already given and give you a chance to ask any questions or withdraw.
- If you agree to go ahead, this interview will take about 45 minutes, but you can have as much/little time as you need.

You will be asked these initial questions: Sometimes, I may ask you for more details or follow-up questions. I am happy to repeat questions or explain them further. You can withdraw from answering any of the questions.

1. What did you know about the AP referral process before your son/daughter moved there? (e.g., AP purpose, anticipated/aspired outcomes for the child, knowledge of options, where knowledge of the setting came from)

2. What did you believe your role to be in the AP referral process? (e.g., during decision-making, during discussions...etc)

3. Were your views and opinions (e.g., asking for change) welcomed during the referral process? If so, how?

4. What involvement from others (e.g., other parents, school/AP staff, other professionals such as educational psychologists) helped/might help you make decisions?

5. Is there anything else about the process that you would like to talk about?

Appendix E: Initial Codes

accessibility of processes	parents directing professionals
aspirations	parents exploring pathways or options
autonomy	parents feeling deceived
battles or fights	parents feeling disregarded
blame or judgement	parents feeling heard
bolstering parental energy - focus on positives	parents feeling isolated
complex or lengthy processes	parents feeling valued
confusing terminology	parents feeling welcomed
consulting others	parents having no option but to trust
damage to parent-professional relationships	parents learning through experience
dilemmas	parents listening to their child
disempowerment of parents	parents' passion
effect of the process on the family	parents perceived as not 'equipped'
effect on parents' relationship with their child	parents' preferred modes of interaction
families feeling low priority	parents' previous experiences
fatigue	parents' proactive actions viewed negatively
first impressions count	parents protecting their child
fleeting professional involvement	parents 'pushing'
flexible systems	parents refusing offers
forethought	parents feeling that they made a difference
frustration or 'why is this so hard?'	parents requesting change or negotiations
"I can't keep up"	parents suffering with their child
inconsistency of support across parents	parents taking the initiative
information - not enough	parents' trust in professionals
information - the importance of	placement availability
information - too late	policy or legislation
information - withheld from parents	power imbalances
lack of genuine welcome for parents	pressure on parents
multi-agency support	professionals advocating for parents
nice for someone else to take over	professionals as saviours
organisational roadblocks or hurdles	school features
other pressures in family life	type of parental involvement
parental aspirations	understanding the holistic needs of the child
parental assertiveness	still ready to fight
parental conceptions of individual 'difference'	the distinctive duty of parents
parental desperation	the impact of failed plans
parental hopes	the roles of professionals
parental perceptions of setting inclusivity	self-reflectiveness
parental regret	waiting
parental self-blame	what is there to lose?
parent-professional communication	who you know determines what you know
parent-professional relationships	working in partnership
parents are humans too	

Appendix F: Coding Book Extract

Code	Code origin (reasoning)	Code description	Example extract from transcripts	Interpretive orientation of extract
Parents are humans too	deductive - derived from existing literature	Reference to treating parents with respect, empathy or kind regard. Reference to professionals acknowledging the challenges that parents are facing/ taking actions to purposefully ease the strain in parents.	<i>'I really think they need to dig deeper and see the person, the actual family; the person, the mum, the dad who are bringing up the child.'</i>	latent-semantic borderline
Parents feeling deceived	abductive - first derived from transcript "Ellie"	Reference to interactions -verbally or written between parents and professionals, including school staff or other educational or LA professionals. Incidents where parents reported that they had been lied to or the subject was being avoided in discussion with them. Including references to being 'fobbed off' or 'strung along' in some way.	<i>'...they were saying, "You're still a student. It's just to help you and it might only be for three months, might only be for six months." That never was the case. [Child's name] was never going back there, but it was never said.'</i>	semantic
Policy/Legislation	deductive - derived from SLR	Reference to school/local/national policy or legislation, or parents 'knowing their rights'. Reference to SEND-related processes and/or duties or expectations of professionals. Reference to the impact of policy or legislation.	<i>'I wish I'd known a bit more about his EHCP and what I could access through that.'</i>	semantic
The distinctive duty of parents	abductive - first derived from transcript "Beth"	Reference to strain on the parent during their child's move into AP, concerning the duty of parents and their responsibility to look after their children's needs. Reference to supporting parents so they can continue to support their children. Reference to the energy required to support the child or pressure that this places on the parents.	<i>'It's enough to tip a parent over the edge and it is not what the parent needs because if you tip that parent over the edge, who has that child then got?'</i>	latent

Appendix G: Proposed Model for Educational Psychologist Involvement in the AP Referral Process (full)

