Using diffractive activity to (re)configure parental choice of pre-compulsory education

Victoria Bamsey

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

September 2021

Plymouth Institute of Education
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks my supervisors Jan Georgeson and Rowena Passy for their unending support and encouragement throughout this project. Your support has been very much appreciated and has transformed me from an individual with no belief in myself to a confident academic with thoughts and ideas I am eager to share and debate with others.

Thank you for my husband and my family for putting up with me over the past six years, for the weekends and holidays I have been tied to my computer, for bringing me endless cups of tea and engaging in debates about the nature of the world and what it means to know.

Dedicated to the memory of my dear friend and confidant – I started this process just weeks after your passing but you have been a voice by my side throughout. Your strength and your beliefs have given me the power to continue in my education and have inspired me.
Author’s declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Education has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included taught modules taken. Relevant educational research seminars and conferences were attended at which work was often presented and several papers were prepared for publication.

Word-count of main body of thesis: 56,756

Signed: [Signature]

Date of submission: 17th September 2021
Victoria Rosalind Bamsey, Lecturer in Education, University of Plymouth, Institute of Education, University of Plymouth, UK

Using diffractive activity to (re)configure parental choice of pre-compulsory education

Abstract

Prompted by the increasing number of children accessing alternatives to mainstream education, this research project was designed to investigate the activity of parents as they engaged in choosing different forms of education for their four-year-old child. The intention was to highlight the individual and entangled activity of parental choice in the English system of education.

Facet methodology facilitated an exploration of the multi-dimensionality of each parent’s lived experience. It allowed for flexibility within the research process that used open interviews to follow the narratives of six sets of parents while they were thinking about and making different educational choices for their child. This included home education, the local primary school, a creative education, a Steiner school, a Montessori school and an independent selective school.

Drawing upon Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory of individual activity as a framework for thinking about educational choice, combined with the new materialist concepts of intra-action and diffraction, the conceptual framework of ‘diffractive activity’ has been developed. Diffractive activity brings to the fore the role of history, society and relationalities within the activity of choice. It is built upon five principles of complexity, intra-action, diffraction, entanglement and movement.

Findings cast the activity of educational choice as a complex process of coming to know, influenced by possibilities, relationalities and entanglements. It starts as an internal process of thinking where educational choice is not limited by practical circumstances but is open to different possibilities. Relationalities emphasise how choice is not a linear process but a dynamic, iterative and entangled process. Entanglements bring choice alive, as a lived experience, an activity that is threaded through time, space, and place. My conclusions are two-fold, firstly that educational choice does not begin with a choice of school, but is a relational activity of thinking about education, and secondly through the introduction of diffractive activity as a framework for thinking about individual human activity.
Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................1
List of Figures .....................................................................................................................................6
List of tables.......................................................................................................................................7
1.0 Introduction .............................................................................................................................8
  1.1 Research overview ...............................................................................................................9
  1.2 Thesis construction ..............................................................................................................10
2.0 Theoretical Framework ..........................................................................................................14
  2.1 Interpreting Vygotsky ........................................................................................................15
  2.2 Vygotsky’s legacy ..............................................................................................................16
  2.3 Mediated activity ...............................................................................................................19
    2.3.1 The mediating role of history, society and relationships .............................................21
    2.3.2 The motivating function of a target of thought ..........................................................24
    2.3.3 New associations .........................................................................................................26
  2.4 Re-working the traditional notion of activity ....................................................................28
    2.4.1 Intra-action ...............................................................................................................29
    2.4.2 Diffraction ................................................................................................................31
  2.5 Re-imagining activity ..........................................................................................................34
3.0 Context and literature review ...............................................................................................38
  3.1 History and policy ...............................................................................................................39
    3.1.1 History of compulsory education and choice ............................................................40
    3.1.2 Tensions within the policy landscape .......................................................................44
  3.2 The influence of culture, society and things .......................................................................53
    3.2.1 Conceptualising choice within society .....................................................................53
    3.2.2 Educational choice ......................................................................................................59
  3.3 The individual activity of choice .........................................................................................66
    3.3.1 The (ir)rational parent ...............................................................................................66
    3.3.2 The role of power within the activity of choice .........................................................69
  3.4 Providing a context for my research ....................................................................................72
4.0 Research design .....................................................................................................................75
  4.1 History and Experiences .....................................................................................................76
  4.2 Research paradigm ..............................................................................................................79
  4.3 Research strategy ...............................................................................................................80
    4.3.1 Facet Methodology ....................................................................................................81
    4.3.2 Methods ....................................................................................................................84
4.3.3 Participants

4.4 Lived experience
4.4.1 Time
4.4.2 Space
4.4.3 Place
4.4.4 Participant recruitment
4.4.5 Configurations of power and trust

4.5 Ethical considerations

4.6 Analytical framework
4.6.1 Data familiarisation and coding
4.6.2 Identifying themes
4.6.3 A brief segue into social network analysis

4.7 Making connections

5.0 The multiple facets of educational choice
5.1 Starting with the elements of choice
5.2 Looking through the lens of mediated activity
5.3 History and experiences
5.3.1 Wanting the same or something different
5.3.2 Being a good parent
5.3.3 Belonging and identity
5.3.4 Summarising history and experiences

5.4 Mediation through culture within society
5.4.1 Social network
5.4.2 Community
5.4.3 Macro-environment
5.4.4 Summarising mediation in society

5.5 Relationalities within the environment
5.5.1 The features of education
5.5.2 The materialities of education
5.5.3 Summarising relationalities

5.6 How facets come to matter

6.0 The complex activity of educational choice
6.1 Using diffractive activity to (re)configure parental choice
6.1.1 An entangled web of activity
6.1.2 Dissociation and association
6.1.3 Transforming activity into choice
Appendix Four – Key legislative changes since 1870 ..................................274
Appendix Five - Research Fieldwork inventory ...........................................281
Appendix Six - Range of Methods and Participants ...............................283
Appendix Seven – Initial analysis of data ..................................................284
  7.1 Summary of interviews with parents ..............................................284
  7.2 Final summary of findings for participants ....................................299
Appendix Eight – Educational Choices ....................................................321
Appendix Nine – Doctorate assignments years one and two ..................332
  9.1 EdD613: ‘Educational, Excellence, Everywhere’. Improving education for
              all or segregating society? ............................................................332
  9.2 EdD614: Children in education. The importance of the ‘space in
              between’ .........................................................................................352
  9.3 EdD623: Critical Realism v Social Constructionism. Similarities and
              differences for education research ................................................373
  9.4 EdD624: ‘A proposal for investigating drivers of parental choice in pre-
              compulsory education’ .................................................................391
Appendix Ten – Thematic Maps ...............................................................411
Appendix Eleven – Social Network Maps .................................................413
Appendix Twelve – Photographic elicitation ............................................416
  12.1 Montessori ....................................................................................416
  12.2 Mainstream setting .......................................................................417
List of Figures

Figure 1: Vygotsky's triangular scheme of activity ...........................................20
Figure 2: Cycle of constructing activity .............................................................23
Figure 3: The role of predmet within activity ......................................................24
Figure 4: Vygotsky's scheme of association .........................................................27
Figure 5: Light refracting through a prism ...........................................................27
Figure 6: Light diffracting through an aperture ....................................................31
Figure 7: The bending and spreading of diffractive waves ....................................34
Figure 8: Diffractive Activity ..............................................................................36
Figure 9: Elements of educational choice .............................................................120
Figure 10: Boundaried school preference process ..............................................149
Figure 11: Web of intra-action within the educational choice process ............165
List of tables

Table 1: Different lines of enquiry .................................................................85
Table 2: The components of activity .............................................................125
Table 3: Associations and Dissociations ......................................................170
Introduction

The introduction of the Elementary Education Act in 1870 highlighted that education is the responsibility of the parent and compulsory in England for children from the age of five. Children younger than five have attended schools since the industrial revolution, however, the nature of education for a child aged four in the twenty-first century, where it takes place, and what it looks like, is open to a parent’s interpretation. Parental preference is enshrined within the Education Act (HM Government, 1996) and there are numerous educational options available for four-year-olds in England from home education, to a reception class in funded schools, or private settings.

This thesis is concerned with the activity of parents choosing which of these options for pre-compulsory education they would like for their four-year-old child in England, at a time when they might transfer from pre-school to reception class in school. Choice in this context is therefore defined as the act of selecting between two or more options, to identify a preferred approach for education. Of particular interest is the nature of that activity of choosing, how history, society and relationships can influence the choice(s) made. It is important because educational reform and school improvement measures have been influenced by the introduction of league tables and market forces since the late 1980’s, with competition putting pressure on schools to promote and improve their offer (Ball, 2013). Policy for parental choice fails to consider the tensions and complexities of educational choice in an imperfect marketplace, education as more than school, or the influences on choice that sit outside of statistical league tables.
1.1 Research overview

The main objective of this research project was to get inside the educational choice process at four - the point when children in England usually start school. There were two aspects of the objective. The first was to find out what was the system of educational choice at a macro level, including the choices available for educating four-year-olds in England today. The second was to gain insight into how parents arrived at an educational choice for their child at an individual micro-level; the influences, nature, and activity of choice. Whilst presented here as two separate facets of choice, they are interconnected as productive forces that co-produce educational decisions.

The context for this research is the phenomenon of four-year-olds in funded education in England. Although 94% of four years olds are in some form of funded education in England today (National Statistics, 2020), this figure represents a year-on-year decrease since 2013 (National Statistics, 2019). Home education in England has increased by 97% since 2011 (Ball, 2018), and alternative forms of education are increasing in popularity as free schools offer different approaches to education (Mills, Hunt & Andrews, 2019). I question what may be influencing parents to choose different forms of education for their young child, particularly those making a proactive decision to choose something other than their nearest mainstream primary school.

The research questions are a result of my immersion with the school choice literature, and through my involvement with the research participants. A Vygotskian (2004) lens has facilitated my analysis, to move beyond thinking about choice as an object to achieve, but to ‘think with’ (Murris, 2021), and to recognise the nature of choice in today’s field of education. By engaging in a
dynamic, iterative and cyclical investigation the research moved away from simply describing the influences on choice, to focus on the possibilities, relationalities (Mason et al., 2012) and entanglements (Hodder, 2012; Ingold, 2010) arising with the facets of choice, culminating in the following questions:

- How are the possibilities for pre-compulsory education conceptualised by parents?
- How do relationalities feature within the lived experience of choosing pre-compulsory education?
- How does the nature of entanglement help to explore the activity of educational choice?

The language of possibilities, relationalities and entanglements that I have arrived at emphasises the experiences, connections and relations within and between different approaches to education, and the conceptual nature of this project as one of entanglement. My positionality, concepts and methodology are interlinked not by straight lines but by ‘multiple lines, knotted together at the centre but trailing innumerable ‘loose ends’ at the periphery’ (Ingold, 2010, p.12). My resultant thinking about educational choice is not a ‘self-contained object’ (ibid), but is a starting point for challenging how educational choice is positioned in policy as a rational choice, driven by league tables (Ball, 2013).

1.2 Thesis construction

My research and the construction of this thesis has been a dynamic, iterative and entangled process. Rather than progressing the investigation in a linear direction from reading to research and then analysis, my thinking has progressed as a spiral of thought with each concept building on the one before, sometimes leading in different directions to make new associations. Even the
tense I use within my writing signifies an evolving process that started with an awakening, then to revisit the past, before coming back to the present as I sit here writing, before moving forward and directing my next steps. As a result, I have found myself wishing to present to you, the reader, a coherent narrative of my research process and findings, whilst also recognising that my research did not follow a linear path from A to B. Instead, it has been a convoluted and winding path where I sometimes needed to revisit my original thinking in order to make sense of what I had found. This thesis is therefore presented in two parts, the first provides the context for this research and the second larger part focuses on my empirical investigation.

In the first part, chapter two introduces the theoretical framework that provides a structure for my thinking throughout this thesis from analysing the literature and the process of educational choice, to the construction of my findings. Built upon the ideas of soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), the mediating role of history, society and relationships within individual activity is emphasised. Chapter three presents an analysis of the choice discourse with reference to the seminal literature arising from the introduction of parental preference and the implementation of the Educational Reform Act 1988. I examine the history of educational choice and how experiences of the past, present and future are interlinked, resulting in a set of systems that ‘jostle, grate, and overlap’ (Ball, 2018, p.209). Habitus, identity, policy, the elements of choice and the role of power highlight an entangled system of educational choice that is situational and relational.

In the second part of the thesis, chapter four is concerned with the research design and the influences on my overall approach. I review and justify the development of my ethics (appendices one and two), methodology, methods
and participant selection. I explain how I followed the paths of six parents, from one specific community, as they chose different educational choices for their child - the local mainstream primary school, a creative education, a selective independent all-girls school, an independent Montessori school, a Steiner academy and a family following an unschooling philosophy. I adopted a qualitative approach within my research known as ‘Facet Methodology’ (Mason, 2011, p.75), which facilitated my investigation into the multi-dimensionality of lived experiences at a macro and micro level, and where each strand of my research represents a different facet (a different aspect or feature). The activity of choice was examined through my interactions with each family as they made an educational choice for their four-year old child (pre-compulsory education), and again one term after their child had started their chosen form of education. The settings perspectives on educational choice were also included as far as possible through interviews with setting leaders, photographs, and a documentary analysis of publicly available material.

In chapters five and six I report on my research findings as I consider how parents arrived at an educational choice for their child, the process they engaged in, and the influences on that activity. A parent’s history and experiences, interactions within society, and relationships with the features and materials of education give insight into the activity of choice as a cultural and historical activity of meaning making.

The key findings reported on in chapter five and six provide the basis for my analysis in chapter seven as I examine how parents conceptualised the educational possibilities available to them, and how the relationalities and entanglements within the activity of choice mediated the choice process. This final chapter then considers the implications of this research for policy, practice
and research as well as for my own professional development, before going on
to consider future avenues for research.

In conclusion, this thesis proposes that when parents are making an educational
choice for their four-year-old child it is not just about choosing a specific school.
It is an iterative and dynamic process of thinking about educational possibilities;
an activity arising through the history and experiences of parent and child, their
*intra*-actions within society and their relationships with the features and
materialities of education.
2.0 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I discuss my use of Vygotsky’s concept of mediated activity as the basis for a theoretical framework that acts as a thread throughout my work and shapes my analysis of the activity of educational choice. It is presented here, near the start of my thesis, to provide the reader with some background to the language I will go on to use, as a framework for thinking about the activity of educational choice. In practice, however, my thinking about mediated activity and my later construction of *diffractive activity* did not provide the starting point for my research but was something that I was drawn to after my initial analysis of data. It has brought to my research a ‘unity’, as Vygotsky (1978, p.24) would say, that has facilitated the bringing together of my different strands of thinking into this thesis.

The use of a theoretical frame in this way is not meant as a causal mechanism or rigid structure, but as a flexible and philosophical framework to support the construction of this thesis and the analysis of the data gathered. It has facilitated the expression of difficult and abstract ideas, and has supported the exploration of relationships and connections between the data I collected, my analysis, and interpretation (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Kettley, 2010).

Vygotsky’s thinking about mediated activity is also referred to as activity theory or Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). It is a framework for thinking about human activity that has been developed by a number of theorists over time, in different languages and cultures (for example: Engeström, 1987; Leontiev, 2005). As a consequence, it can hold a different meaning for different people and the following sections set out how my own understanding of human activity has developed through my engagement in Vygotsky’s writing. I first explore the
historical context of Vygotsky’s legacy before going on to explain the
development of activity theory and the key principles that I have embodied within
this thesis. The final part of this chapter builds on Vygotsky’s thinking to
incorporate the notions of *intra-action* and *diffraction* from Karen Barad (2007)
as I move to recognise the entangled nature of human activity.

2.1 Interpreting Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Soviet psychologist best known for his work
on child development and in particular the development of language and the
concept of mediated activity. He was also widely read in terms of linguistics,
sociology, philosophy and the arts, and these interests can be seen within his
investigations into child psychology and pedagogy. His early death from
tuberculosis at the age of only 37, combined with Russian politics and the
permeation of Marxist ideology at the time, meant that much of his work was not
published until after his death and has been subject to interpretation ever since
(Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019).

My own reliance on translations of Vygotsky’s work means that the subtleties of
his original meaning may be lost. As Veer and Yesnitsky (2011) point out, the
translated works include inaccuracies, missing passages, suppressed citations
and insertions. Even the spelling of names can be different according to the
transliteration (Robbins, 2001). Whilst the passing of time and translation of
language and culture brings with it an inevitable element of reframing, it is
important to avoid the inherent danger that repeated interpretation can bring
(Fleer, 2016; Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). Indeed, Roth and Lee (2007)
refer to Vygotsky’s activity theory as a ‘neglected legacy’ (p.186) in recognition
of how his original ideas were developed into the systems framework that is more commonly seen today (for example: Engeström, 2015).

For these reasons I have returned to translations of Vygotsky’s original writing as far as possible in an effort to understand the principles of activity theory and to consider how Vygotsky’s ideas could inform my own philosophical theorising about the activity of educational choice. I have not sought to apply Vygotsky’s theory in my own work as a ‘solution’ to a problem; but for his theories to inform my ideas as a theoretical frame that provides scaffolding within my research. It is through Vygotsky’s concept of mediated activity that I have considered my research questions, interpreted the data gathered, and constructed a view of how educational choice may be brought into being (Silverman, 2018).

2.2 Vygotsky’s legacy

Philosophically Vygotsky formed his ideas partly from Marxist roots (Cole, 1988; Leontiev, 2005), in that human relationships were seen as collective activity, mediated and historically developed, with activity starting in the mind before being externalised (Vygotsky, 1997b). His work was inspired by well-known thinkers such as Ernst Cassirer’s (1923; 2020) observations on the use of symbolic forms, Ivan Pavlov’s (1924) research into the conditioned reflex, and Jean Piaget’s (1923) stages of child development.

Vygotsky (1997a) also referred to Kurt Lewin’s concept of the field of human action and stimulating forces which was later published in 1936. Indeed, the concept of field has been taken forward by many as an environment with many layers, regions or forces (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992; Lewin, 1936). It refers to a social space that locates a topic (such as educational choice) within a specific
historical, local, national, international and relational context (Thomson, 2014), notions of which are explored throughout this thesis.

Vygotsky’s concept of activity was centred around his idea of mediation and how the behaviour of an individual develops along three principal lines, through evolution, history, and ontogeny (Luria & Vygotsky, 1992). Vygotsky argued that the success of the human race was due to the structure of an interdependent social group where knowledge and tools were handed down between generations. This means that there is an intergenerational aspect to human activity where the experiences of past generations impact on activity today.

The history of an individual was also seen as important because it is here that behaviour would be formed as a child developed, influenced by their biology and experiences in society. This emphasis on the role of experiences in society remains key to much of Vygotsky’s work emphasising that humans do not act independently but as part of a complex social structure. Finally, ontogeny was referred to as the entire life-span of an individual from pre-birth until death, it was seen as important in terms of the development of culture and language.

Vygotsky argued that the traditional approach to psychology at the time separated mind and culture (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). Instead, these principal lines of human development were seen by Vygotsky as interconnected emphasising that behaviour (activity) could not be viewed as an individual endeavour but was social and multi-faceted. He was a social constructivist (Ang, Zaphiris & Wilson, 2011; Young & Collin, 2004), in that he believed that the individual made sense of the world through their interaction with the (social) environment, and that knowledge and meaning were historically and culturally constructed through cultural processes and action. This led to his development of the ‘Genesis of higher mental functions of the child’ (Vygotsky, 1997a) and
the identification that new habits, formed through contact with others in society, and through mediating tools and signs, would shape new patterns of behaviour (Luria, 1935; Sameroff, 2009). His ‘thinking about thinking’ permeated all facets of his work and although his focus was on the development of thought in the individual, his ideas on mediated and goal-orientated activity formed the basis for later forms of activity theory developed by Aleksei Leontiev (1975) and more recently by Yuri Engeström (2015).

My interpretation of Vygotsky’s translated works draws upon two key overarching philosophical principles rather than utilising his individual ideas as an answer to a problem. Firstly, to adopt a systemic approach to mediated activity through the application of a systems perspective. Vygotsky argued that human activity was a complex structure of experiences, and that there was a danger in adopting a reductionist approach that would simply describe the elements of activity. Such an approach denotes a separateness between the human and the environment and ignores the fact that practices can be ‘interpreted uniquely by different individuals’ (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019, p.8). This type of analysis by element could be compared to the chemical analysis of water broken down into hydrogen and oxygen which ‘are of a different nature than the whole from which they were derived’ (Veresov & Fleer, 2016, p.330). The elements themselves do not determine activity, instead their meaning is refracted through a ‘prism of the [parent’s] emotional experience [perezhivanie]’ (Vygotsky, 1994, p.340 italics in original). There is a need to explain the connections and relations between the elements of activity as a unit of the whole (unity), and by bringing the concept of perezhivanie into activity, the complexity of educational choice is emphasised. Activity becomes dynamic and untimely, it queries binaries and rethinks notions of subject – object dualism. An example here is the
development of imagination where individual elements may correspond with reality but that it is the combination of the elements that are reworked through experiences and transformed into imagination (Vygotsky, 2004). Such a systemic approach acknowledges the interdependency of elements where ‘every element has properties that are subject to that system’s function, and no element can be changed without affecting the whole system’ (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019, p.5).

Secondly, the social origin of human activity. Vygotsky (1994) emphasised the role of society in shaping human behaviour through culture, language and practice; that the strength of the individual was found in their membership within a social group. This emphasis on the social origin of activity highlights how the behaviour of an individual needs to be considered within their social context and not separated from practices within society.

These core principles can be found in much of Vygotsky’s work and have provided a basis for my exploration of the relational activity of a parent choosing education (Bakhurst, 2009; Sameroff, 2009).

2.3 Mediated activity

Vygotsky’s concept of human activity recognised that behaviour (activity) is not a simple reaction to a stimulus where A→B, but is mediated through a prism of emotions and experiences referred to in Russian as ‘perezhivaniya’ (plural) or ‘perezhivanie’ (singular) (Vygotsky, 1994, p.339 italics in original). Perezhivanie is seen as the way in which a person might relate to experiences and objects in their environment, and through interactions within society (Vygotsky, 1997b). It is a word that is difficult to translate into English and is interpreted in different ways. Some argue that Vygotsky himself used the term both as a phenomenon,
and as a concept or theoretical lens (Veresov, 2017). In keeping with Vygotsky’s argument for unity I do not seek to separate perezhivanie as a thing, an experience, or a tool/concept. Instead, it is all of these at once and perhaps this is why Vygotsky’s (1994) use of perezhivanie in ‘The problem of the environment’ was in terms of an emotional experience, as ‘a unity of environmental and personal features’ (p.343) that helps to explain why two people experiencing the same thing (for example a school building) may react in different ways.

Vygotsky portrayed the basis of this theory of mediated activity as a triangular scheme (A→X→B), where ‘X’ represented mediation. A simple example used by Vygotsky was the development of memory (recalling the name of something) and the use of a knot in a handkerchief (X) to stimulate thinking. In this example the knot (X) held meaning for the individual, they associated the knot with a memory. Whilst, in this example, it was a simple memory recall function, this also symbolised how ‘X’ could mean different things for different people depending on their emotional experiences (perezhivanija) (Vygotsky, 1997b, p.86).

Figure 1: Vygotsky’s triangular scheme of activity
This triangular scheme or model of activity thus emphasised the role of mediation (X) within human activity, whether that be an internal activity of thinking or an external activity towards a goal (B).

2.3.1 The mediating role of history, society and relationships

Building on this scheme of activity, Vygotsky went on to explore the important role of mediation (X) in much of his work. His writing on imagination and creativity in childhood (2004) is a clear example of how he brought together the mediating role of history, society and relationships as part of an active process of thinking that ‘takes a circular path’ (p.21). In this account, the interactive nature of activity took the form of imagination (thought) that started with previous experiences, was mediated by culture, society and the emotions evoked through interactions with the environment (perezhivanie) and was then transformed into reality. The terms ‘circle’ and ‘cycle’ appeared to be used interchangeably here within the translated works of Vygotsky. I argue that one does not return to the original starting point of thought that a circular path would indicate, instead the process is more of a spiral of thought over time with each component developing from and relating with the one before. Indeed, this is not unlike Sameroff’s (1975) transactional model of human development where the relationship between a child and their experiences is reciprocal, with each impacting on the other over time.

Such a cycle of constructing activity can be summarised through four principal components each leading to new associations between thought and reality:

1) History and experiences. This component of activity referred to the experiences a person had in the past in the form of their history but also their
experiences in the present. These experiences would provide the material from which thinking would be constructed.

2) Culture and society. Vygotsky referred to this component as social experience whereby thinking about something that had not yet happened could be influenced by the past experiences of others. In this way, thinking about a future possible reality would not be confined by the boundaries of one’s own experience but could ‘venture far beyond these boundaries, assimilating, with the help of his imagination someone else’s historical or social experience’ (Vygotsky, 2004, p.17).

3) Relationalities. This third component is a type of association described by Vygotsky as the ‘emotional experiences’ arising from a situation or environment. It is here that perezhivanie (Vygotsky, 1994, p.339) highlights the role of subjectivity and the emotions arising from a situation or aspect of the environment. ‘Relationalities’ thus refers to the relationships arising through perezhivanie.

4) Transformation. This final component in Vygotsky’s cycle of activity represents the associations made between imagination (thinking) and reality. During the first three components mental associations (or dissociations) between historical experiences, the experiences of others in society, and relationalities would have been made. Transformation is the point at which internal thought is crystallised into something new, a new reality that has not been seen before. This new reality then ‘begins to actually exist in the real world, and can go on to affect other things’ (Vygotsky, 2004, p.20).
Although Vygotsky did not portray his thinking diagrammatically, I have done so in Figure 2 below as this helps to clarify the interactive nature of mediated activity with each component of activity linked to the other.

![Figure 2: Cycle of constructing activity](image)

Over the past century, since Vygotsky formulated his concepts of individual human activity \((A \rightarrow X \rightarrow B)\), there have been different lines of theoretical development, with both a quantitative increase in the use of activity theory (Roth & Lee, 2007) and a qualitative development of new theory formations.

The limitation of Vygotsky’s ideas in terms of his theory of activity is said to be related to how the unit of analysis remained focused on the individual rather than on collective activity within society (Engeström, 1987). The ideas of Vygotsky’s student, Alexsei Leontiev (1903-1979), sought to address this limitation, as has the more recent work of Engeström (1987) and his followers; however, my own focus remains on the individual activity of a parent making an educational choice for their young child. It is for this reason that my own theory of activity is firmly rooted within Vygotskian socio-cultural theory rather than
networks of interacting systems of collective activity. What Leontiev’s work does offer for my research, is to build upon the ideas that Vygotsky formulated before his untimely death.

2.3.2 The motivating function of a target of thought

Leontiev continued to emphasise the mediating role of the environment and society within activity, the importance of interconnections and the need to move away from dualism (the separation of the individual from the environment) to recognise the complexity of activity related to a target of thought (referred to in Russian as ‘predmet’) (Leontiev, 1981). The notion of predmet is important here as it distinguishes between a subjective target of thought, and ‘objekt’ an object or material objective thing which is the common translation of the Russian term (Kaptelinin, 2005). In activity predmet takes on a motivating function embedded within a system of activity; it is the reason why a parent might start thinking about education for their child, and provides the stimulus for the formation of goals and thus the activity a parent might engage in.

Although Leontiev did not portray his ideas diagrammatically Figure 3 below helps to explain how I have conceptualised his ideas in terms of Vygotsky’s cycle of constructing activity.

![Figure 3: The role of predmet within activity](image-url)
In this way $A \rightarrow X \rightarrow B$ becomes much more involved. ‘$A$’ represents not just the subject (parent) but the point at which they become orientated towards activity. ‘$X$’ is not just one mediating object (such as a knot in a handkerchief) but a cyclic internal activity of thought made up of history and experiences, culture in society, and relationalities. Finally, ‘$B$’ can be seen as the point of transformation, where activity is crystallised into reality as external action or a new way of thinking.

Leontiev’s (1981) notion of activity recognised that an individual does not act in isolation but within society, in relation with others and with things. Individual action could no longer be seen as separate from society but as part of society, subject to conditions (the rules of the system or field), even the state of material objects (things) could change according to *perezhivanie*. Activity became recognised as being socially mediated with a dynamic interplay between goal-orientated activity, and the conditions or operations that created the means to carry out the action. This is an important consideration within the educational choice process highlighting that although it is an individual parent making a choice, their activity of choosing education takes place within the conditions of their social network and societal expectations.

To apply this philosophy of activity towards parents choosing education for their young child, *orientation* may start with the receipt of a school preference form from the local authority, this would provide a motivation to start thinking about education. The *predmet* becomes the need to start education, which then forms a *motivating function* with a *goal* of choosing education for their child. The *activity* that takes place in order to meet this goal would be mediated by history, society and relationalities and might involve actions such as speaking with friends, looking at what is available in the surrounding areas, searching the
internet, and visiting schools. Different mediating conditions may change the goal if there are no spaces in a school, legislative requirements, finance, logistics, friendships, and so on. The motivation of choosing a specific form of education may need to be satisfied by home education instead of sending their child to school.

2.3.3 New associations

As a philosophy for my own thinking about thinking, Vygotsky’s theory of individual human activity has emphasised the role of history and experience, society and relationalities. His concepts of dissociation (disconnecting from something) and association (to make a mental connection) can be compared to the ideas of Jean Piaget (1923), where connections are made with previous experiences and the activities of others, to highlight the dynamic and iterative process of activity, that might not transform into ‘B’ after all, considerations that I am keen to explore.

Indeed, Vygotsky and Luria (1994) explored how the mediating action of tools and signs (X) could sometimes result in new associations (Y). They referred to the development of memory as an example, and how the use of signs such as an image could stimulate indirect memorising. Rather than A→X→B as depicted in Figure 1, A→X→Y shows how an individual’s history, culture and society can influence the meaning of ‘X’ to result in something different and at times unexpected as portrayed in Vygotsky’s scheme of association in Figure 4 below (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994, p.149).
In Vygotsky’s (1994) scheme of association he referred to the symbolism of light passing through a prism which then refracts the influence of ‘X’; hence activity mediated by ‘X’ may result in ‘Y’ instead of ‘B’. He maintained that the emotional experience arising from a situation or the environment would determine what kind of influence that situation might bring. The prism itself was therefore seen as \textit{perezhivanie} (emotional experience).

The problem with the symbolism of a prism is its fixed state with flat polished surfaces that refract light (it changes direction). In effect, the light is the same but displaced elsewhere as portrayed in Figure 5 below:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{prism.png}
\caption{Light refracting through a prism}
\end{figure}

In activity, the effects of mediation would appear to be much more dynamic than a prism or refraction would imply. Such complexity needs something more than
the symbolism of a prism that refracts light. It is at this juncture that the language of *intra*-action and *diffraction* from Karen Barad (2007) provides conceptual tools for re-working the traditional notion of activity as A→X→B to recognise the entangled nature of activity within the process of choosing education that might not always lead to ‘B’.

2.4 Re-working the traditional notion of activity

Barad’s theorising about the relationships arising through the entanglement of individuals and things in the environment, relates to a theoretical turn away from dualisms in cultural theory, known today as ‘new materialism’. New materialism recognises the nature of interconnected phenomena: the intra-play arising between humans, the language they use, and their *intra*-action with objects around them (Sencindiver, 2017). Originally termed as ‘neo-materialism’ by Braidotti and DeLanda, in the 1990’s new materialism has sought to transcend dualisms that positioned nature on one side and culture on the other (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012) and this sits comfortably with Vygotsky’s core argument as already explored in 2.1.

By accounting for ‘how practices matter’ (Barad, 2007, p.90) the conceptual lens of *intra*-action (rather than interaction) recognises that meaning is iteratively reconfigured and mutually constituted, emerging through *diffracted* and entangled intra-relating. For Vygotsky, meaning was mediated through tools and signs, but also through emotion (*perezhivanie*). In new materialism, meaning emerges through diffracted intra-action arising between the individual, society and things. In the following sections I explore the language of intra-action and diffraction and what this brings to activity, before going on to re-imagine the activity of educational choice in 2.5.
2.4.1 Intra-action

Barad’s (2007) notion of ‘intra-action’ signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies’ (p.33). This is in contrast to the term ‘interaction’ used by Vygotsky, a term that implies a dualism of subject and object and singular direction of activity toward a goal. Human beings do not simply interact with each other or with objects in their environment as this implies a separate agency that precedes their interaction; instead agency emerges through intra-action in relation to their mutual entanglement (Barad, 2007). Intra-action acknowledges the ‘collective and interconnected nature of mediation’ (Cypher, 2018, p.2).

Objects, things, or matter, are seen as active, self-creative, productive and unpredictable, forming and emerging within relational fields (McGregor, 2020).

As an example, a building is only seen by a parent as a school because of intra-action. It was not a school before that intra-action, only a building. Furthermore, a ‘school’ brings with it meaning in terms of how it is used and seen in society, but also through a parent’s relationship with it, through their own history and experiences of education - through relationalities. Some may feel a sense of belonging within the building, others may not.

The importance of relational fields within intra-action is similar to Vygotsky’s use of ‘perezhivanie’ to recognise the emotion arising through experiences within an environment. It helps to explain how individuals can relate and respond to the same thing in different ways depending on their history, experiences and relationalities as already explored. Perezhivanie on its own, is not intra-action but forms part of intra-action. The parent is not passive in how they are influenced by the materials and conditions of activity; there is a relational lens (Mohr, 2013) needed to recognise the dynamic intra-action arising between the
parent and mediating conditions that sometimes creates new associations (Leontyev, 1977).

The subject (in this case the parent) has a focus on education for their child and their decision making process is being influenced by a dynamic intra-action arising within the community, the macro-environment, and through intra-actions with objects in their environment. Education policy frames the timescale for expressing a school preference and when to start school. Materials, such as a computer screen in the classroom, bring their own history and mediated meaning and are interpreted by the parent as a representation of education in that setting. The computer screen is not just present as a computer screen, it brings meaning in terms of what a child may be doing (sitting at a computer), how they are learning (through a computer instead of engaging with staff and peers), where they are learning (indoors), and what they are learning (abstract concepts rather than concrete exploration).

Intra-action arises through experiences of the past, experiences of the present, and a vision for the future. These intra-actions can be seen as a web of activity where the process of educational choice is not linear toward a goal, but is messy and complicated as parents engage with the different elements of choice and the meanings these evoke.

Through intra-action, a new understanding of education is created by the parent that is not a simple reflection of what education is (a reception class in a mainstream school), but an entangled web of activity that shapes what education might be (home education, independent, Montessori or perhaps Steiner education) (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012; Ingold, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987a).
2.4.2 Diffraction

Diffraction is a notion in physics that refers to the physical action of waves bending and spreading after encountering an obstacle or aperture. Barad (2007), adopts the concept of diffraction as a way of thinking about how intra-action can create difference and how the relations of difference come to matter. This is important within the activity of educational choice as it helps to explain how and why parents may respond to history and experiences, to their intra-actions arising within society and to the relationalities evoked by materials in the environment in different ways.

Drawn from quantum physics, the notion of diffraction is a physical phenomenon that refers to how waves (such as sound waves or those in a beam of light or a pool of water) bend and spread (diffract) when they encounter an obstacle or opening (much like the ripple effect produced by the sea water pouring through a narrow gap). During diffraction the waves overlap and either combine or cancel each other out. This is known as constructive and destructive interference and in terms of light waves the effect can be seen in the resultant alternating pattern of light and dark as shown below:

![Figure 6: Light diffracting through an aperture](image-url)
For Barad (2007), the language of *diffraction* helps to recognise the effects of difference (the diffractive pattern of light and dark). Philosophically Barad utilises this concept of diffraction as an alternative to reflection or refraction with an emphasis on how diffraction helps to map where the effects of difference appear. It recognises the complexity in activity in a way that Vygotsky’s (1994) symbolism of refraction through a prism does not. It pays attention to how differences are made and the effects of those differences (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). Diffractive patterns make ‘wave-like behaviour explicit’ (Barad, 2007, p.81), and in this sense it is the wave and resultant pattern that becomes more important than the aperture or obstacle. This helps to move my research away from simply describing the elements of choice to instead analyse the activity of educational choice (the diffractive waves).

Barad (2007) goes into great depth exploring diffraction as a philosophy and there is not the time or space to do justice to her ideas here. What is important to note is how the physical phenomenon of diffraction is used here as a language that can create new ways of theorising the activity of parents making an educational choice for their child. Rather than Vygotsky and Luria’s (1994) refracted activity A→X→Y the phenomenon of diffraction now leads to A→X→?, where ‘?’ represents the effects of difference.

As already explored in 2.3, activity is mediated through the intra-actions that arise between a parent and the components of history and experience, through society, and through relationalities. The effect of that intra-action is akin to waves encountering an obstacle (such as not being able to afford a private school) or a narrowing of a path (no school transport). As waves would bend and spread out, so might the way a parent thinks about education bend and spread. Each component of activity therefore has the potential to change the
way a parent thinks about education for their child. At times their thinking is confirmed (constructive interference). At other times their thinking changes (destructive interference). How a parent thinks about education, their history, culture, and intra-actions in society, diffract their activity to reconfigure and transform the choice they make for their child.

Theoretically the notion of *diffraction* brings a dynamism to choice, as well as movement and expansion. It recognises how intra-actions arising between an individual, their experiences, society and things can be reconfigured to create new ways of thinking about education. It moves the rhetoric of choice away from a discourse of cause and effect to consider relationalities and entanglements. Through intra-actions differences appear, different ways of thinking about education and what a parent may envisage for their child. Just as a beam of light hitting an obstacle might diffract around or through an aperture, so might a parent’s thinking about education as they engage with the elements and components of choice. It is not the component or element of choice itself that becomes important but what emerges through intra-action.

As a way of conceptualising this phenomenon, picture what happens when stream water encounters rocks in its path, what comes to matter for the observer is the effect of the intra-action arising between the rocks and the water. Circular ripples can be seen spreading out from each point of intra-action, combining and overlapping as portrayed in the figure below:
Turbulence occurs as the water forges its way forward, sometimes returning to its original course, sometimes finding a new path. By bringing diffraction into activity the intra-actions arising between an individual and their history, society and relationalities can be seen to create new patterns of understanding that may change according to time, space and place. The notion of diffraction emphasises movement and expansion as a result of intra-action within activity.

2.5 Re-imagining activity

The new materialist concepts of intra-action and diffraction thus provide a language for exploring the effects of mediation and the associations a parent makes with education. When combined with Vygotsky’s theory of constructing activity the relational nature of choice comes to the fore, transcending dualism and emphasising the intra-relations arising between individuals, their experiences, and objects in society.

Vygotsky’s thinking (alongside that of his peers) from the late 1920’s incorporated new materialistic concepts even if their language at the time did not reflect the language that Braidotti, DeLanda, Haraway, Murriss and Barad
have used in more recent times (Levant, 2017). Vygotsky (1987b) himself recognised the importance of considering where the ideas of contemporary theory might intersect with his own and where gaps may emerge and if permission were needed from Vygotsky to make the connections I have, I believe he would have given it.

My own thinking has not followed a linear process but has diffracted, making new associations along the way (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994) to now re-imagine activity as ‘diffractive activity’ based upon five principles:

- firstly, a recognition of the qualitative uniqueness and complexity of human activity
- secondly, activity is formed through the intra-actions arising between the individual, their experiences, society, and relationalities.
- thirdly, that individual activity within society is shaped by patterns of difference. The language of diffraction provides a theoretical frame for exploring the effects of difference within activity.
- fourth, the importance of the connections and relations (the entanglements) within activity. There is a danger that breaking down experiences into component elements overlooks the unity or structure of the whole.
- finally, that activity is dynamic and untimely. It is in constant motion, forming over time, in different circumstances and in relation to previous intra-actions.

These five principles have shaped my own thinking about activity as intra-active, diffracted, entangled, and in constant motion. Vygotsky’s cycle of constructing activity as set out in Figure 2 can now be developed further to consider ‘what
next', by bringing intra-action and diffraction together as ‘diffractive activity’ as portrayed in Figure 8 below.

*Figure 8: Diffractive Activity*

Much like the action of a stream encountering rocks in its path (represented above by history, society and relationalities), the Intra-action arising between the components of choice results in diffractive patterns as the waves overlap, spread out, and reform (association and dissociation) before they resolve (transformation). My development of *diffractive activity* thus provides a conceptual framework for thinking about the activity of educational choice, but also for the activity of my research. By bringing together Vygotsky’s (2004) theory of activity, and the language of intra-action and diffraction from Barad (2007), I have been able to gain insight into the socio-cultural elements of activity arising between the parent, the field of education, and the process of choice.
Diffractive activity offers a philosophical framework for thinking about educational choice. It provides a structure for my own writing by emphasising the entangled nature of history, society and relationships in activity. Whilst it is necessary to identify the separate elements of educational choice (much like one would first collect together the ingredients before baking a cake), this represents only a starting point for thinking about the activity of parents making an educational choice for their young child. What is important is the whole system of activity, the connections and relations between the elements of choice as components within activity, and how the elements are refracted through the prism of a parent's emotional experience (*perezhivanie*).

In this thesis there is a cycle to my writing as I consider the mediating role of history, society and relationships as they pertain to each chapter. What will come to matter is how this cyclical approach enables a fresh view of educational choice that does not simply describe my findings in terms of the elements of choice, but goes further to consider how these relate and intra-act as an entangled whole in chapter six.
3.0 Context and literature review

In this review of the literature, I seek to contextualise parental choice of pre-compulsory education within today’s system of education in England. My particular concern is in relation to how the system of education, and a parent’s intra-actions with others, mediates the choices they might make.

The literature on educational choice both in England and in other countries tends to have a focus on choice of secondary school, and choices made between schools located within inner cities. My focus on parents making a choice of pre-compulsory education, when a child might typically start in a school reception class at four years of age, is an area that has received less attention. As a consequence, this qualitative and critical review of the literature relating to educational choice (see appendix three for an overview of the key texts, the stage of education they relate to and the link to my own research), has not been ‘a search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning’ (Geertz, 1973, p.5). It has been a frustrating process born out of a tension between a complicated system of education and the multifaceted nature of choice.

Perhaps it is this very complexity that has driven researchers in the field to focus on just one component of choice at a time such as equality (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1994), policy (Bagley, 2006; Ball, 2013), privatisation (Tooley, 2003), or admissions (Coldron, Willis & Wolstenholme, 2009). There is a danger in this approach as it suggests a cause and effect or as Vygotsky (1997a, p.28) might have said a ‘stimulus–response’ hypothesis, that neglects the activity of the whole. In addition, the majority of choice literature was published following the introduction of parental preference in the late 1980’s and so may appear rather
focused on that era at times. More recent literature refers to these seminal texts as the basis for their argument and a return to the original avoids the danger of cyclical reinterpretation that may shift ideas and meaning.

In an effort to bring context to the activity of educational choice whilst providing a narrative that scaffolds my thinking throughout this thesis, I have found myself returning to Vygotsky (2004) and in particular his cycle of activity, that begins with the past before considering the mediating effect of society, culture and relationships. In this chapter, I explore the history and legislation surrounding educational choice for children at four years of age. I follow this by considering the influence of culture and society on the choices that parents have been making since the introduction of parental preference and the Educational Reform Act 1988. Finally, I explore how the individual activity of choice is framed within the literature and the role of power.

3.1 History and policy

Parental choice of pre-compulsory education in England is framed by a complex history during which the age of compulsory education was decided, and the introduction of parental preference was brought into legislation.

England’s educational system today is a product of history, it has evolved over time as have the government’s perceptions of what is best for children and the country. Educational policy has developed through ‘contradictions, outliers and ‘knee-jerk’ reactions to crises’ (Ball, 2013, p.114), leading to a system of education that is convoluted and multifaceted. Political ambition and religious doctrine in the 1870s contributed to a lack of a cohesive state education system and to the multifaceted system of education that parents need to negotiate today (Ball, 2018). In this section I first explore the history of compulsory education
and choice and then consider the tensions arising within the policy landscape of today.

3.1.1 History of compulsory education and choice

Education for all sections of society in England was introduced during the Industrial Revolution within the Elementary Education Act 1870. The act gave provision for schools to be set up and for the local authorities to introduce bylaws requiring children from the age of five to attend school. The age of five was an arbitrary decision, arising from a committee debate on the Act with a focus on a child being available for work as soon as possible (Woodhead, 1989). The Elementary Education Act 1876 then made education compulsory for all children from the age of five and held parents responsible for their child’s education, in reading, writing and arithmetic, from the age of five for five years until they reach the standard of proficiency set out within Lowe’s Code of 1862.

Despite the passing of time the same principles remain today with compulsory education starting at five years of age and parents remaining responsible for their child’s education.

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable—

(a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
(b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise (HM Government, 1996, p.4 own emphasis)

The Education Act 1996 goes on to state that ‘pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents’ (HM Government, 1996, p.5) and thus does not stipulate a requirement for children to be in school.

From the beginning of education for the masses, compulsory education did not always equate to compulsory attendance at school. Choice has always been a
site of contestation, of oppression or achievement and advantage. Indeed the requirement for every child in England to attend school only made an appearance in legislation between 1880 and 1921, then again between 1936 and 1944 (see appendix four for details of legislative changes). Despite the passing of 76 years since compulsory schooling was last seen, the language of ‘compulsory education’ and ‘compulsory schooling’ appears interchangeable for parents and within the literature, and blurs the boundaries between education and schooling (For example; Cunningham, 2006; Hargreaves, 2019; McDowall-Clark, 2013). For several parents participating in my research, education is school. The experiences children have outside of school are not valued in the same way and this is an argument I have pursed in other works (Bamsey, 2020; Bamsey et al., 2020a).

Whilst schooling was not always compulsory, the opportunity to send children to school did provide convenient childcare, ‘particularly if the mother had to try to find work outside the home’ (Cunningham, 2005, p.100). For many, then and now, attending school from an early age provided a convenience. The requirement for a child to be in education was met, and a child was cared for so that a parent could work.

Today the increasing pressure of standard assessment tests has created a downward pressure that the parents in my own study have felt, a ‘backwash’ phenomenon also seen at a global level (Chawla-Duggan & Lowe, 2010, p.267). There is now an expectation for children to start school at four as part of the government’s agenda for ‘investing in human capital as a means of improving the nation’s competitive edge in a growing world economy’ (Boronski & Hassan, 2015, p.187). The earlier a child starts school, the better prepared they will be when they start compulsory education. Whilst the phenomenon of four-year-olds
in school started as convenient childcare, it has now become a social norm (Searle, 1995) with 94% of four-year-olds in England in some form of funded education (National Statistics, 2020).

Nevertheless parents have always had a choice regarding how and where they educate their child(ren); even when legislation required school attendance it did not stipulate which school. The Education Act 1980 did not change this right to educational choice but it did place a duty on local authorities to make arrangements for parents to express a school preference. I contend that this more overt demonstration of a right to choose also shifted the focus from a choice of educational approach to choosing between schools.

The policy intention (Ball & Bowe, 1992) of introducing parental preference within education was to ‘prioritise the economic well-being of the nation’ (Abbott, Rathbone & Whitebread, 2013, p.79). Politicians envisaged a ‘market utopia where every school gets better … and the magic of competition ensures that every consumer is happy’ (Ball, 1993, p.5). Neoliberalism and right wing educationalist views saw market forces as ‘an antidote to regulation and intervention both within the public sector and in relation to the management of the economy’ (Ball, 2013, p.84). Education as a private good (benefitting the individual), provided learning, improved social status and future earnings for the individual. A public good (benefitting the general population) could also be felt in terms of equality, economic growth and employment (Levin, 1987).

The right to choose within the disciplines of competition meant that schools were required to act more like businesses and were financially dependent on the successful recruitment of students.

The education market (like all markets) is intended to be driven by self-interest: first, the self-interest of parents, as consumers, choosing
schools that will provide maximum advantage to their children; second, the self-interest of schools or their senior managers, as producers, in making policy decisions that are based on ensuring that their institutions thrive, or at least survive, in the marketplace (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995, p.2).

The policy of marketisation had an intention of handing power back to the individual and the schools. Power in this sense was rationalised as the power to choose – for schools to choose how to use their funds and for parents to compare and contrast educational offerings, to choose to become involved in the activities of their schools and to have a say. Intended policy (Ball & Bowe, 1992), was to drive school improvement by introducing competition into the education market place; successful schools would thrive and schools failing to recruit students would close.

Later legislation, such as the Education Reform Act 1988 built on the principle of parents expressing a school preference, and the Education and Inspections Act 2006 set out a duty on Local Authorities to support the parental choice agenda. In 2010 the Coalition government introduced the Academies Act 2010 and with it, the opening of additional schools in the form of Free Schools (state funded academy schools able to decide their own curriculum), thus increasing both the rhetoric of choice and the range of school choices available to parents.

The practices and discourse arising from the response of schools and parents to the changing field of education created a quasi-market system (with market-like mechanisms), with competition and market forces requiring schools and registered early years settings to become more responsive to the interests and needs of parents (Ball, 2013). The choice agenda positioned parents ‘as consumers rather than citizens’ (Ward & Eden, 2013, p.28), and schools became judged on their performance in league tables, more akin to choosing a commodity on the supermarket shelf. In principle such a system should drive
improvement, transferring power from the government to the parent (Abbott, Rathbone & Whitebread, 2013). In practice, the free market elements of choice, competition, demand-led finance and autonomy are embedded within the ‘structural position and significance given to the public interest’ (Bagley, 2006, p.357). There are tensions between legislation and policy, practice and culture that have provoked an interest in choice research over the ensuing decades.

Today’s field of education in England includes home-education, private and maintained schools, multi-academy trusts, free schools, grammar schools, church schools, special schools, small schools, international schools, forest schools and more. Alongside the burgeoning of free schools there has been an increase in the availability of different educational approaches with free schools and academies able to offer a curriculum other than the National Curriculum for some subjects (Department for Education, 2014b). The changing system of education has arisen from an intra-action arising between history and society. The consequences of globalisation have led to tensions and contradictions in policy with implications in terms of “social justice’, ‘social cohesion for the sake of stability’ or ‘individualism, the market and meritocracy” (Chawla-Duggan & Lowe, 2010, p.264).

3.1.2 Tensions within the policy landscape

Educational legislation and policy are key to the rules, conditions, and boundaries in the field of educational choice. They set out the intention of introducing parental preference, the requirements in England for a child to be educated, the age of compulsory education, the role of the local authority, and the boundaries within which parents act. Policy reconfigured within the practice of educational choice is not a stimulus-response process where the policy sets
out the parameters for educational choice and parents uniformly react to that policy by making a simple choice of school. Policy enactment is messy and complicated. Such a diverse educational landscape should provide the very choice that drives a free market; in practice each of these educational approaches are constrained in their offer through systems of accountability in terms of sufficiency, financial sustainability, and performativity as I shall go on to explore.

The first system of accountability that mediates choice is one of sufficiency. The local authority has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient school places for all children in their area (HM Government, 1996), as such it cannot allow a school to close if that would result in insufficient school places for the pupil population. This duty sits in tension with the marketised approach to education that should drive school improvement, when a school begins to fail it is in practice supported to survive by the local authority because of their concern over sufficiency. Furthermore, where a school is over-subscribed it is the school that decides which students to accept and the parental preference becomes side-lined. In 2018 over one million primary school places in England were in schools rated as ‘less than good’ by the Office for Standards in Education Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) and nearly 35,000 new school places were being made in schools rated as ‘less than good’ or with no Ofsted judgement (Department for Education, 2018b).

A further tension, between the local authority sufficiency practice and the policy of choice as a driver for school improvement, is the system of directing failing schools to become academies with the support of a sponsor and most sponsors are Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2018). Once the school becomes an academy it is seen as a new
school and will not have an Ofsted judgement until the next inspection which may not be for three years (Ofsted, 2019b). This means that the local authority statistics can be manipulated, reducing the number of schools in their region as ‘failing’ through academy conversion or re-brokerage (the process academies follow when an academy school fails). Parents are therefore not always able to assess a school’s quality in terms of Ofsted outcome when making their educational choice. In practice, the local authority sufficiency duty reduces both the information available to parents and their educational options. Rather than opening a new free school and increasing choice, existing failing schools are simply moved under the umbrella of another organisation, class sizes are increased and space utilised differently.

A second system of accountability can be found within the need for financial sustainability in schools, and the early years and school finance policy as set out within the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2020. School finance is a thorny area that is reliant on pupil numbers, cross referenced with the number of available places in the school, social deprivation, and pupil premium as a start (HM Government, 2020). The intention is to ensure parity of opportunity across the country based on levels of need and cost, supporting social mobility and sustainability in the light of increasing pupil numbers, increasing staffing costs, pension contributions and inflation (Britton, Farquharson & Sibieta, 2019). Policy-in-use (Ball & Bowe, 1992) means that school finance is derived from pupil numbers in school on a given head-count date in October (HM Government, 2018). Furthermore, local authority funding appears to be based upon the head-count of the preceding year (Department for Education, 2018a). Students need to be recruited onto the school roll before the October head-count as this will directly impact upon the funding received.
Equally, schools will be reluctant to recruit students after head-count because they are not immediately funded. Not only does this encourage early recruitment to school at age four, but it also creates an environment where schools are competing with each other for children, particularly where there is a surplus of places available (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997b).

The fight for financial sustainability, for ‘bums on seats’, means that children are being recruited to school before they reach compulsory school age. The local authority facilitates a school admissions process when children are still only three years of age through a centralised system that parents must apply to within a specified time-period. If a family do not submit the school preference form, within the allocated time frame for their child to start school in the September following their fourth birthday, then a place will not be reserved for their entry into year one (compulsory education) and parents may become responsible to provide transport to school ([Local] Schools Admissions Service, 2018). Policy-in-use means that a parent’s choice for their child to not be in education until the age of five is being eroded. Different approaches to education such as home education or part time schooling are not publicised as a choice (Lees, 2014) nor is the fact that children are not required to be in education until the term after they turn five. School preference is expressed as a choice of school at age four, not a choice of educational approach from five.

Schools have become outward looking as they search for a competitive edge, open days, prospectuses, websites and social media accounts have become the norm and I have noted a proliferation of promotional road-side banners in more recent years. Achievement in examinations and inspections are broadcast and parents are positioned as rational choosers (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017), following a formula of necessity that simplifies choice making (Ball, Bowe &
Gewirtz, 2006; Chen & Bradbury, 2019; Vincent, Braun & Ball, 2010). The marketplace is seen as a mechanism through which market pressures will bring about improved provision, where good schools will thrive and failing schools will close (Ball, 2018; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Colburn, 2012; Tooley, 1992).

In practice schools must now adopt the role of a business, managing significant sums of money, staff, and marketing as well as the provision of education in a competitive marketplace (Armstrong, 2018). Schools are competing for the ‘best’ students with higher abilities and cognitive skills (Robert, 2010), because this will impact upon examination results and the school’s ranking in league tables.

The policy of introducing choice into the education market place relies on parents acting objectively in a goal orientated fashion, making ‘individualistic decisions about how to maximise their personal gain’ (Duncan et al., 2004, p.255). Parents are expected to engage in a process of identifying the available options and choosing from among these through the application of consistent criterion (Levin & Milgrom, 2004; Scott, 2000). These decisions are based upon the information made available to parents such as cost, transport and quality (Allen, Burgess & McKenna, 2014). Government websites allow for school comparisons based on distance from home, school performance, examination results and the number of teaching staff. Parents in their role as active choosers are positioned to be ‘good’ parents making an objective choice that is right for their child, offering them the best educational opportunities (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013). As I argue throughout this thesis, educational choice is an entangled activity of relationalities that is subjective in nature (as explored in 3.3.1). Rational choice theory does not stand up in light of published research on educational choice, because parents are not making educational decisions
in an objective manner by weighing up costs and benefits (for example: Bradbury, McGimpsey & Santori, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Gurney, 2017; Mann, Cuskelley & Moni, 2015).

Finally, *performativity* in terms of curriculum, examination and inspection is another example of how competitive individualism is mediated in practice. The implementation of pupil assessment in the form of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) at age five or standard assessment tests (SATs) in Key Stage One and Two, means that all education providers must ensure children are learning specific knowledge and practices in order to succeed in these assessments. Schools are judged by inspecting bodies such as Ofsted or the Independent School Inspectorate (ISI) according to pupil progress toward such assessments and so, although not all schools have to follow a prescribed curriculum such as the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013a), they do have to offer a ‘balanced and broadly based curriculum’ (HM Government, 2010, (1)). In practice, many schools continue to follow the National Curriculum (Roberts, 2019) reducing the educational choices available to parents. In the early years, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2017a) does not currently prescribe a curriculum but the downward pressure from later years testing can be felt. Whilst it is possible for early years providers to seek exemptions from the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) that children should achieve at five (Department for Education, 2017b), children still need to be seen to be making progress toward standard assessment tests at age seven.

Despite the intention for schools to be individualised in order to promote choice, the accountability measures in terms of curriculum and national assessments standardises education and reduces the choices available to parents. There is
a tension between the policy intention to promote choice and the practice of standardising education. Settings are still judged and inspected on the basis of pupil progress toward the next stage of their education – EYFSP results in the early years, and SATs at the end of Key Stage One and Key Stage Two (Ofsted, 2019b). Teaching outcomes (or product) starts in the early years, with a link between attending pre-school and GCSE outcomes, ensuring children are ‘school ready’, and that there are sufficient early years places to enable parents to work (Department for Education, 2015). Although more recent school judgements in England have moved away from outcomes to instead focus on progress (Ofsted, 2019a), the expectation for pupil achievement remains and schools are judged on the number of students progressing towards expected standards. Schools are not individualised when they are all following the same curriculum and working towards the same standard assessment tests.

Steiner Academy schools are a clear example of this policy tension with an exemption granted for the ELGs in maths and literacy whilst also being inspected on the basis of pupil progress towards Key Stage One SATs in maths and literacy. Three Steiner academy schools in the South West of England were graded as inadequate by Ofsted in 2018. They have since been through brokerage, have been taken over by a multi-academy trust, and the exemptions have been dropped (Russell, 2020). Parents wishing to choose a Steiner school for their child have chosen that particular educational philosophy, but the re-brokering of these schools means the educational approach has now changed.

Parents seek out our schools for the artistic way in which children are taught without stress and high pressure. The availability of this kind of education within the state sector is essential if parental choice is to be genuine especially when the mainstream approach of introducing formal learning at a younger age than most of our counterparts in Europe is considered by many educationalists and parents to be too stressful for a substantial number of children (Russell, 2020, p.2).
Where exemptions have been sought for the ELGs in literacy and maths the setting has been unable to articulate and evidence children’s progress toward their SATs and were at risk of receiving poor inspection judgements. Whilst the principle of marketisation promotes individualisation for parents and settings, it appears that the inspection process and funding agreements for academy schools standardises education and restricts choice.

The drive for accountability in terms of sufficiency, financial sustainability and performativity in schools is part of the reconstruction of English education from ‘welfarist’ (protecting the economic and social well-being of citizens, equality and distributive justice), to ‘post-welfarist’ (democracy and competitive individualism) (Gewirtz, 2002). Whilst marketisation encourages competitive individualism, in practice the school inspection process, facilitated by the establishment of Ofsted in 1992 (Courtney, 2016), creates a standardised mechanism for assessing school failure and driving systematic improvements. Ofsted’s inspection framework, or its equivalent for independent schools, emphasises pupil progress, attainment and outcomes, as well as safeguarding and leadership. Standardised testing at the end of Key Stage One and Two, alongside GCSEs and A-Levels form the basis for such judgements and in turn lead to a standardised curriculum.

Such a system of accountability to both the national purse and to families brings with it tensions through what Lyotard (1984, p.55) refers to as the ‘law of contradiction’. School accountability implies a stable system where all variables are known. Contradiction emerges from a lack of knowledge and control over the variables, with parents choosing education not simply on school performance but on a multitude of facets and experiences. Policy is not simply
received and implemented (Bagley, 2006), but is subject to interpretation as it is mediated through history, society and relationalities.

The process of policy from ‘intended’ to ‘actual’ policy and ‘policy-in-use’ (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p.100 own emphasis) highlights tensions and complexities. Choice requires differentiation of provision but the facets of sufficiency, accountability and performativity remove this very differentiation (Taylor & Mackay, 2008). The provision of education within schools becomes standardised and the choice discourse arising from these policy entanglements means that choice relates to a choice of school rather than a choice of educational approach. Not only do these policies mean that educational choice becomes a choice between schools, it has also become something that takes place when a child is only three years of age, ready for them to start in a school reception class in the September after they turn four.

The rhetoric is of increased parental choice, in practice choice is time-bound (in terms of the school preference deadline), limited (there may not be other schools to choose from), and constrained by a set of criteria set out in a school admissions policy, such as distance between home and school, catchment area, gender, ability, and faith. The government’s vision of the education marketplace is referred to by Duncan et al (2004) as a ‘rationality mistake’ (p.256). Social complexity is ill considered within this economic model of choice as ‘all parties are presumed to start from the same basic position, with access to the same sufficient information’ (James et al., 2010, p.630). People do not act in such an individualistic or economically rational way (DeJarnatt, 2008; Duncan et al., 2004). Power, society, emotional and moral concerns, practicalities, and ‘people like us’ (Vincent, Braun & Ball, 2010, p.295) all have an influence within
educational choice, making the process a lot more involved than it appears in political discourse (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014).

This brief analysis of history and policy demonstrates that educational choice today cannot be separated from either the context of educational policy in England, nor from the experiences of education and school passed down from one generation to the next. Through a review of the history of education it is possible to theorise how these experiences provide the foundation from which parents start to make an educational choice for their child today. A choice that arises though their own experiences and the intra-actions arising within society and with the materialities of education.

3.2 The influence of culture, society and things

Parents making an educational choice do so within society, meaning that their culture and intra-actions with others are likely to influence their choice activity. Vygotsky (1997b) emphasised the importance of studying behaviour (in this case educational choice) as a whole, in order to understand the interrelations between a person, their behaviour and their environment. In this section I begin by exploring how choice is conceptualised within society, I then consider how the literature frames educational choice in terms of culture, society and things, before focusing in on the individual activity of choice in section 3.3.

3.2.1 Conceptualising choice within society

The concept of choice has featured historically from Plato’s ‘Crito’ and the decision made by Socrates to drink the poisonous hemlock (Greenberg, 1965; Komorowska, 2011), to Shakespearian tragedies, through to the neoliberal model of ‘competition, choice and calculation’ (Roberts-Homes & Moss, 2021) found in England today. It is a perplexing and complex notion related to decision
making where an individual selects between two or more options. Indeed, we make decisions every day that can sometimes be difficult to comprehend from when to get up in the morning, how to hold a knife and fork, and when to cross the road, to more strategic decisions such as moving house, getting a job and choosing education for a child.

Each choice we make is influenced by knowledge, culture, social capital and the human condition of feelings and instinct. As a consequence there are a number of theories as to how choices are made from the ‘Socratic method’ of using questioning and dialogue for enquiry (Denman, 2003), to the economics of rational choice (Manzo, 2013), and the more ‘irrational’ and interpersonal social choice theory (Arrow, 2012). Each of these theoretical frames can help us to ‘unpack and better understand’ the ‘ineffability of choice’ (Harper, Randall & Sharrock, 2016, p.1) in different ways.

The ‘Socratic method’ is not so much a concept of choice (why a specific choice is made) as a model of decision making (how a choice is made). This method of decision making is based upon Plato’s Socratic dialogues in which Socrates is seen to practise a distinctive philosophical method of enquiry where he examines the ‘reputed wisdom’ (Benson, 2010, p.181) of those he meets, to consider the evidence and draw systematic conclusions. ‘The Socratic method is better used to demonstrate complexity, difficulty, and uncertainty than at eliciting facts about the world’ (Denman, 2003, p.nn). It is about examining the options and exploring the values, principles and beliefs of the stakeholders in any given situation.

In contrast, economic theory positions choice as a process whereby an individual chooses goods or services in order to ‘maximise the satisfaction they
can achieve, given the limited budget available to them’ (Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 2015, p.110). This more utilitarian or rational approach to choice features in the literature in a range of guises, from a formulaic approach whereby the marginal rate of substitution (MRS) between two goods (such as food (F) versus clothing (C)) is plotted on a graph depending on preference (P) ‘MRS=PF/PC’ (Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 2015, p.111), to a model of ‘beliefs, preferences and constraints’ (Manzo, 2013, p.364) whereby the preferences define the choice because the beliefs and constraints are seen as consistent. In such reductionist (Satz & Ferejohn, 1994) models of choice the stability of the factors is questionable and leads to a neo-rational approach that attempts to factor in adaptive preferences such as time and opportunity, which in effect turns ‘irrationality-into-rationality’ (Manzo, 2013, p.366). The result is a more and more complex mathematical formula that fails to consider the ‘unknown unknowns’ where the individual is not always able to access information, articulate their preferences, or identify what choices they have in the first place. As Levin and Milgrom (2004) state,

a main criticism of the most basic rational choice model is that real-world choices often appear to be highly situational or context-dependent. The way in which a choice is posed, the social context of the decision, the emotional state of the decision-maker, the addition of seemingly extraneous items to the choice set, and a host of other environmental factors appear to influence choice behavior [sic] (p.22).

As an alternative, social choice theory has its roots in historical thought and recognises that not all decisions are based on economics. Instead there are environmental and psychological elements of choice at play where ‘people not only misjudge their options, they misjudge them repeatedly and in specifiable ways’ (Harper, Randall & Sharrock, 2016, p.3). Individuals are not making choices in isolation from the rest of the world, they are of the world, living and intra-acting within society. Sociological ideas about the relationship between
human action and social structure, social behaviour, the influence of power, gender, ability and ethnicity have an influence in the decisions people make (Elliott, 2014; Murphy, 2013). As such choice cannot be conceived as separate from society but as part of society ‘derived on the basis of an agent's location in a social structure’ (Satz & Ferejohn, 1994, p.72). This is not to say that the principles of rational choice theory do not have a part to play in the decisions people go on to make with an ultimate goal of achieving satisfaction within the parameters present. I contend that there is a continuum to choice theory with a purely economic model at one end of the spectrum and sociological theory at the other. It is a combination of economics and intra-actions within society that influence the choices that an individual will go on to make.

In today’s neo-liberal England competition and economisation are seen as key elements of a free market, with an assumption that buyers and sellers come together to purchase goods and services at an agreed price. In a purely competitive marketplace there would be total satisfaction with freedom of entry to a large number of buyers and sellers, access to perfect information and no obstacles to choice (Levin & Belfield, 2006). There is a belief that the economy works best when individuals can pursue their own interest, that everyone is equal, and that the market will ensure ‘survival of the fittest’ (Lauder et al., 2006, p.25). This shift from citizen to consumer positions the ‘neoliberal subject [as] self-interested and competitive; a capable market trader and informed consumer, independent and self-reliant’ (Roberts-Homes & Moss, 2021, p.9).

In practice the constraints of discursive and material contexts have resulted in a complex, unstable and contradictory set of practices that neglects the positionality of the individual and their material conditions (Blackmore, 2019;
In a society where we are not all equal, where there are obstacles to choice and where information is not freely available, there are winners and losers. The winners have more access to information and are able to ‘play the market’ to get what they want (as explored in section 3.3), the losers have less power, less choice, more barriers to information and may not be aware they have a choice at all.

The social context of choice means that individuals are acting within a society where there are ‘clashing interests, orientations, and lifestyles’ (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p.4) that bring together individuals on the one hand and yet also create physical and social boundaries that separate. In neo-liberal England individuals are positioned as free agents and active choosers able to forge their own paths in life and yet, at the same time, there is greater ‘dependency on social institutions such as education, employment and consumer markets to deliver individual wants and needs’ (Lauder et al., 2006, p.22). This dependency brings with it constraining forces in terms of hierarchy (the relationship between the transmitter of information and the acquirer), sequence (the order and pace of information) and criteria (what counts as information, rules, conduct, behaviour, expectations) (Bernstein, 2004). As Beck (2005) recognises, ‘the ability to choose … is not an ability everyone has by nature. It is … a learned ability which depends on special social and family backgrounds’ (p.98 italics in original). It means that many people are unable to break free from the influence of their history, circumstance and social background. When it comes to making a choice in any field, options become limited and there is a tendency to accept what is (mainstream schooling) without considering what might be (different forms of education).
In practice trends can be seen in terms of social class, disadvantage and choice (Crozier, 2015) with different ways of life and views of the world forming ‘a matrix within which consumption takes place’ (Featherstone, 2007, p.84). Instead of improving opportunities for all, neo-liberal choice promotes inequality where those with economic advantage and social skills take advantage of the opportunities available to them (such as buying a house close to a good school), pushing out those less able to play the market (Ball, 2013).

More choice therefore leads to more segregation in terms of both class and ethnicity as explored by Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (2006) who identify three typologies of choice that can help to explain these trends. Firstly the ‘privileged choosers’ (p.9) who value and will search out choice; they have the capacity to engage with possibilities whilst recognising complexity and the role of their emotions. Secondly, ‘semi-skilled choosers’ (p.26) have an inclination to choose but are less socially competent or aware of the options available to them. Finally, the ‘disconnected’ (p.34) are disadvantaged and less educated, unfamiliar with the options available to them and lack confidence. With disconnection choice becomes pre-determined and the act of choosing often becomes ‘a process of confirmation rather than comparison’ (p.37). Whilst categorising choosers in this way casts light on a certain disposition and relationship between class and choice there is a need to recognise that not all individuals will fall neatly into one typology or another. A family that is labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ because they are unemployed, uneducated and dependent on social housing is not necessarily incapable of searching out and engaging with choice. What is of note are the influences of choice on a deeper level than just their typology as explored in 3.2.2 below with a focus on choosing education.
3.2.2 Educational choice

Within the literature on educational choice, the influence of culture and society is prevalent, it is frequently explored through the use of Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ (Wacquant, 1989, p.50), rather than activity theory. It is for this reason that I shall now go on to briefly explore Bourdieu’s ideas and the use of his thinking tools within the educational choice literature. Whilst some similarity of thinking can be seen between Bourdieu and Vygotsky, the way Bourdieu’s ideas have been reinterpreted in terms of translation and their application in today’s context means that they have frequently been cited as a causal mechanism for school choice.

Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French philosopher and sociologist who was particularly interested in social, political and cultural practice in order to bring meaning to the actions of people (Grenfell, 2014). This sits comfortably with my own interpretations of Vygotsky’s thinking with a need to move away from dualism to recognise human activity as historically and culturally constituted through social process and action. Perhaps this is unsurprising when both Vygotsky and Bourdieu cited Lewin and Cassirer as inspirations for their ideas (Mohr, 2013).

Bourdieu’s key concepts were the notions of capital, habitus and field, and to provide context for their interpretation within the educational choice literature I shall briefly examine each in turn. Firstly, capital was seen by Bourdieu (1984; 1986) as the money, status and connections that a person may hold. Capital was described as accumulated labour in the form of the ‘material’ or ‘embedded’ within the person (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). When appropriated by individuals it could enable a social energy, which can then act as a force within the structure and functioning of the social world. Bourdieu argued that capital can be found
in three guises, the first being *economic capital* which can be converted into money or property. Secondly, *cultural capital* which can be further broken down into the embodied state (external wealth converted into habitus - dispositions or attitudes), objectified state (cultural artefacts such as paintings), or the institutionalised state (qualifications). Finally, the concept of *social capital* refers to social connections and the volume of capital possessed by each connection.

Bourdieu (1986) argued that in order to account for practice in the social world, capital in all of its forms should be considered. Whilst each can be converted into economic capital, the process of transformation has secondary costs in terms of time and value. In all these forms, Bourdieu argued that capital takes time to accumulate and its distribution would determine the chance for individual success in the social world. An example here is how an individual would need to use their qualifications in order to get a job, which in turn would enable them to accumulate wealth. In terms of educational choice, this means that those parents with the most capital are the most likely to access the education they desire for their child, and for the child to be most successful in their education, and go on to get a well-paid job. It is this principle of capital as a force within the field of education that has been seized by choice theorists, as a mechanism for choice and for the reproduction of inequality within society.

*Habitus* refers to the dispositions and attitudes of an individual (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Bourdieu specifically avoided the use of the term ‘habits’ as he felt this brought with it connotations of a ‘mechanical assembly or performed programme’ (1977, p.218). He claimed that such dispositions were characteristic of certain classes and he used taste as an illustration (for example eating habits) stating that ‘taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (1984, p.6). Habitus is therefore an unthinking way of being, of acting, in the social
world. In a similar approach to that of Vygotsky, Bourdieu recognised that the history and experiences of a person have an influence on present and future activity. A person’s habitus is a way of being, a ‘predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.214) that starts for an individual at birth and is passed down from one generation to the next. These tendencies last over time and in relationship to the environment and society, or in this case, the field of education. Habitus is closely linked with cultural capital as part of the embodied state as already explored. These dispositions and attitudes frame how a person thinks and acts in the social world, they form part of a person’s sense of self and are influential in the formation of identity through intra-actions with others within society (Holland & Lave, 2001). Through identifying a commonality with others ‘I’ becomes ‘us’ and the act of choosing a school can become a means of expressing identity, with the school as a symbolic site of expression and positioning in society (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). Identity formation can thus be described as a process that is unfinished, affected and formed through history, institutions and within local struggles (Holland et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001).

A sense of belonging becomes important to parents with a need to feel comfortable within a social group in terms of habitus, identity, ethnicity, or class (Ball et al., 2013; Crozier et al., 2008). The way in which parents talk about their choice with others provides an opportunity to justify their actions and to identify themselves as belonging within a social group (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013). Educational choice can therefore become a site of contestation, of oppression or strategy, where parents seek a sense of belonging, a match with other people that they identify with, or a desire to become other, to change identity ‘for achievement and advantage’ (Ball et al., 2013, p.284). Not belonging
in education can create a site of struggle where tensions arise between wanting to belong and holding onto history in person. Identity is formed through conflicted practice within the activity of choosing education for the parent and during the child’s experience of education, as part of changing social, cultural and material circumstances (Holland & Lave, 2001; Payler & Georgeson, 2013). How an individual comes to understand who they are is through the worlds they inhabit within the field of education such as school.

Finally, Bourdieu’s concept of field is defined as a social formation or space framed by ‘relations of force’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992, p.19), by history and in relation to the local, national and international context. Individuals are acting in a social field and it is the relations arising between the individual and the social field that become important, not only in terms of identity formation as mentioned above, but in terms of activity and the educational choices they may make. Vygotsky (1997b) emphasised this through his focus on the interrelations between an individual and their environment stating that it is the investigation of these interrelations that is necessary in order to understand behaviour (Vygotsky, 1997b).

The use of Bourdieu’s theory to explore educational choice, suggests that individual choice is made within a field of education, that consists of rules, conditions and boundaries likened to a football field (Thomson, 2014). Within this social space education takes place in school and children are going to school from the age of four, even though compulsory education in England does not start until a child is five and ‘education’ can take place anywhere. At the same time the school admissions policy constrains choice by setting out criteria or parameters for prioritising places when over-subscribed. Generally this includes distance to school and school catchment area as well as siblings,
feeder schools, ability, pupil premium and faith (Department for Education, 2014a). School choice is, therefore, situated within a field of education where choice is not as free as it may seem.

Bourdieu (1984) went on to explore how the notions of capital, habitus and field interrelate using the formula ‘[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice’ (p.101) as a way of accounting for human practices. He argued that power is exerted within fields through the volume and structure of the capital held by the ‘player’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.99), the player holding the most cards (the most capital) will hold the most power and be more successful. In order to play the game of educational choice, parents that want to buy into a ‘good’ school do so by buying or renting a house nearby (Orford, 2018). This is the argument held by many within the educational choice literature in that the most successful players (parents) in the education marketplace will be those holding the most cultural and economic capital (for example Bagley & Hillyard, 2015; Ball, 2003; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 2006; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1994; Vincent, Braun & Ball, 2010; Vincent et al., 2012).

As explored in 3.2.1, the introduction of market mechanisms into the school choice process assumes that the choosers are all equal, and are making an informed choice on the same basis. However parents are not all equally competent, motivated or positioned (Colburn, 2012), they hold different capital, have access to different resources, networks, knowledge, have different experiences, and are thus starting from different places in the competition for education. The literature argues that to be successful within a marketised system of education, parents need to successfully ‘play the market’ (Carroll & Walford, 1997) thus privileging or disadvantaging families according to the
values that inform their decision-making (Ball, 1993; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 2006; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995).

Choice is therefore said to be informed by classed practices geared towards the ‘privileged chooser’ (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995, p.25) who holds more capital as parents actively seek a match between their own habitus and that of the school community. Educational choice has become a domain of middle-classed practices that requires active involvement in the choice process, an ability to decode the educational system, to engage with and to question the educational offer (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). Social and cultural capital play a crucial role facilitating a knowledge of how to ‘work the system’, to question, to maintain pressure, to be remembered (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). The activity of making an educational choice is multi-faceted, ‘choice has different meanings in different class and cultural contexts … it is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon’ (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997a, p.575).

Whilst the link between class and choice has been highlighted by many, using a normative framework to classify parents as a particular class or type of chooser, can be difficult to apply (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997a; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Tooley, 1997). The point of note is the social context of choice informed by how people lead their lives, their history and social group. Whilst concepts of habitus, and capital can help to explain the practice of educational choice, they are not mechanisms for choice; a parent with a history and geography of disadvantage should not have their choices pre-determined (Mills, 2008; Reay, 2004a), and indeed this only privileges some humans over others (Murris, 2021). A parent’s habitus and the capital they hold are recognisably key facets within educational choice and have the potential to reshape activity and the choice to be made. Whilst this is useful there is also a danger of over-simplifying
choice through the application of habitus and capital as causal mechanisms with deterministic power (Mills, 2008; Reay, 2004a). Instead, Bourdieu’s concepts can help to illuminate the social process of choice, recognising the interconnected nature of individuals acting within the field of educational choice.

It is this interconnection, or the relationships within the activity of choice, that become more important than the separate elements of practice. A focus on the relationships affords opportunities to rethink educational choice, to unsettle the discourse that labels some parents as disadvantaged, rational or irrational (DeJarnatt, 2008; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). Bourdieu’s concepts should not be applied as if they were real objects, and I contest that there remains a tendency in the literature to use his concepts as causal mechanisms for educational choices and to argue that such mechanisms drive inequality. This is something I seek to move away from within my own work, to instead focus on the individual intra-actions arising within the field of education and parents engaged in the activity of choice.

My position adopts a different perspective to the majority of the literature on educational choice, firstly because I am keen to seek insight into educational choice as opposed to school choice. Secondly, because of my interest in the parent’s individual activity of choice, as opposed to potential mechanisms that might direct the choices made by particular groups of parents. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Bourdieu’s thinking tools may not be helpful in the analysis of parents engaging in the activity of educational choice for their young child. Indeed, the drawing together of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and the process of internalisation proposed by Vygotsky has been highlighted by others in different fields such as Paul Connolly’s (2004) exploration of how young boys
acquire and produce different forms of masculinity in the early years, and Julian Williams’ (2012) writing on the use and value of mathematics education.

3.3 The individual activity of choice

There is extensive literature on educational choice, policy and the elements or facets of choice. Few, however, consider the activity of choice as a unified interrelated system, where choice is not a linear process but an entangled activity arising through intra-actions. In this section, I seek to explore how the elements and activity of choice are framed within the literature and the role of power within the field of education.

3.3.1 The (ir)rational parent

DeJarnett (2008) introduces the concept of ‘the (ir)rational parent’ (p.1) arguing that parents do not make decisions based on academics and teacher quality when it comes to school choice. By focusing on the elements, rather than the activity of choice, choosing education is in danger of being seen as a process of identifying objective criterion and making a decision in a goal orientated, linear fashion (Scott, 2000), as explored in 3.2.1. Indeed, in some literature there is undue emphasis on these more objective features of choice such as reputation, exam results, class size, staff, single sex / co-ed, pastoral care, location, facilities, special educational needs, religion, and sibling attendance (Allen & Burgess, 2013; Gorard, 1999; Grogan, 2012; Jackson & Bisset, 2005; Williams et al., 2001).

Although Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz’s (1994) work is now over twenty years old, it supports this argument as they emphasised the potential danger of breaking down choice into separate elements such as class. They claimed that this would ‘miss both the dynamism of the process of consumption and remove any sense
of it being embedded in deeper and wider social relations’ (p.44). They argued that the logic of consumption (or in this case educational choice) attaches symbolism to objects informed through cultural determinism and that this is only a partial account informing human action. The dominant concern with culture as a mechanism for choice neglects the role of social relationships, the community and the ‘embodied practices’ (p.46) of parents making an educational choice. There is ‘an emotional side to consumption’ (p.46) where the feel of a school or gut reaction becomes important. ‘To focus only on ‘the act of consumption’ or ‘the culture of consumption’ is to draw attention away from the profoundly social nature of the process’ (p.49).

The emotional or affective response to elements such as those stated above appears to be largely neglected in the literature. Whilst the materiality of education features strongly in literature, this sensitivity to the physical reality of school has not made its way into educational choice (for example: Fenwick & Landri, 2012; Roehl, 2012). The senses and emotions evoked by the materialities of education, such as the school building, a white board, coat pegs, sandpits and the quality and design of facilities shape the way that schools are viewed, and yet receive little attention in the theory of educational choice.

From this material root emanates schools’ values, appeal, social status, and pedagogical organisations – school effects – that empower or weaken the school’s attraction and self-confidence (Poromaa, 2017, p.384).

The materialities of education are located in time and space, framing social practice as individuals pass through and engage with them in the process of activity. Parents are situated in society and are a part of society as they interact with policy, society and the materials of education as part of a process of
meaning making. Poromaa (2017) likens the material as a conductor in an orchestra, holding power with which to shape practice and social intra-actions.

Choice is ‘multi-faceted … not readily accommodated by any one all-encompassing market–consumer, class reproduction or human capital theory’ (Aurini & Davies, 2005, p.471). The practice of choice within the field of education emphasises complexity (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2017) with parents making educational decisions based on relationalities - the emotions and feelings evoked through the power of materials and through the intra-actions arising with the elements of choice within society. Facets of choice, such as a school’s reputation, exam results, transport and resources act as agents in the activity of choice shaping possibilities for education and the way the educational offer is viewed by the parent (Poromaa, 2017). The language of relationalities emphasises the role of emotions in mediation, it repositions the activity of choice as an entangled process of becoming and attends to the effects of difference (Barad, 2007).

In practice the activity of choice is influenced not only by culture and society but by these more relational or affective criteria (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 2006). By conceptualising choice as a multi-faceted activity, the individual nature of choice is emphasised. Individuals will have different experiences of choice, there will be different facets of choice that are important to them and influential in the choice they go on to make. Choice criteria evoke an emotional response that cannot always be expressed in words but which constitutes meaning for the parent (Bowe, Ball & Gewirtz, 1994; Coldron & Boulton, 1999). This affective or relational aspect of choice dynamically reconstructs how a parent thinks about education, mediating the activity of choice and sometimes making new
associations. It is within the affective domain of choice that complexity arises ‘an issue often projected simplistically in official discourses’ (Reay, 1996, p.587).

The relationalities arising through a parent’s intra-actions with the features and materialities of education mediate activity to produce a knotty entanglement of choice. The multi-faceted nature of choice sits at odds with rational choice models which do little to address social networks, emotions, identity, and the dynamic interplay between parents, children and society (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Hemming & Roberts, 2019). The ‘widespread rejection of league tables’ (James et al., 2010, p.631) highlights how school quality and choice is more complex than policy allows. Educational choice is not just a choice made by parents in isolation but is a choice situated within a wider ecology encompassing the individual, the school and educational policy both locally, nationally and globally (Lynch & Moran, 2006). If choice is reduced to ‘crude lists of criteria we will fail to grasp either its impreciseness or its real significance in terms of social and cultural reproduction’ (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997b, p.219). In this way, choice becomes located within a field of education where influences of the micro and macro environment are at play.

3.3.2 The role of power within the activity of choice

As explored in 3.2, the field of education is shaped by ‘relations of force’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992, p.19), in the form of the micro and macro environment. The conditions (materials, rules, and boundaries) set by educational choice policy mean that there is a certain configuration of power at play that impacts upon the individual activity of choice.

The role of power within education has emerged as a facet that interacts within policy and practice, it is found through the relationship between schools and
families, with schools becoming sites that can rival and displace family. Local authorities have a power to grant exemption from school attendance, or conversely to impose a requirement to attend school, to decide which school a child may attend, to agree whether a new school may be opened or an existing school to be closed. The policy of marketising education has an intention of handing power back to the individual through the power to choose but free choice is constrained by what parents are able to choose from, how, when and where.

The power of conditions within society (Foucault, 1979), controls the parameters in which educational choices are made. Whilst such conditions may not be physical (in terms of the prison architecture in which Foucault situated his thinking), configurations of power can be found within the field of education in terms of how space, time and activity represent the parameters in which educational choices are made. Such forces may not always be overt but may take the form of minute signals and responses likened to those used between horse and rider during a 'dressage' test (Foucault, 1979, p.166).

The role of power within educational choice is expressed in terms of the chronology of schooling, the placement of the child in the classroom and the parent outside of the school gates, membership to a social group, of consumer power, the power of the state, disciplinary power, and of power within families (for example; Boulton & Coldron, 1996; Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball, 1994; Bradbury, McGimpsey & Santori, 2013; Connell, 2012; Crozier, 1998; Crozier, Reay & James, 2011; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay & Lucey, 2000). The conditions in which educational choices are made will be different for each individual, where they live, the social groups they are a part of, the activity of choice that they engage in and the capital that they hold (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).
Social power can be seen through membership of social groups, accents, manners, and taste (Bourdieu, 1984) giving access to some schools and not to others. Being part of a social group comes with ‘normalization’ and Foucault (1979) refers to ‘the power of the Norm’ (p. 184) within his ideas on discipline. Bourdieu (1986) describes this sense of belonging with reference to ‘social capital’, having the ‘institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition … to membership in a group’ (p. 10).

Power as time can be seen in terms of the chronology of schooling (Foucault, 1979) – as the movement through the school according to age, the timetable of the school day and the pattern of the academic year, compulsory education starting at five and the invitation from local authorities to express a school preference when a child is still only three. The timetable for choosing education is set out in legislation and seen within the local authority school admissions process. It is linked to the annual rhythm of school formed during the industrial revolution with a need for workers to be available during the summer harvest and children to be available for work as soon as possible. It takes a powerful parent to circumvent the power of time to make an educational choice on their own timetable, rather than that dictated through policy.

Power within the activity of choice is found through the way parents are positioned, moved and articulated (Foucault, 1979). The materials of education such as the school preference form, school comparison websites, school buildings, uniforms and classroom resources shape activity in terms of practice and social intra-actions (Poromaa, 2017). The activity of the parent is punctuated by signals and much like ‘the disciplined soldier’ in Foucault’s (1979, p. 166) writings, obedience is ‘prompt and blind’ (ibid). A good parent (Crozier, 1998; Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013) will adopt the value system of the school
choice process and follow the prescribed route to education for their child. Tensions arise between parent, school, local authority and society for those who do not follow the political agenda of choice.

The role of power within the educational choice discourse does not provide a mechanism for choice but it does mediate the activity of choice as parents reassess the options available to them when coming up against the potential barriers presented by space, time and activity. Since the introduction of increased parental involvement in schools in the 1980s, the needs of the consumer parent have had to be met by the schools and teachers. An entanglement of disciplinary power has formed, developed through intra-actions arising from the power of parents to choose, the resultant activity of schools and teachers, and the power of schools to set policies and practices that parents and children must abide by (Crozier, 1998).

3.4 Providing a context for my research

Through the framework of diffractive activity, I have endeavoured to bring together literature on the different components of choice that began with the history of education before considering the mediating effect of culture and society, and the relationalities arising between the elements and the activity of choice. It has not been a straightforward process as I endeavoured to relate the literature on school choice (which focused mostly on secondary inner city schools) to my own interest in the activity of educational choice for children at four years of age.

Despite the legislation citing ‘compulsory education’ (not ‘compulsory schooling’) I have found myself as a parent, lecturer of early childhood and education, and early career researcher, surrounded by a discourse of education
as school. Children have to be in school, school starts at four, children have to study the content of the National Curriculum, and have to sit national exams (Key Stage SATs, GCSE and A-levels or equivalent level three qualifications). In England this is not the case, children do not have to go to school, or follow any particular curriculum or sit any exams. They just have to be in ‘efficient full time education’ (HM Government, 1996, p.4). What education looks like can be ‘in accordance with the wishes of their parents’ (HM Government, 1996, p.5). Children at the age of four do not have to be in any education at all. Overall, I found that the literature on educational choice in England was limited, it did not address educational choice for a child at four years of age, or consider those parents making a proactive decision to follow a different option to the mainstream schooling offer. Nor did it consider in any depth those parents located in communities where choice was limited, or the fact that children do not have to be in education at all until they are five.

Whilst the policy intention (Ball & Bowe, 1992) of introducing parental preference was to promote equality and improve schools, the positioning of the parent as a consumer has made the activity of educational choice more than a simple response to the measurements of school effectiveness such as the Ofsted report and league tables. A marketised system of education positions education as schooling, not as an activity that can take place in other forms. The increasing move to different forms of education seen since 2013 is an interesting example of diffractive activity where parents have been voting with their feet to forge a new path that repositions educational choice, a path that includes options outside of the school gates.

My own interest in the relationalities arising within the activity of educational choice, is not one generally reflected within the literature. I wish to explore the
practices and complexity of choice, to recognise the relationalities that arise between parents in society, with culture, and with the features and materials of education. This analysis of educational choice literature highlights an entangled system of education that is situational and relational. It has provided the context for my own study and the field of education parents are operating within today, acting as a springboard for my own research.
4.0 Research design

In the second part of my thesis I present and justify the research approach in terms of my methodology, methods, participant selection, ethics, and subsequent analysis of data. Whilst a research design can be presented as a linear process (for example: Crotty, 2015), I have found it to be a dynamic and iterative activity, with each stage impacting on the next and sometimes requiring me to revisit the starting point. As I shall go on to explore, I became a part of the research process from my initial interest in educational choice at four, to the recruitment of participants and my developing relationship with the parents as they made their choices. Even now as I write this thesis I have received an email from one parent who wishes to share with me her children’s successes outside of school. As a result this chapter is not presented in a linear fashion that follows a singular direction, but in layers where each one builds on the one before. Some of these layers are fairly simple and straightforward, some are thicker and more detailed, and some have led to different ways of research and to a consideration of my investigation from different perspectives.

Once again I have found myself returning to Vygotsky (2004) and his cycle of activity as a form of scaffolding for my writing. I was engaged in the activity of research as my intra-actions with the participants mediated and diffracted my thinking, creating new associations with the activity of parental choice. This account of the research design begins, as Vygotsky would, with my own history and experiences as these provided the stimulus for my research and the development of the research questions. I follow with an exploration of my research paradigm as this underpins the way that I view the nature of educational choice and how it can be understood (Hammersley, 2012).
The third layer of my research design considers the overall research strategy, the methodology I adopted as a guide for my investigation. So far all may appear to be rather linear and straightforward but it is at this juncture that the layers within the research became apparent as the role of culture and society mediated my thinking. The fourth section of the research design brings with it a layer of relationalities, exploring how time, space, place and power impacted on my activity, the research participants and the data I was able to collect.

Represented here as a fifth layer within the research I set out my ethical considerations, not because these were not considered until this point but for the sake of the narrative. In practice ethical considerations acted as a golden thread throughout my work. Whilst I started the research with the completion of an ethical protocol, ethics in practice and relational ethics has meant that ethics remained core to my research practice, the relationship with my research participants, and now in my approach to the writing of this thesis.

As a final layer I set out the analytical framework I turned to for the analysis of my data. Once again I found myself questioning a linear process that brings with it a danger of reducing rich complexities into narrow themes that have the potential to hide important but outlying data.

4.1 History and Experiences

‘Life experiences shape what type of research we choose to do, who we choose to work with in our research, and how we analyse that process in the end’ (Louis & Barton, 2002, p.2). My history and experiences as a childcare development worker, as a lecturer in early childhood studies and education, as a friend, as a mother, and as a reader of literature, have all played a role in the research. These experiences have shaped the subject I was interested in, and were
influential in the way I positioned those who participated in my research and the way they positioned me (Louis & Barton, 2002, p.4).

As a lecturer in early childhood studies, and having previously worked as a childcare development worker, I have experience of education both in the early years sector and in schools. My visits to numerous early years settings over the years have included a range of providers that followed a curriculum based around Development Matters (Department for Education, 2020; Early Education, 2012) or the Early Years Outcomes (Department for Education, 2013b), as well as settings that followed different philosophies of education such as those inspired by Rudolph Steiner and Maria Montessori. These visits opened my eyes both to the educational opportunities available to children in England, and to the phenomenon of children transitioning to school at four, before they have completed the Early Years Foundation Stage. I became fascinated with four-year-olds in school, and parents increasingly choosing different forms of education for their young child as a pro-active choice at four as opposed to a reactive choice to do something different because mainstream education had ‘gone wrong’.

On a more personal level, a few years ago I became closely involved with a friend whose two young children were struggling with mainstream education and I looked to see what options were available that would support their needs. For them, education was not about the attainment of GCSEs but about an activity that supported their social and emotional needs. The more involved I became with these children and the educational choices available for them, the more aware I became of other children in my community whose parents had also made a decision to access a different form of education, whether that be home education, an independent school, a grammar school, a Steiner, or Montessori
School, or something else. I started to wonder if this was a phenomenon across the country or just within my local community. I questioned whether this observation was a result of the local provision not meeting student needs, whether there were wider issues at play, or if this was something I was only just beginning to notice.

My view of education as a parent is multi-faceted, influenced by my not-so-positive experiences of school as a child, the experiences my own children have had, and my later studies of education before becoming a university lecturer. On the one hand, I recognise that in England many employers and higher education programmes expect young people to hold GCSEs including English and Maths, without which career choices may be limited. On the other, I value a child’s imagination and problem-solving, critical thinking skills, skills that do not appear to have a place in a knowledge based economy. I would like my children to do well in their school examinations because I feel that this will give them more choice in their future, but I also want them to be happy and confident in their own skin. I am not so sure that our current education system values these more embodied elements of education, or recognises that not all children are academically inclined.

There are a multitude of research papers on the subject of school choice, however, my particular interest is within the early years, a sector I have been working in for some 18 years. In an era where we hear about the ‘erosion of childhood’ and ‘too much too soon’ (House, 2011, p.1-2), when the importance of play is evident (Brett, 2015), the decision to choose a different form of education to the mainstream schooling offer is a proactive choice that I am keen to explore.
4.2 Research paradigm

Through life experiences and previous research it has become clear to me that I see the structure of reality (ontology) and what it means to know (epistemology) as intertwined (Crotty, 2015). Such a position is adopted by Barad (2007) who refers to onto-epistemology as one word claiming that ‘we don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world’ (p.185). Barad argues that it is not possible to separate the human and non-human, subject and object because knowing and being are mutually implicated, and as researchers ‘we cannot conceive of alternatives within the discursive possibilities we currently inhabit’ (Ball, 2019, p.134). There is a need to move away from the dualism of separating the mind and human behaviour. It is what arises between the parent, their history and experiences, the system of education, society and the environment that become important (Vygotsky, 1997b). I believe that individuals are ‘of the world’ (Barad, 2007, p.185), and that parents construct their understanding of education and therefore the educational choice they go on to make, through their intra-actions within society. These beliefs align with a social constructionist (Ang, Zaphiris & Wilson, 2011) onto-epistemology, that adopts a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, whilst recognising the specificity of history, culture and experience in the social world bound up in power relations (Burr, 2015).

As a social constructionist, I believe that knowledge is constructed from the intra-actions arising between human beings and their experiences in the world, and that research within the social constructionist paradigm arises from a cyclical intra-action arising between the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of a phenomenon (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007; Silverman, 2018). It has framed my thinking about the activity of parents making an educational choice and my interest in the ‘what’
- the educational choice system that parents are acting within (the way it is), and
the ‘how’ - the individual activity of choice (the way it is used).

The inseparability of ‘what’ and ‘how’ within the activity of educational choice, has brought with it a need to ‘to break with inherited understandings’ (Crotty, 2015, p.80), and to tease out the subconscious. I sought to take a critical stance towards ‘taken-for-granted knowledge’ (Burr, 2015, p.2), to trouble existing assumptions related to school choice, to instead consider educational choice in its wider form. As a consequence, my research strategy needed to be flexible, sensitive and ethical in order to adapt to the multi-dimensionality of lived experience.

4.3 Research strategy

My research strategy links my positionality as a researcher with the methods that I used to collect my data. I wanted to gain insight into the activity of parents making an educational choice for their four-year-old. As such, I did not want to structure my research so tightly that I constrained the participants and restricted their ability to communicate their experiences about what was important to them. In addition, I was seeking to get inside the educational choice system (the way it is) and wished to explore the relationship between the system and the process of choice (the way that it is used). Parents and settings became participants in the research process, their activity of choice and the types of education they were interested in shaped the investigation in terms of their narratives and the settings I then went on to investigate.

My research approach needed to be flexible, in terms of remaining sensitive to the needs of the participants. It needed to take into account the relational nature of choice and the intra-actions of parents within the field of educational choice.
It needed to consider the development of educational choice in England, the entangled intra-actions and relationalities. To focus on just one facet of research such as the development of educational choice would be to over-simplify and would provide a one dimensional view of knowledge, or ‘monological knowledge’ (Kincheloe, 2005, p.326), which does not recognise the intricacies of knowing. Such a position is reflected within much of the literature surrounding school choice emphasising a focus on the elements of choice, cause and effect (Kincheloe, 2005), such as choice criteria, class and social networks. This highlights what Emmel and Clarke (2009) describe as descriptive tools with a focus on ‘normative attributes’ to nodes and the connections between them.

In order to avoid reductionism, and in keeping with a social constructionist paradigm, the language of possibilities, relationalities and entanglements within my research questions highlights the multidimensionality of lived experience, not to ignore selected ideas but to situate them within the activity of everyday life.

Multi-faceted research methodologies that use different research methods in different research environments present distinctive possibilities for exploring the complexity and multi-dimensionality of personal associations, and especially the critical nature of these (Davies & Heaphy, 2011, p.5).

By positioning choice as relational and entangled, my research strategy also needed to recognise the multi-dimensionality of lived experience and this was facilitated through a research approach known as ‘Facet Methodology’ (Mason, 2011).

4.3.1 Facet Methodology

In recognition of the relationships between individuals within society, with materials and policy, facet methodology (Mason, 2011) is an approach to social
research that can be used to cast light on the complexities of educational choice. Facet methodology is a research orientation that allows for the creation of ‘a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions’ (Mason, 2011, p.75). Rather than following a set of rules for research the aim of facet methodology is the pursuit of ‘flashes of insight’ (p.76). It places an emphasis on the relational in order to ‘capture the combination of vital, tangible and intangible dynamics in the way that personal relationships and relationalities are lived’ (Mason et al., 2019, p.nn).

I wanted to problematise, to gain insight into the activity of educational choice rather than produce a list of choice criteria. I was just as interested in difference and outlying data as I was in patterns because it was the complications within educational choice that I was seeking to embrace. Through facet methodology I was seeking insight into each parent’s experience of choice, to make connections within the lived world, to trouble existing assumptions, and for the creation of a strategically illuminating set of intertwined facets in relation to my specific research concerns. The use of different research methods, in different research environments facilitated the exploration of the multi-dimensional social world of educational choice.

The principles of facet methodology link closely to my interpretation of Vygotsky’s (2004) cycle of constructing activity and emphasises the complexity of the topic. Each facet within my research has troubled the nature of choice, they have been methodological and substantive, and have produced flashes of insight in relation to my research questions, facilitating the analysis of the relationship between facets (Mason et al., 2012). The entangled and relational nature of choosing pre-compulsory education is multi-dimensional within and between the micro and macro environments as well as between the system of
educational choice (the way it is) and the process of choice (the way it is used). Facet methodology recognised and allowed for this multi-dimensionality casting light on the possibilities, relationalities and entanglements within educational choice. Each facet troubled existing systems, facilitated the investigation of different educational possibilities, represented entanglements within the activity of educational choice, brought insight into relationalities, and the development of choice over time.

In a similar approach to Vygotsky, Mason (2011) elicited the visual metaphor of a gemstone to represent the overall research topic, and the facets within the gemstone as different ways of seeing the research. The gemstone was meant to represent what the research was looking at and the facets signify how it was being looked at (Mason, 2011). My own diffractive thinking builds on this to consider my role as the researcher shaping the research, the importance of being open to new associations and the resultant entangled pattern that the different facets might create. Indeed, Mason (2011) acknowledges the danger of shoehorning everything into a metaphor such as a gemstone, highlighting how metaphors are only helpful ‘as long as we do not try to push them too far’ (p.78).

What facet methodology has brought to this research is the ability to be flexible as I followed the needs and interests of my participants. ‘Facets are designed in relation to existing theoretical and conceptual knowledge’ (Mason, 2011, p.83), they can be shaped and changed throughout the research process as new ideas emerge. My intra-actions arising between the different parents and the educational choices they were making created flashes of insight into the activity of educational choice. Facet methodology allowed for flexibility during the research process as I followed each parent during the choice process. The
research participants became active in shaping the study as the choices they were making led me to the settings I went on to investigate. I did not wish to limit myself to interviewing parents, as this would only focus on one aspect of choice. Instead I sought to ‘direct scrutiny towards the rather complex ways’ (Mason, 2011, p.79) in which the activity of choice is informed by culture and history, socially constructed, and influenced by politics and practice.

4.3.2 Methods

I recognise the values tied up in the methods employed in social research and how my use of methods can construct social relations such as those between parents, schools and communities. To disentangle and isolate selected ideas is to ‘limit, specify, focus, and contain’ replacing the ‘most complex whole’ (Geertz, 1973, p.4). My different lines of enquiry needed to provide insight into the phenomenon of educational choice as a whole (or ‘unity’ as Vygotsky would say), to make connections between the process, elements, components and history of educational choice, to ‘create a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to’ parents choosing pre-compulsory education (Mason, 2011, p.77 italics in original).

There were two groups of methods employed, the aim of the first was to consider the system and context or macro-environment of the research topic, and the second to focus on the process for the individual and the micro-environment – the significant symbols and meanings of participants (Emmel & Clark, 2009). My different lines of enquiry, and each method (facet), provided insight into the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of educational choice whilst maintaining connections within the unity of the whole as indicated in the table below:
Table 1: Different lines of enquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different ways of seeing (facets)</th>
<th>Different lines of enquiry</th>
<th>Resulting in an entangled pattern (unity) of educational choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Components</td>
<td>Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What (system)</td>
<td>What is the process (system) of educational choice</td>
<td>What are the components acting within the system of education choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro (society)</td>
<td>Societal activity</td>
<td>Government and community activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-environment</td>
<td>How (Process)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How individuals interact within the system of educational choice</td>
<td>How individuals interact with each component</td>
<td>How the significant symbols (elements) may influence choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro (individual)</td>
<td>Individual activity</td>
<td>Intra-action between individuals and each component</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The methods employed generated qualitative data that brought insight into a parent’s activity of educational choice (see appendices five and six for fieldwork inventory and methods employed with each participant). They were not all planned from the start but evolved through my engagement with parents over three stages as summarised below.

During the first stage of my research open interviews were carried out in the spring / summer with parents who had just made their pre-compulsory educational choice for their young child (when their child was three or had just turned four years of age). They were framed by my initial question where I asked the parent(s) to tell me about the educational choice they had made for their
child and what had influenced that choice. Following that initial question the interviews were unstructured allowing the parents to provide their own narrative, prompted only by my asking for some clarification or elaboration at times. They provided a space for ‘constructing experiential knowledge’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2021, p.71), where the parents engaged in a narrative of their experiences akin to telling a story with a timeline, plot, and characters (Czarniawska, 2021). I was aware that I was not separate from that narrative but of the story as I interacted with the participants and they responded to my prompts (questions). These initial interviews cast light onto the educational choice process that parents had followed, a process that was not yet influenced by their day-to-day experience of a particular setting for that child. In order to bring trustworthiness to my findings I then conducted an initial analysis of the data gathered, through transcribing the interviews and using a data analysis programme – NVivo (QSR International, 2018), which supported the identification of themes and topics, thus informing the next stage in the research (appendix seven summarises this initial analysis). Through this series of open interviews, parents described their choice of education and what had influenced their decision.

Second stage interviews with parents were semi-structured, informed by the analysis of the first interviews. These took place towards the end of the autumn term after their child had started their chosen form of education. I started the interview by asking how the first few weeks of education had been going, for the child and the family, and allowed this to lead into the more focused set of questions which had emerged from the first interviews (appendix two).

As a third stage of the research process, semi-structured interviews were carried out with setting leaders where possible, and with the local authority admissions team. In some cases setting leaders also took photographs of the
key aspects and resources within their setting that they felt were important in the choice process. A documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) explored the link between policy and practice. This included a review of websites relating to the educational approach of the individual setting, the setting prospectus where relevant, Ofsted or Independent School Inspectorate reports, local authority websites, and school membership bodies.

The intricacies of the social world in which educational choice takes place means that asking ‘what’ and ‘how’ was not straightforward. An active engagement with the process, elements and components and history of choice ensured that I did not place boundaries upon my research that prevented me from following the educational choice process the participants were engaged in. Together, the what, how, micro and macro became interlinked and resulted in an entangled pattern (unity) of educational choice.

4.3.3 Participants

The messiness of social research became more apparent at this point in the research design as, on the one hand I wished to give a straight-forward overview of the research design, on the other hand my research in practice was not straightforward but iterative and dynamic. It is for this reason that I have added a further section to this chapter where I explore the emerging relationalities between myself and the research participants in terms of time, space, place and power. In the meantime, and to provide context for my research approach, I shall give an over-view of my research participants and the educational approaches they were interested in.

There were six families included in this research, four represented by just the mother and two by both parents. (I recognise that the children themselves have
not had a direct input as participants or voices within this research. The focus was on parental choice and the child’s view is an avenue to explore in future research projects. Each family was interested in a specific educational approach and this included the local mainstream primary school, a creative education, Montessori, Steiner, a selective all girls independent school and home education. Pseudonyms are used throughout my thesis in order to protect the anonymity of the participants, and a short description of the educational approach chosen by each family is set out below:

David and Morag – chose to send their child to the local mainstream Church of England primary academy school. This school is funded by central government, inspected by Ofsted, and follows an inclusive admissions process. Classes are taught in chronological year groups working towards national tests.

Maisie – was interested in a creative education and believed that creativity is important for children’s education in terms of their learning, and well-being (Nutbrown, 2013), and that it supports expression and innovation. Maisie was concerned that creativity was being squeezed out of the school curriculum and was willing to flexi-school her children in order to provide for creativity in their lives. This would mean that her children would go to school part time and be home educated in the arts for the rest of the week.

Orla – wished to send her child to a Montessori school. The Montessori philosophy is based on the principles of liberty, activity and independence supported through close observation of the child without preconceptions. The teacher’s role is to guide independence through meaningful activity (Montessori, 1912). Orla has been keeping her child in a Montessori nursery until she reaches the age of compulsory education by which time she hopes to have started her own Montessori school.
Zara – chose to send her child to a Steiner Academy school. The Steiner philosophy is based on the belief that education is an art that encompasses the whole child, their body, soul and spirit. Key principles include the role of observation as a foundation for teaching using practical activity that has connections to the world around us (Steiner, 1924).

Frankie – Chose to send her children to an all-girls, selective independent school. This is a private school that charges fees. Children must pass an academic entrance exam to be offered a place. They do not have to follow the national curriculum.

Ethan and Olivia – Home-educated their children following a philosophy of Unschooling, which meant that they educated their children at home instead of sending their child to a school. An ‘unschooling philosophy’ (Holt, 2016) is child led, self-directed learning. The parents work together with the child following the child’s interests.

In addition to the parent participants, I was also able to interview representatives of three settings, the local primary school, the Montessori setting and the Steiner academy. Both the primary school and Montessori setting leaders offered to send me photographs of the aspects of their setting that they felt were influential in the choices parents made. I was able to complement these images with a documentary analysis of each setting’s marketing materials in order to gain insight into how a particular educational approach was represented for parents engaged in making a choice for their child.

Not only did the parents participating in this research hold their own views on education and what was important to them; so did the setting leaders taking part. One local mainstream school looked, felt, and practised differently to
another, there were differences between an Independent Steiner school and a Steiner Academy, philosophies of education developed in the early nineteenth century were adapted for modern day expectations, and home education was practised in different ways according to the beliefs, needs and culture of each family. Each parent’s own experiences of education coloured their perception of a particular educational approach for their own child, however, today’s provision was different from their own experiences. What was important to note was the effect of difference between the past and the present through an interpretation of legislative requirements, an original philosophy of education, a parent’s beliefs, and a settings interpretation (please see appendix eight for details of each educational approach).

The range of educational possibilities being considered by each parent offered a different insight into the activity of choosing pre-compulsory education before and after their child had started school. Their choices formed what the research was looking at, with information gathered from a variety of sources through different methods (how the subject was being researched). By following the parents as they made an educational choice I was able to make comparisons between experiences (Robinson & Seale, 2018, p.105), and the educational choices they were making. By locating my research within a particular time, space and place the activities of choice became alive, a lived experience that brought insight into how parents were thinking about education.

4.4 Lived experience

The principles and procedures used to identify and select research participants were employed in order to gain meaningful insight into the activity of choosing pre-compulsory education (Mason, 2018). I was interested in the lived
experience of parents making a choice to follow a different educational approach to the local mainstream primary school and the process they followed. The facets of time, space and place for this research became important in order to locate my research within the wider context of the school choice process as it happened.

4.4.1 Time

On a practical basis I needed to be able to collect my data within a time-frame constructed by the doctorate process and that of the university’s ethics committee meeting dates. I needed to gain ethical approval before carrying out the research and needed to complete my doctorate within a stipulated period of time. There were also limitations in terms of the time I had available for data collection as I had to undertake the research around my work and family commitments as well as the constraints presented in terms of my own location, distance and the time I needed to put aside for travel.

The nature of educational choice in the English field of education today is linked to a time-frame imposed by the local authority and the chronology of schooling. The annual calendar of English education means that schools, pre-schools and toddler groups follow an academic calendar of closure from mid-July until early September. Parents are expected to complete the local authority school preference form in the autumn following their child’s third birthday ready for their child to start school in the following September when their child is four. This dictated the time-frame for my own research as I was interested in gaining insight into the process of educational choice being followed by parents and needed to be in a position where I could engage in each parent’s narrative of choice before they were influenced by their child’s experience of education.
Second interviews then needed to be carried out after their child had been in their chosen form of education for some time.

Ethical approval for the research was granted and my doctorate proposal was submitted and agreed in early June 2018. In order to follow the process of choice that parents engaged in, I needed to recruit participants and complete the first interviews between June and early September 2018 before they started education. Second interviews were completed after the child had experienced nearly one term of education - from late November 2018 to January 2019. Interviews with settings then followed the parent's narratives and were completed between February and May 2019.

4.4.2 Space

This investigation into educational choice has not been a search for truth, which would enable generalisations to be made, but a search of meaning in order to gain insight into the choice process and advance understanding of the activity of parents making an educational choice for their four-year-old child. The space for this research was located within the neoliberal marketised system of education in England, meaning that the participants needed to be engaged in the English educational choice process. My interest was in parents making a pro-active decision to access different forms of education and so the participants needed to be interested in, and have access to different possibilities for education.

The act of making an educational choice takes place in multiple spaces, virtual, written, social, and physical practice. Virtual space included an online local authority portal, government school comparison sites and school websites. Written space was found in the form of school preference paperwork, school
admissions forms, school prospectuses and marketing materials. Social space was represented by the social groups parents were a part of, the networks and connections within a community. The physical space for educational choice was found in the family home, schools, parent and toddler groups, early years settings, children centres, health centres and community sites. My research needed to be flexible to the process of choice followed by the parents in order to gain insight into the space(s) choice operated in. My own location in South West England, and limitations in terms of time and expense, meant that my research needed to be located in South West England within fifteen minutes’ drive from a major road. As I was interested in gaining insight into the activity of choice rather than a generalisable ‘truth’, I sought to focus the research within one geographical area where I would be able to access the spaces that parents acted within. The physical space for the research was defined by a school catchment area set out by the local authority school admissions protocol. It needed to have its own primary school and parents within that community choosing different forms of education. I was also interested in working within a community that had a mixed population including a range of socio-economic groups.

I chose to situate the research within the space of a specific rural community (a particular geographic locality), not because I wished to explore rural school choice specifically, but because rurality (defined here as a town surrounded by countryside with a population of 1,000 to 2,000 people) meant that parents had to work much harder to choose education outside of mainstream schooling – it was not on their door-step. Different schools and educational options were therefore not easily available to them. Transport was difficult, the community population and resources smaller. Parents within such a community who were
choosing a different form of education to the nearest primary school would have made a proactive decision to do something different from the social norm (Searle, 1995) despite the challenges this presented them.

4.4.3 Place

The final facet of place located my research within a specific community and set of educational choices. The chosen location had one primary school, a preschool, nursery, and two parent and toddler groups. It was of particular interest because it also offered a home education group thus indicating that there were families in the community that had chosen to follow a different form of education to the mainstream schooling offer.

My selection of location was chosen not as an object of study but as a ‘method of study by which sociological issues can be explored within a local setting’ (Hall, 1990, p.101, emphasis in orginal). I was not studying the community itself, my research was taking place in a community (Crow, 2008) as a method of investigating a phenomenon. To consider how experiences and relationalities may change, influence and interact I was keen to explore the dynamics and nuances within the lived experience of choice. As Crow (2002) explores, ‘community studies have proved to be instructive as testing grounds for general theories of social change’ (p.2).

The recruitment of participants took place in parent and toddler groups held within the community, as well as the local nursery and one parent recommendation. The educational choice they were making then led to the settings that I sought to include within the research. Although I cannot claim that this was a representative sample of the community, an internet search did not list any other organisations and this increased my confidence that I had included
all groups in the town that promoted themselves as working with parents and children during the time when they would be making an educational choice.

4.4.4 Participant recruitment

From the outset, I was seeking to recruit a range of parents, each interested in a different educational approach including the local school, Steiner, Montessori, independent school and home education. I remained open to the educational approaches parents may be accessing and did not want to limit my recruitment to just these forms of education. As with any research project I was constrained by the resources available to me; I was aware that I would need to limit participants in order to make the project manageable, but also that the number of willing participants may be self-limiting (Emmel & Clark, 2009).

In order to recruit parent-participants I approached the parent and toddler groups and local nursery through the group leaders in their role as gatekeepers who had ‘relations of trust’ (Edwards, 2013, p.508) with the parents through their long-term involvement and position of trust within their role. The gatekeepers held positions of responsibility and professionalism, with knowledge and experience of the early years sector. This meant that they were more likely to understand the purpose of my research and be interested in participating. In both parent and toddler groups, and the nursery, the group leaders were keen to build a relationship with me. They were enthusiastic about the research and keen to introduce me to the parents. The relationship I built with them provided a foundation for my studies and a basis from which to meet parents and invite their participation in the research.

I was interested in how the parents would describe to me their educational choice and their experiences of choosing education; their individual
characteristics in terms of demographics, gender, faith or ability were not the focus of my study. I did not want to direct this recruitment process by selecting participants but to adopt a more organic approach to recruitment where the parents actively chose to participate. I was expecting the majority of parents I spoke with to be considering the local primary school for their child and that recruiting participants interested in different forms of education would take some time. As a consequence, I had planned to speak to as many different parents as I could find across the different parent and child groups at different times in order to explain my research and invite collaboration. During my first visit to one toddler group I worked my way around the room speaking to every parent in turn and I was excited to find that each parent I spoke with appeared to have a different view of education including the local primary school, Steiner, Montessori and flexi schooling. From these conversations I was able to recruit the first four participants for the research. Many of the same parents were also present at the other toddler group and the nursery where a further parent, interested in independent schooling, was recruited through my visit to the nursery.

The only educational approach not represented through either toddler group or through the nursery was home education and this may have been because parents interested in following this approach were not attending these group settings. The local home education group also proved inaccessible for me, perhaps because I did not have any prior relationship with them, I was very much an ‘outsider’ (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013, p.496) to their home education community. The recruitment of parents who were home educating became difficult and access to these parents proved challenging with no ‘gatekeeper’ to go through and extend trust (Edwards, 2013). In recognition of this I approached
somebody outside of the place I was conducting my research in, with whom I already had a trusting relationship and who was home educating. They were willing to recruit participants on my behalf and this ‘trusted other’ provided an effective channel for recruiting parents within the community with whom I would otherwise have had no contact.

As the educational choices being made became apparent so were the settings I wished to contact for the third stage of the research, and it was at this juncture that the data collection became more problematic. My ethical protocol included a need to keep the identity of participants confidential. I was unable to disclose to the settings that I had already spoken with parents who had chosen to send their child to them; I had no ‘relations of trust’ (Edwards, 2013, p.508) with the settings. Despite this, two of the settings, representing three of the educational approaches chosen, were willing to speak with me, whilst the home education approach following an ‘Unschooling’ philosophy did not, of course, have a setting.

My initial contacts with both the Steiner school and the independent selective school were through the school receptionists who in both cases appeared enthusiastic and supportive towards the research, stating that they would ask somebody to get back in touch with me. In both cases I followed this initial conversation up with an email and participants’ information sheet (see appendices one and two), but received no response. I contacted both receptionists again a few weeks later, and again in both cases my enquiries were positively received, The Steiner school receptionist assured me that they would pass my queries on but again no response was forthcoming. The independent school receptionist declared that she had passed my query onto the admissions team but that they were very busy and if they had not replied
then this was because they were unable to. I expressed my gratitude at their support explaining that I understood their position. In both cases I asked whether the school had a prospectus or any paperwork that they would usually send to parents making enquiries that they would feel able to send to me and in both cases I was told that the school website provided all of this information. By this time I felt that I had exhausted any potential to progress my enquiries to these settings but would remain open to possibilities should they arise as my research progressed. One such opportunity was through a Steiner membership body and an executive officer who was willing to talk with me via Skype. This provided insight into the Steiner perception of why they thought their schools were chosen by parents. As my research progressed it became apparent that the local authority’s perspective on educational choice would form a further facet to my research and a local authority school admissions manager was willing to answer my interview questions through an emailed response.

4.4.5 Configurations of power and trust

Just as power can be found within the field of education (as explored in section 3.3.2), power was also present during my research, within the recruitment process and within my relationships with participants. Such ‘configurations of power and trust’ (Edwards, 2013, p.505) emerged between the setting gatekeepers, the parents and myself in my role as researcher, characterised by the individual’s own history and experiences, the relationship between myself as the researcher and the participant, and the situational trust (Celestina, 2018). In this case I found relational and situational trust had been developed through my introduction via the setting ‘gatekeepers’ (Edwards, 2013).
Setting gatekeepers held the power to include or exclude me from the parent and toddler groups, whether they should extend their trust to me. Parents also held power in the form of their choice to become part of the research project or not, what they would contribute, where the interviews would be held, when and for how long. Configurations of power were present in the language I used both in discussions with parents, within the writing up of my research, in how I referred to the parents not as ‘subjects’ which would have inferred a passive role in my investigation, but as ‘research participants’.

The notion of mediation used throughout this research draws attention to the dynamic nature of the project, in recognition of the intra-action arising between the participants and myself. My interest in pre-compulsory educational choice influenced the overall research focus and the parent’s educational choices influenced the identification of the six different educational approaches. What arose was an intra-action between my own interest and that of the parents that mediated the research process ‘characterised by a respect for trust’ (Celestina, 2018, p.375). I gave out ‘Participants Information Sheets’ to parents and settings at the first meeting, setting out the ethics of my research and the rights of the participants. I also asked participants to sign a consent form agreeing to the use of interview recordings within my research. At the start of each interview I reiterated the purpose of my research, the ethical protocol I was following and asked for their written consent to record the discussions. At the end of the interview I explained how I would transcribe the interview word-for-word including all of the grammatical errors and use of language.

The majority of first interviews took place within the parent’s own home apart from two, which took place in more public spaces. The second interviews, however, all took place in the parent’s own home, possibly suggesting a
development of trust between myself, and these parents. During the second
interviews, I re-established the parameters of the research by making reference
to the participant's rights and asking for their written consent. I also made
reference to the first interview asking if they had read my transcript and offered
opportunity for comment, I then summarised my initial findings before starting
the interview. Research participants were sent interview transcripts to check that
they represented an accurate record of our discussions, in addition a summary
of the research findings (appendix seven) was also sent to participants offering
them an opportunity to comment or change anything that I had stated.

I aimed to do this as quickly as possible after the interview and in some cases
this was on the same day. For others a few days passed before I was able to
send the transcription to the parents due to other demands on my time. The
time-bound nature of this research meant that in all cases I asked the parents
to send their comments back to me within two weeks, after which time I would
include the transcript data within my analysis. In the event only one parent
commented on my transcription and this related to the use of language when
describing children's activities and cultures. In this case I changed the language
used before the data was included in my analysis. Interestingly a parent who
had commented on my transcription did appear to be more guarded during the
second interview and I felt that I had to work harder to develop the discussions.
This may have been situational in that there may have been other influences I
was unaware of, or it may have been in part due to some concern over the use
of language during our first discussions.

During the second interviews it emerged that the other five sets of parents had
not in fact read the full transcripts I had sent to them, with one parent exclaiming
that they did not want to read their own words. Others remarked on the length
of the transcripts and that they had started reading them but not finished, commenting that they were sure I had transcribed the conversation accurately. This emphasised the trust that the parents had placed in me in transcribing the interviews and how the data would be used. I had given participants the opportunity to hold the power in this exchange, to decide what information would be used in my research and what would be excluded, to mould their story and produce a certain kind of narrative (Celestina, 2018), however the majority did not do so. The negotiation of power and trust is not straightforward and directly emphasises the importance of understanding the participants and the situation.

Back (2007) argues that ‘sociological listening is not simply a matter of transcription, or just emptying people of their expertise and wisdom’ (p.8). By thinking about the role power would play in my research and adopting a more collaborative approach I sought to establish a ‘co-learning and empowering process’ (McKemmish et al., 2012, p.1114). Although I was learning about parental choice of pre-compulsory education, it became apparent that the parents were also using the discussions with me as an opportunity to learn more about the educational options available to them, or to seek some support on an area of concern they had. In these instances I remained supportive and acknowledged their apparent concern and signposted to support services. My use of open interviews enabled parents to lead the conversation in a direction that suited them and at times this did take the conversation off topic, however in allowing this to happen parents then appeared more comfortable in talking about their choices and to articulate their ideas.

Power differentials can also be exacerbated by social differences (Ali & Kelly, 2018). I was an educated, mature, white, middle class, Christian female conducting research in a mixed socio-economic community. The parent and
toddler groups I visited consisted primarily of young mothers and the gatekeepers were older females, any fathers present may have felt disadvantaged in their position within the group community. Equally the younger mothers were less willing to engage in conversation with me and appeared to move away as I approached them, in these instances I did not enforce my position but instead moved on to speak to other parents. Both groups accessed were held in church halls, although only one of them brought religion into the group activities through the telling of bible stories. The location of these groups may have represented a barrier to those who did not feel an affinity to that religious community the group may have been connected to.

Power relations of this type are viewed as relational, co-constitutive, requiring trust, and bearing important consequences for the direction a piece of research can take, the quantity and quality of data that a researcher can gather, as well as the kinds of conclusions a researcher can draw (Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013, p.458).

Power relations within the research project have been said to reproduce those within the wider social context (Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). It is interesting to note how in contrast to this statement a range of socio-economic groups and genders were included within this investigation including the father in two cases. There were six sets of parents included in this research, each representing a different approach to education as set out in appendix eight.

The discourse of science constructs the findings of research as a truth and places the researcher in a position of power with respect to the research participants (Burr, 2015). After all, it is my interest in the topic that drives the research, my use of language, interpretation of data, and construction of meaning in the final thesis. A more dynamic approach was needed that drew attention to the role of participants and the relationship arising between researcher and research project. By recognising that the participants’ accounts
of the educational choice they were making for their child were being constructed with me there was an opportunity to hand back some power to the participants. A relational position helped to mitigate the role of power and move the research from one of authority and truth to one of collaboration arising between researcher and participant. Research participants grasped their own ‘frames of meaning’ from the questions I posed and responded accordingly. In turn I reconstituted their responses through my own ‘frames of meaning’ bringing a ‘double hermeneutic’ into play (Giddens, 1993, p.86). Participants were given the opportunity to comment on the data recorded during interviews and to review my interpretations before and during the process of analysis and writing up. Power in the form of knowledge and control circulated between myself as the researcher and the research participants (Miller, 2008) bringing intra-action and diffraction into the heart of my research.

At times I held the knowledge of the research process and of the educational choice system, at other times the research participants held the knowledge of their experiences of educational choice and what had influenced this decision. Power was passed between us from the start of the project, when I chose the place for recruitment, whether a person chose to be included in my research or not, what types of education they were interested in, and what they chose to discuss with me during the interviews.

There could be no end to the iterative process I adopted within this project except for the demands on my time, and the need to produce a thesis that brought deadlines that must be met and recommendations made. I recognise that in doing so, any sense making I have developed reflects my own construction of meaning through the writing of this thesis. It is hoped, however,
that this iterative and circulatory process has added trustworthiness through strength and confidence in the research findings.

4.5 Ethical considerations

There are commonly recognised ethical principles within educational research including a responsibility for minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, offering reciprocity, and treating people equitably (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). These can be described as ‘procedural ethics’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.262) and are based on a positivist tradition being scientific and quantitative in nature, with a focus on the completion of an application form for the Ethics Committee.

My ethical agreement (appendix one) sets out how I gained informed consent, how I ensured openness, honesty and confidentiality during the research process, participants right to withdraw, protection from harm, and how I intended to debrief participants and to disseminate my research. The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) were followed in the compilation of my ethics application. Ethics became not just a procedure to be followed, but included ‘ethics in practice’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and ‘relational ethics’ (Ellis, 2007), as part of ‘an actively deliberative, ongoing and iterative process of assessing and reassessing the situation and issues as they arise’ (BERA, 2018, p.2).

As explored in earlier work (appendix nine) ‘ethical tensions are part of the everyday practice of doing research’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.261). In keeping with facet methodology this research project developed with the research participants and entered into realms I had not conceived of at the start. My ethics application set out a three stage process of research with each stage
building upon the next. However not all settings were willing to participate in the semi-structured interviews I had envisaged, whilst other setting leaders shaped the direction of the research when they offered to take photographs of the key features within their setting environment that they felt were important in the activity of parental choice. As the research developed it became apparent that the voice of the local authority would be an interesting added facet within the project creating an extra dimension to stage three of my research. This developing nature of the research meant that I went back to the ethics committee to seek minor amendments to my ethical agreement in order to take advantage of these research opportunities as they arose.

‘Ethics in practice’ are those which arise ‘in the doing of research’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.264). Examples here may be where the research was shaped by the participants as already outlined, or perhaps where a participant makes a disclosure unrelated to the research itself. Here is a situation that is not often anticipated, and yet is ethically important and needs consideration. Within my ethics agreement I made it clear that I would follow the local authority safeguarding protocol should I have any concerns. In this way there was a clear procedure for me to follow should a disclosure be made, if I were to witness an incident, or have concerns about the welfare of a child, and this was shared with participants from the start (Wiles et al., 2008). Although no disclosures were made during the research I did ensure that parents were made aware of the support available to them by offering a pre-prepared list of support services.

‘Relational ethics’ is a third consideration that ‘recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness’ (Ellis, 2007, p.4) not only between the researcher and researched, but also between the researcher and the community. My relationship with the research participants did adapt and change
over time as demonstrated by being invited into participants homes for the second interview where this had not been the case initially. I believe that this supported a shared understanding of the influences on educational choice with parents and the setting leaders who became part of the project as it developed. However, I was also aware that boundaries needed to remain between myself and the research participants as I was not their friend or setting support worker. In order to emphasise the boundaries between those participating in the research and myself I was clear about the goals of the research from the start and how the data gathered would be interpreted and utilised (Ellis, 2007). I practised ‘process consent’ (Ellis, 2007, p.23), confirming consent at each stage in the research process - before each interview, upon review of my transcriptions and upon my initial analysis of the data collected.

Maintaining anonymity can be challenging when the research takes place in a small community or where there are only a small number of comparable settings, issues of power, ownership, and relationships are of concern (Moosa, 2013). Through procedural ethics and the successful completion of an ethics application I believed that maintaining anonymity would be straightforward with the simple use of pseudonyms protecting participants and settings within my work. I included statements aligned with this within my participant’s information sheet and consent forms assuring research participants that the information collected ‘would be used in a confidential manner’. However the details of a ‘confidential manner’ were not set out and participants signed their consent without challenging the statements I had made. Moosa (2013) emphasises how power relations may have a part to play in participatory research such as this and although I was aware of the possibility of a power imbalance during the research process, and made every effort to alleviate this, I question whether this
is possible (Burr, 2015). Although I did discuss with participants how I would use pseudonyms within my writing and shared my initial analysis whilst welcoming comments, no concerns were raised. Whilst conducting my fieldwork I did not question whether participants may want their identity to be shared, this would perhaps have brought them a sense of empowerment and ownership to the project. One of the setting leaders sent me photographs of their setting for inclusion in my research and these included photographs of the key staff. I felt that I would be breaking my ethical agreement with the setting by including their image but it may be that they wanted their image included as part of their sense of ownership in the project. As Moosa (2013) highlighted it may have been more appropriate to discuss how the participants may want to be identified or to have their anonymity preserved thus emphasising their role in constructing the research project.

From the outset I have recognised relationalities within this research and this is emphasised within the context of my research methods. In a small community, networks of relationships can be seen with individuals taking on multiple roles and within different contexts whether that be within the parent and toddler groups, religious services, community projects or perhaps a local theatre production (Moosa, 2013). During the process of recruiting participants I started from the parent and toddler groups and was visible as I spoke with parents and exchanged contact details, similarly the involvement of the nursery leader in recruiting participants and a home educator meant that the pool of potential research participants could be exposed through these relations. Disguising the settings involved helped to conceal sensitive information about participants. Settings accessed by parents within this community are not necessarily located within the town bringing some anonymity to the data collected. Despite the fact
that I have not used setting or community names the limited number of schools offering the educational approaches explored within this research means that it may be possible to identify the specific schools I have referenced. By being aware of this possibility I have made every effort to disguise the specifics of the schools concerned. I have confirmed that there are a number of schools in South West England fitting the descriptions I give thus further disguising the settings involved.

I am unable to wind the clock back and change what has been done but am able to reflect on my use of language within this thesis and whether some data should be excluded if it has potential to disclose the identity of a participant. I believe that by broadly locating my research within South West England I have been able to preserve the anonymity of the community and settings involved. No names of participants or settings have been used and a reflexive approach involving participants brings credibility and trustworthiness to my writing.

4.6 Analytical framework

My initial approach for analysing my data was one of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) facilitating the identification of patterns across my dataset from familiarisation, to identifying themes and writing up. The systematic rigour of thematic analysis brings trustworthiness and credibility to the research as ‘a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights’ (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2). It provides an audit trail and rationale for the decisions I have made and the conclusions reached. In this section I set out each phase of my data analysis from data familiarisation and coding to the identification of themes. Of interest is how diffractive activity provides a language for this
analysis as I intra-acted with my participants and the data I collected, dissociated from some ideas and associated with others, to form new ways of thinking about parental choice of pre-compulsory education.

Although only six sets of parents took part within this research project, the amount of data generated was large with 15 interviews to transcribe, three sets of photographs and documents relating to five educational approaches. By organising data into separate educational approaches I was able to bring together all of the participatory data and contextual information, to not only build networks but also to disassemble connections, to gain insight into what may facilitate or impede educational choice within and between each facet of my research. I recognised the potential for looking across and between the different educational choices being made, each having the potential to be ‘constituted and reconstituted by the researchers in social space and social time’ (Emmel & Clark, 2009, p.21). The participants themselves also acted within and upon the formation of the different research facets, diffracting the direction of my research and the data gathered, making this not solely the role of myself as the researcher. Theorisation in and between facets was developed during my immersion in analysis and my first interviews, revealing a set of relationships between parent, choice, setting and the macro-environment. It was only at this juncture that I was in a position to delve deeper into the research process with the second interviews as I began to identify themes which were theoretically interesting or puzzling, or how different facets could provide ‘telling knowledge’ (Mason, 2011, p.81), or a ‘coming to know’. My study became longitudinal as I followed the parent’s process of choice from when the choice was being made in the spring / summer term until the end of the first autumn term for the child in their chosen setting or educational approach. These included Mainstream
schooling, an interest in creativity in education, Steiner, Montessori and home education following an ‘Unschooling’ philosophy (Gray & Riley, 2013).

The analysis of my data was ‘constrained and controlled by the context’ (Emmel & Clark, 2009, p.21). The context was informed through the participant selection, who was represented and who was not, secondly through my documentary analysis, interviews with the settings, setting photographs and finally through situating the research within the wider social world and system of education in England. This, in addition to a review of educational policy and choice processes, emphasised the potential within the system of educational choice. As well as casting light on possible tensions between what parents can do and what they actually did (Hasan, 2005).

4.6.1 Data familiarisation and coding

Braun and Clark (2006) set out the manner in which a thematic analysis follows a phased approach from the initial data familiarisation and coding, to the identification of themes, and the production of the report. Whilst each step was broadly followed, I struggled with the concept of reducing the findings down into narrow themes. My interest in the activity of educational choice and how the participants constructed their understanding of choice meant that I was interested in acknowledging complexity and to valuing the effects of difference ‘in relation to the whole narrative in which they appear[ed]’ (Griffin & May, 2018, p.515-516). This became more apparent in phase four where I increased the number of themes I then went on to analyse.

In the first phase of familiarisation, I repeatedly immersed myself with my data as I listened to interview recordings, engaged in transcription, and debriefed my participants (see initial analysis sent to participants in appendix seven).
transcribed the interviews as a verbatim account of what was said, including all moments of quiet as well as utterances. as I sought to capture what was going on (Mason, 2018). The transcription process became an opportunity to reflect on the interviews, what was going on during the interview process, to ask myself questions of the statements made, which in turn informed the second interviews with parents that took place after their child had started education. I also kept field notes on what happened during the interview. Here I noted my observations and feelings, any additional questions to ask in subsequent interviews, and ideas for analysis. The field notes became a space for engaging with the phenomena arising during my research, to consider my role within the interviews and how I may have interacted with the participants thereby influencing the data collected. These proved valuable as a ‘developmental device’ (Mason, 2018, p.160) for formulating the interpretation of the data I was collecting and to develop my analytical ideas. I became immersed (Rivas, 2018) in the data as I transcribed interviews, and repeated that re-immersion through my summary of findings for participants and through the field notes.

Following this transcription process and subsequent participant feedback, the transcripts were fed into qualitative data analysis software - NVivo (QSR International, 2018) in order to support the analysis process. The use of NVivo (QSR International, 2018), facilitated the identification of emerging topics or codes as I entered the second phase of my thematic analysis (initial coding). It enabled the interpretations and cross-facet working to be linked back to the original transcript enhancing transparency and coherence during the research process (Griffin & May, 2018). At this stage in the analysis I used an inductive approach to coding, meaning that I was seeking to analyse the data without applying a pre-conceived framework. I used the words of participants and
created codes that represented what they were saying rather than adopting a deductive approach which would have shaped my interpretation of what participants had said (Rivas, 2018).

I recognise that my analysis was not taking place in ‘an epistemological vacuum’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84); my social constructionist position meant that I was interested in how my participants represented or constructed the educational choice process. Consideration of what choices were being made and how each choice was brought into being inevitably framed my coding approach (Silverman, 2018). Those participating in this research have interpreted my questions and the research topic and from this have constructed a response that they felt met my need. In turn I recorded these responses and then constructed my own meanings as I dissociated from some ideas and associated my thinking with others; I have not been a ‘neutral agent in the research process’ (Griffin & May, 2018, p.519). My positioning, as set out in 4.1, has informed this research and has been recognised in order to guard against an overly determining analysis. I took care to remain open to the ideas articulated by research participants and to not overly influence their ideas through my own experiences of education or that of my children’s.

Coding through NVivo enabled me to sort my data into meaningful groups, to organise and integrate different forms of data into one place whilst keeping some of the surrounding data so that the context remained clear. Some of the data appeared relevant to more than one code whilst others appeared inconsistent creating tensions within the data set. Nevertheless all of the codes initially identified were kept in order to gain insight into the activity of choice for all participants.
4.6.2 Identifying themes

The process of coding identified features of the data that were interesting to me as an influence on the choice being made; these became the elements of educational choice. The third phase of the thematic analysis sought to collate my codes into potential themes. I recognise that I was not passive in this process as these themes did not actually reside within the data, but in my thought processes as I made associations between the narratives of education choice and my own ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of ‘thematic maps’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.98) (appendix ten) supported this process, as I looked to identify the relationships between codes, as well as codes which did not appear to ‘fit’ anywhere (the outliers). The identification of themes brought together the separate elements into components that recognised complexity within the activity of choice as properties of the whole (Vygotsky, 1997a), as a ‘unity’ (Leontyev, 2009, p.41).

There were multiple facets to this research through the different educational approaches and methods used to collect the data, but there was also ‘constellation and association between facets’ (Mason, 2011, p.81) recognisable in the emerging themes. The process of analysis also became multi-faceted as I sought to examine the data collected in different ways. I was keen to ensure that the voices of my participants were not lost in theory and concept but provided a vocabulary for educational choice (Back, 2007).

My initial thematic map identified links between the codes in the form of rational (objective) or relational (affective) elements of choice. This reflected my thinking about choice at the time and was interesting in that it emphasised that choices were not being made on the basis of just measurable objective decisions but
that the more affective or relational elements of choice were important. These initial thematic candidates did not embrace all codes and several outliers remained. Choice was more than just rational or relational and needed breaking down into further themes forming phase four of my thematic analysis.

By increasing the number of themes I was using within my analysis I was moving away from Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestion of refining themes. There was a danger in over simplifying the analysis of data as this may have hidden the very nuances of choice that I sought to research. Looking at the coding again I recognised that even where elements of choice were objectified, the parents intra-acted with these elements in a relational way. The narratives of the parents highlighted that choice was not a reaction to objective stimuli but a process where the parent engaged in the activity of educational choice within society. By this time, my own understanding of activity had shifted through both my reading of Vygotsky and Barad, and the continued immersion in the data. When I looked at the codes again I was able to identify a different set of themes that incorporated the outliers and recognised the mediated and relational nature of choice (see appendix ten for thematic maps). The data extracts now formed related to each theme in a coherent pattern and supported the narratives of choice shared by parents, I was able to refine and then define the nature of each theme.

The final phase of thematic analysis is the writing up of the research, to go beyond a simple description of the data following each theme, by making an argument in relation to the research questions. The use of theory provided a framework for the analysis and through the use of *diffractive activity* I was able to explore the ‘relationships and the causal connections between conceptual abstractions’ (Kettley, 2010, p.9).
4.6.3 A brief segue into social network analysis

The inclusion of social network analysis at this juncture may seem at odds with my analytical framework. It seems unconnected and yet it did form an important part of the research as I sought to investigate the role of social networks within the activity of educational choice. In practice the social network analysis took place after the thematic analysis as part of my exploration of the role of society, it facilitated the identification of relationships between research participants and community members (Borgatti et al., 2017). This came from interviews with participants as they discussed the people they knew who had been influential in their educational choice.

Although this analysis cannot be seen as a representation of the whole community of parents making pre-compulsory educational choices, it did afford a systematic means of handling relational data that transcended the individual (Crossley, 2011). The emerging interpersonal relationships could be seen as ‘conduits for the flow or exchange of resources such as information, knowledge, materials’ (Mamas, 2019, p.3). This analysis also considered the flow of information between settings and individuals within the community, highlighting the potential marginalisation of some groups as is explored in chapter five.

4.7 Making connections

This account of the research design is located between my literature review and my findings. It provides a connection between the context of educational choice, my own positionality and my research findings. The multi-dimensional nature of sociological research involves ‘many issues, layers, places, eras and meanings all at the same time’ (Smart, 2011, p.14). It has not been a linear process but an intra-active engagement that does not sit comfortably within the confines of
a written document. Even now, I find myself going back and forth between theory, literature, research strategy, and experience, forming new associations with each intra-action. The process is fluid and cannot in itself come to a finite conclusion, nor perhaps should it. My thinking about educational choice is without end and this thesis therefore represents a point in time where I pause and consider the next steps.

My social constructionist position recognises the importance of the relational, and my theorising in and between the micro and the macro highlights the relationships arising between individuals, society, and things (Ingold, 2010; McGregor, 2020; Smart, 2011). This research recognises a need to understand the lived experiences of the parent-participants as they chose education for their young child. Any sense-making has been constructed, making explicit the implicit, through the recognition of how these lived experiences have been interpreted both by the parents and myself during the interview process. Those parents participating in my research have been asked to ‘seize hold’ of educational choice within their narratives, to engage with it, to articulate their experiences and to recognise not only their activity within the system of education but also the operations or conditions (Leontiev, 2005) within which the activity of educational choice takes place.

Facet methodology has provided an orientation, a way of thinking about these lived experiences through constellations of facets that helped to define the overall activity of educational choice at both a micro level (the individual) and macro level (the system of education in England). The parents participating in this research have shaped my work through what was important to them and the choices they were making. In this way I have been able to highlight how educational choice is not just about a choice between mainstream providers but
about an entanglement of possibilities and relationalities that I shall now go on to explore.
5.0 The multiple facets of educational choice

The aim of this study was to explore the activity of parents making an educational choice for their child at four years of age. My review of the literature in chapter three emphasised that educational choice is a complex activity situated within a fragmented field of education that has evolved over time. By characterising choice as multi-faceted I recognise that choice is an activity that is unique to the individual parent and child and it is this unique experience that I go on to explore in this research.

As set out in chapter two, this research has not followed a linear process. The intra-actions arising through the literature, with my research participants, and my thinking about diffractive activity have been messy and entangled and yet need to be set out in this thesis as a coherent narrative. Although I arrived at my theory of diffractive activity at the end of my research it has been positioned at the start of this thesis as a theoretical frame to structure my writing. The following presentation of my findings follows this frame from a review of the elements of activity through to an analysis of the components of choice. In chapter six I then go on to examine how diffractive thinking moves choice beyond ‘what is’ to ‘what might be’.

Rather like assembling the ingredients before making a cake, I begin with an identification of what the key elements were that the parents participating in this research referred to as influencing the educational choice they made. I then move on to explore how these elements of choice were just facets within the activity of choice. They were not the answers (the reasons why a specific choice was made), rather they mediated the activity of choice for different parents in different ways. Section 5.2 sets out how the lens of Vygotsky’s mediated activity
(see section 2.3.1 for more details) supports this analysis as I explore how the elements of choice mediated activity. It is from this stage that I move from the simple identification of the elements of choice, to consider how the activity of parents participating in this research was part of an entangled process that took place over time, was mediated by history and experiences, through intra-actions within society and through the emotions evoked by the features and materials of education.

5.1 Starting with the elements of choice

The data I collected have come primarily from interviews with parents, supported by interviews with setting leaders, setting photographs and a documentary analysis. The first interview with parents started with an open question that asked what educational choice they were making for their child and what had influenced that choice. Rather than responding with their decision and a list of influences the response was one more akin to telling a story; there was a timeline, with characters and plots (Czarniawska, 2021) as exemplified below:

So we’ve chosen the Steiner firstly for my older son who is now seven. And he was at the local school before that and ... sometimes he’d gone fine, sometimes he found it difficult there. I was never comfortable wholly with it (Zara).

Well when we first moved here, it was about seven years ago, from [a city], and my eldest … she was at a little private school in [a city]. Because we couldn’t get into our local primary school, and we tried for ages (Frankie).

I went to a Montessori School from 3 to 16 … I enjoyed that and what I found when I went to college was that most people didn't really want to be there, weren't really interested in learning whereas I was really interested in learning I really wanted to get on with it (Orla).

As researcher I was looking for what the stories were saying to me (Czarniawska, 2021), to identify connections between the different narratives
that might help me to theorise how the stories, characters, actions and events could be transformed into a new understanding of educational choice.

The thematic analysis of data started as an inductive process where codes were identified within the data set without making links to a pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By making comparisons across and between the different narratives of choice I arrived at 22 over-arching codes that represented the different elements (characters, actions and events) within the narratives; the influences acting within the activity of educational choice as portrayed below:

![Figure 9: Elements of educational choice](image)

At first glance some of these elements (such as inspection outcome and examination results) appeared to align with the concept of choice as objective and driven by league tables (Ball, 2013; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). However, what was particularly prevalent were elements that were more subjective, personal and relatable to the individual parent such as a sense of belonging and friendships. These elements of choice were clearly relational, linked to feelings,
a sense of belonging and friendships. There were also other elements of choice at play that were important to parents and influential in the final choice that they made; these were the features of education such as the school building, technology and resources (see appendix seven for a summary of my initial analysis).

On further review what was more important to parents was not the individual elements themselves, but the way parents related to each element in different ways (their story). In this sense, the features and materials of education, and the system of educational choice, evoked emotions and held a symbolism for parents that was informed through their experiences (see 4.3.3 for details of parent participants). An example here was the materiality of the school itself (school building and site):

Their playground is like a concrete block with a massive fence around it. It’s horrible, it’s like a prison (Orla).

It’s actually really nice inside. It’s got nice light and it’s all fresh and new, so yes, it’s going to be nice for [my child] (Maisie).

Here the parents were talking about the same element of choice – the local primary school, but their relationship with it and the circumstance surrounding it coloured their views and were quite different. For Orla this had influenced her choice to start a Montessori school, whereas Maisie felt positive about the school building and this contributed to her decision to send her child to this setting.

Whilst an inductive approach to data analysis enabled the identification of the elements influencing choice as a starting point, each parent’s narrative emphasised that their activity of choice came as a result of an active engagement with the world through the relationalities arising within their activity (Sameroff, 2009) rather than the elements themselves. It was at this point that
Vygotsky’s cycle of constructing activity (Figure 2) provided a theoretical framework to re-examine educational choice, to identify patterns and connections that I had not previously seen as I now go on to explore.

5.2 Looking through the lens of mediated activity

The initial analysis of data emphasised that it was not the elements of choice that were important but the connections and the narrative surrounding each element (Griffin & May, 2018). Vygotsky’s theory of mediated activity (as set out in 2.3) facilitated this next stage in my analysis of the entangled nature of human activity. It recognises that activity is not a linear process toward a goal but that mediation within activity may sometimes lead to the unexpected.

Vygotsky’s (2004) cycle of activity highlights the role of history and experience, society, and relationalities within activity. It has provided a framework for my thinking throughout this thesis, and the interpretation of the data collected, supporting the analysis in three ways:

- firstly, through recognising that educational choice is not a response to the stimulus of a particular element of choice such as a good Ofsted report as this does not take into account the qualitative uniqueness and complexity of human activity. Whilst identifying the elements of educational choice was important, they did not provide any insight as to the eventual educational choice parents made, or enable an exploration of the activity behind the choices that were made.
- secondly, by positioning mediated activity as a dynamic and iterative concept that brings into this analysis the role of perezhivanie, rather than portraying choice as a linear process towards a goal. It helps to explain why different parents dissociate and associate with the same element of
choice in different ways (much as Orla and Maisie exemplify in their narrative about the school building in 5.1 above).

- finally, acknowledging that mediated activity provides a framework that recognises the connections and relations between the elements of choice. Whilst it is necessary to identify the elements of activity (Figure 9), this is in order to ascertain the properties of activity as a whole - the possibilities, relationalities, and entanglements within the activity of educational choice.

In section 2.3 I highlighted how the interactions between a parent, their history and experiences, society, and relationalities, could mediate activity confirming or changing how a parent might think about educational choice. For some parents, their own experiences of education may have been more instrumental in the educational choice they made for their child than perhaps the influence of society or material things. For others society may be more significant. What became important was not the individual element of choice itself (such as an Ofsted rating) but how each element mediated the educational choice they went on to make. David and Zara’s narratives about the Ofsted report exemplify this; David explains how the Ofsted outcome was influential in his choice of education stating that ‘[the Ofsted rating] is important because it’s the only thing you’ve got as a guide’. Conversely, Zara’s opinion was that ‘you don’t want to be judged on something you are not actually aiming to achieve if you know what I mean’. Here Zara was inviting me to agree with her statement, to acknowledge that the Ofsted report did not acknowledge some of the practices within a Steiner school that were more focused on the development of a child’s spirit and way of being in the world than their progress in maths and literacy.
Through the framework of mediated activity, I have been able to gain insight into the whole system of activity that parents were engaged in, bringing meaning to their narratives of choice and a structure for this analysis. In the rest of this chapter each component of activity will be examined in turn, starting with the role of history and experiences before considering society and finally relationalities. I then move on to examine how these intra-actions within activity transform into choice in chapter six.

When analysed through mediated activity connections can now be seen within and between the different elements of choice framed by the components of mediated activity. The first component of history and experiences brought together both the parent’s and child’s experiences of education (as narrated by the parent), related to their sense of belonging within a particular educational approach. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus was important here (section 3.2.2) as experiences of the past had an influence on present and future activity framing how a person thought and acted in the social world.

The second component of mediated activity is that of culture and society. Here a parent and child’s friendships and social intra-actions arising within their community and the wider macro-environment shaped how they thought about education; what options were available to them and whether a particular educational approach would meet their needs.

Finally, relationalities. This is a component of activity described by Vygotsky as the emotional response to a situation or the environment (perezhivanie). On the one hand perezhivanie (singular) / perezhivaniya (plural) would relate to all components of mediated activity in terms of how a parent relates to their experiences or to their intra-actions within society. On the other hand Vygotsky (1994, p.339) specifically referred to perezhivanie as ‘the emotional experience
… arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment'. It is the aspect of the environment that I was keen to acknowledge within this component, in terms of the features and materialities of education as these were elements that parents highlighted within their narratives of choice. Features of education included the inspection outcome, cost, practicalities, examination results, school ranking, vaccinations, curriculum, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and religion. The elements included buildings, technology, resources, the environment, school size, facilities and type of setting.

Each of these components - history, society, and relationalities, are summarised in the table below, and provide a starting point for identifying connections and how they mediated the choice the parents went on to make.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History and experiences</th>
<th>Mediation through culture within society</th>
<th>Relationalities with the environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Element</td>
<td>• Element</td>
<td>• Element</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• parent’s experiences</td>
<td>• friendships</td>
<td>• inspection outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• children’s experiences</td>
<td>• social interaction for parents and child</td>
<td>• cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• belonging</td>
<td>• community</td>
<td>• practicalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Connections</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>Connections</strong></td>
<td>• examination results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• wanting the same or something different</td>
<td>• social network</td>
<td>• school ranking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• being a good parent</td>
<td>• community</td>
<td>• vaccinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• belonging and identity</td>
<td>• macro-environment</td>
<td>• curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• SEND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• materialities (buildings, technology, resources, environment, school size, facilities, type of setting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Connections</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• the features of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• the materialities of education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: The components of activity*
The layout of the following sections within this chapter follows this framework of mediated activity as I explore each component and what this means to the activity of educational choice. Starting with ‘history and experiences’ in 5.3, I consider how a parent’s own experiences of education in the past, their experiences with education for their children in the present, and possibilities for education in the future, influenced how they thought about education. These experiences of education informed the choice they were making for their young child today wanting the same or, if their experience had been poor, wanting something different. Here I also explore the parent’s desire to be seen as a good parent making the right choice for their child and how their identity and need to feel a sense of belonging within the community of school were important.

In 5.4 I deliberate the mediating role of the parent and their view of their child within society. Educational choice was not separate from society, the parents were part of society and the educational choice they were making strengthened or weakened the bonds they had in their community and social group. Here I highlight how the parent’s own sense of identity, their social network and their links within their local community were influential in their activity, as was the system of educational choice (the macro-environment) they were acting within. Finally, in 5.5 I examine the relationships and emotions (perezhivanie), the meaning that different materials and features of choice brought and how this mediated a parent’s thinking about the choice they were making.

Whilst each component is listed here separately it will become clear that different threads of thinking extend between components. The notion of ‘belonging’ exemplifies this with threads stretching from the history of an individual to their belonging in a social group or community. This serves to highlight the complexity of choice as I now go on to explore.
5.3 History and experiences

The parents’ and their child’s experiences and sense of belonging were highlighted as key elements within their activity of choice, connected through the component of ‘history and experiences’. They provided a starting point for each parent’s narratives about educational choice and how each parent related their experiences to their thinking about education for their child today.

All interviews started by asking parents what type of education they had chosen for their child and what influenced their choice. In response all parent participants referred to their own experiences of education (and in some cases that of an older child) as a reason for the choice they were making. In David’s case he acknowledged that

it’s just what I’ve known as education … We both had a normal state schooling, so as for deciding about other, even private schooling or home education, we just never sort of thought of it (David).

Equally Frankie referred to her own and her partner’s experience of going to an independent school as a reason for sending her child to a selective all-girls school in the nearby city.

I did go to an all-girls school … we were both privately educated. So I guess we come from that, and weirdly [this school] is quite similar to the prep school I went to in the style of the building (Frankie).

Zara used her own experiences of alternative education as a reason to send her child to a Steiner school, further elaborating by making links to an alternative education and being happy at school. Similarly, Orla made links between her experience of a Montessori education and being compassionate and caring for the wider world. Both of these examples suggest that the parents saw a connection between the type of education their child would receive and the type
of person they may become (happy, compassionate, caring, being a nice person):

I went to alternative schools myself … all my other brothers and sisters have been to a Steiner school at some point as well. And my Mum had, it was just always really important to her that we were happy at school and that was the main thing (Zara).

I went to a Montessori School from three to sixteen … Being compassionate and being caring for your community and the wider world and being knowledgeable about the world. I think that is really important. And being a nice person which is something that I don’t think is necessarily factored in the State System (Orla).

Not all parents had a good experience of education. In Ethan’s case, his own experience was negative and as a consequence he did not want to send his child into the mainstream schooling system that he had endured.

Well I had a bad experience of school because I was dyslexic so I was put into remedial classes which was just crisis management all the time … It was like pure violence in that room (Ethan).

Such comments were offered within parents’ narratives almost as if they were evidence for the decisions they were making, for wanting the same sort of education or something different; as evidence of being a ‘good’ parent that ‘only wants the best for their child’ (happiness, to be kind, compassionate, to avoid violence). Each parent seemed to connect their own experiences of the past with what they wanted for their child today as they identified with a particular educational approach and explained why that was important. For Zara, a sense of belonging was important for herself and her child as she acknowledged that she did not feel comfortable in the mainstream setting her older child had initially attended.

My older son who is now seven … was at the local school before … sometimes he’d gone fine, sometimes he found it difficult there. I was never comfortable wholly with it (Zara).
Whilst these elements of choice (parent and child experiences and sense of belonging) were important, it was the meaning these experiences brought for the parent that was influential in the choice they were making. These meanings included wanting the same experience of education for their child as the parent had or something different, wanting to be a ‘good parent’ and a need to feel a sense of belonging within a setting. These connections are analysed in sections 5.3.1 to 5.3.3.

5.3.1 Wanting the same or something different

Experiences like those outlined above not only provided the starting point for each parent’s narrative about educational choice but were also revisited during the interviews. A Montessori education for her child was important for Orla because it inspired learning, whereas attendance at the local school brought with it a danger ‘I didn’t want my children to be switched off from education basically’ (Orla). Equally, Zara had attended alternative schools as a child and felt that she ‘was really lucky to have had the education [she] had’. She loved school and stated ‘I feel like I owe it now to my children that they love school’ (Zara). In Ethan’s case his own negative experiences of school meant that he did not want the same for his own children and has chosen to Unschool (Holt & Farenga, 2003) instead.

I feel that that system [of mainstream schooling] was really bad for me and I was very reticent about putting that onto [my daughter], because I knew how damaged I was by my experience of school (Ethan).

The parent’s own experiences of education were intertwined with a narrative about choice influences as an iterative process between time present, time past, and time future as choices made for their child today were justified by their previous experiences and their vision for their child’s future life:
We both had a normal state schooling, so as for deciding about other even private schooling or home education we just never sort of thought of it (David).

I did go to an all-girls school … we were both privately educated. So I guess we come from that, and weirdly [this school] is quite similar to the prep school I went to in the style of the building (Frankie).

I think the majority of people don't think about it especially If you have been to a state school like my husband said “well it would never have crossed my mind to send them” … I went to a Montessori school, I enjoyed that …I was really interested in learning I really wanted to get on with it (Orla).

As Vygotsky (2004) noted, every act starts with an accumulation of experience; this provided the foundation for a parent’s thinking about education for their young child today. The parents participating in this research revisited their own experiences as an iterative process that reconfigured the present. By combining and reworking previous experiences with new propositions, the materials for thinking about education were constructed (Vygotsky, 2004).

5.3.2 Being a good parent

The employment of conversation enabled me to gain insight into the educational choices being made by the parents participating in this study as they put into words their thinking about education. Although parents were not asked to justify their choice of education, their narratives of choice appeared to do just that. Otherwise referred to as ‘the deployment of ‘legitimation talk’” (Vincent & Ball, 2001, p.649), referring back to previous experiences can underpin the approval or rejection of different approaches to education (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013). Parents were justifying their choice to themselves but also to me in the role of a knowledgeable educator. I was not, therefore, separate from the narrative but embedded within it; I was implicated within the parental responses to my questions through the formulation of the question in the first place, and through the intra-actions arising within the narration as parents sought to justify
their choices in dialogue with me (Bakhtin, 1981) as demonstrated by Ethan and Olivia below:

**Ethan** - See the problem we have with [our daughter] going to school, if we were living in Finland I wouldn't have a problem at all. In most other countries. But here in this country I would say no, it's to abusive. It's not doing the right thing.

**Olivia** - Too Victorian.

**Researcher** - It's a very strong word to use – abusive.

**Ethan** - I really believe it's abusive that's how badly I think about it right now.

**Researcher** - What leads you to feel that passionately, what is it about the education system?

**Ethan** - Well I had a bad experience of school because I was dyslexic so I was put into remedial classes which was just crisis management all the time. We didn't learn anything. So I was getting up at 5 to watch OU programs, and then going into school and sitting bored all day, and then going back and watching more. You know it was like … I just learnt everything I was interested in from telly. So I was very… I've virtually had zero education in those classrooms.

As well as justifying their choices to me through their elicitation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ experiences, the participants were also justifying their choices to themselves as they managed their emotions through their narrative. Orla exemplified this when she stated ‘I spent last summer worrying whether we had made the right decision’ before going on to manage her emotions by focusing on the positive ‘I think she was happy [at the Montessori nursery] … she was doing really well and we liked it you know as an option’ (Orla). In this way ‘good parenting’ was being demonstrated through the parents' interpretations of education and the choices they went on to make. As Zara stated ‘you want something better for your children than you had don't you’. By inviting me to be on her side, Zara was seeking my agreement that a Steiner education was a 'good' and 'better' option than the local primary school.
The identity of being a ‘good parent’ who would not send their child to a ‘bad school’ was also emphasised when parents referred to the Ofsted outcome during their choice narrative:

It didn’t have quite the Ofsted rating, but it was still rated as good (David).

[My sister] she had a look at both schools of their Ofsted and “oh yes they’re both fairly good” she said (Maisie).

Similarly, the importance of the school’s ranking was something that Frankie thought I wanted to hear when she stated ‘so [we are] very lucky to have [this school] because it is nationally ranked isn’t it’.

During the narrative this position was then renegotiated (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013) and in David’s case a sense of community became more important than a school’s Ofsted outcome and he was keen to explain this to me.

[It was an] excellent school you know Ofsted excellent, in every category. But there was no sense of community there because most of the people were driving their children into school (David).

Similarly Orla explored how ‘you don’t want to be judged on something you are not actually aiming to achieve’, and following an inadequate Ofsted judgement after her child had started school Zara argued ‘well it’s obviously just because they can’t measure all the wonderful intangible things about the school and put that in their report’.

The knowledge that her chosen setting had received an inadequate Ofsted outcome conflicted with Zara’s belief in the school and created a sense of discomfort or cognitive dissonance (Vaidis, 2014) for Zara. Cognitive dissonance theory is based on the concept that an individual ‘strives toward consistency within himself’ (Festinger, 1957, p.1). Where inconsistencies arise, as they did for Zara, an individual will take steps to rationalise them. In Zara’s case this need to feel a sense of equilibrium was addressed by highlighting ‘all
the wonderful intangible things about the school’ as she appealed to my judgement for approval. Narratives about educational choice were formed through the parents’ intra-actions with me; they appealed to a knowledge shared and in Zara’s case she felt no need to voice the ‘obvious’ to me.

The ‘moral concerns’ (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013, p.216) parents held about a ‘good’ education played a part in the choice they were making but also in the positioning of their identities as good parents. For this reason educational choice cannot be understood ‘without knowing the opportunistic history of its formation’ (Holland et al., 1998, p.6).

5.3.3 Belonging and identity

The importance of feeling included within a school or social group and having a sense of belonging was of primary importance to parents and became influential in a parent’s decision to choose, or not to choose, a particular setting. As Zara commented when she moved her eldest child from the local primary school ‘there’s this cultural barrier between me and the school’, going on to state ‘I don’t want them to be somewhere that I don’t feel good about and [where] I know that they’re not happy’ (Zara). Zara did not feel she belonged in the local primary school, whereas David felt very differently about the same setting ‘it seemed friendly, you just get a feel about somewhere, I felt that I could fit … just by looking at people’ (David).

A sense of belonging is related to emotional attachment and a feeling of being at home (Yuval-Davis, 2006). David and Zara felt differently about the same place and this emphasises how belonging can be a dynamic process that shifts in different times and locations. Their own experiences of education as a child provided a sense of familiarity and belonging (or not belonging) with a particular
educational approach today. This shaped their view of education and the types of setting in which they felt a sense of familiarity and so felt comfortable sending their child to. Zara identified with the Steiner community as opposed to the local primary school; with the practices and activities culturally constructed within the frames of her social life as part of that Steiner community (Holland et al., 1998).

‘Identity is lived in and through activity’ (Holland et al., 1998, p.5), culturally constructed in social situations within fields of social life such as education. It is formed as ‘history-in-person’ (Holland et al., 1998, p.18) influencing a parent’s understanding of what a ‘good education’ looks like, and their sense of belonging with a particular educational approach that perpetuates the same cultural principles. Zara’s comment about not belonging in the local primary school but identifying with the Steiner community is an example of how the act of choosing education can be seen as ‘a means of expressing and enacting a particular identity’ within society (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014, p.487). It is a means for parents to articulate who they are as people and their beliefs; to make links between their sense of self, their educational choice and their sense of belonging within a social group. In this sense educational choice becomes laden with meaning and emotion, it is political and symbolic (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Gurney, 2017; Youdell, 2011). For Ethan and Olivia, their decision to Unschool was, inseparable from politics.

I don't understand where the evidence is [for] the current education system. We've got Singapore and Finland at the top of the league tables so follow them, that's the evidence. Instead of doing the exact opposite of what they do. Just because it's the political agenda of the people in power. It is what they believe. I've heard Michael Gove say it is very important that children learn these things in this way and, you know, go back to rote learning. And I'm thinking well that's just your opinion it's not based on any evidence … that's where I think the abuse is … The overall system (Ethan).
As Youdell (2011) states, ‘schooling and politics are inseparable ... shaped by the wider economic, political and social context’ (p.7). Frankie’s positioning as being culturally aware meant that she raised the importance of diversity and culture within the school, a desire to belong to a culturally diverse society.

I think it’s important for the children to see that there are other sorts of people who look completely different, have different religions, but actually, fundamentally, are all the same really (Frankie).

The roots of an individual’s sense of belonging can be found in their history and identity before being moulded and defined by attachments to certain groups, places, or ethical and political value systems (Lovell, 1998; Millei & Sumsion, 2011; Witten, McCleanor & Kearns, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The role of belonging in educational choice starts, therefore, with the parent’s history and identity but extends with threads of thinking to the social networks of which parents are a part, their community and the wider macro-environment as explored in 5.4.

5.3.4 Summarising history and experiences

The role of history in the form of the parents’ own experiences of education, and more recently that of their older children, provided a starting point for parents as they engaged with the activity of educational choice for their four-year-old child. Ethan’s statement about ‘feeling reticent about putting that onto [my child]’ exemplified how his own experiences impacted on the decisions he made for his eldest child and how history and experience can be seen as forming the first component in the activity of educational choice. These experiences established the foundations for a parent’s thinking about an educational choice for their four-year-old, before being combined and reworked (mediated) with new propositions. In this way the past was not separate from the present but was dispersed and threaded through their intra-actions within the activity of
educational choice today and the later choices they were considering for their child in the future.

5.4 Mediation through culture within society

Not only were the past, present and future experiences of education influential in the choice parents made for their child, but so was the role of culture in society. The parents in this study were not acting in isolation as they engaged in the activity of educational choice, they were located within a relational field of education (Wacquant, 1989). These parents brought their experiences of the past, their history and identity into the present as they interacted with those around them as part of society.

All of the parents participating in this research made reference to their friends, the importance of social interaction for themselves and for their child, the role of the wider community, and the system of education as elements that influenced the educational choice they made. For both Zara and David their child’s friendships were important and they saw school as a place where friendships would be formed:

Part of being at the school was really amazing actually. In that … suddenly everybody knows your child, and you meet so many more people. And it really does strengthen that feeling of place I think, being part of the local school (Zara).

She’s got a happy life here now. She’s got lots of friends. She says hello to everybody. She gets invited to birthday parties, social things, she’s happy (David).

For David friendships also extended beyond the school gates to include the community, going so far as to state that a sense of community within the town was more important than the school.

It seemed friendly … you just get a feel about somewhere, I felt that I could fit. Just by looking at people, a good sense of community
and stuff … I don’t think we would have moved to a place we didn’t like just for the school (David).

The role of the community was also raised by Orla as she talked about both her own involvement in the community outside of school, as well as her children’s, stating her need to be able
to do things and to be able to involve [the children] in the community and things … We’ve met a lot of people here that we will still keep in contact with (Orla).

The role of society in mediating the choices that parents were making could also be seen at a macro-level when Orla, Ethan and Olivia referred to the pressure they felt from society to ensure their child was well placed to achieve within the system of education:

Already at two there’s quite a lot of pressure that they are going to go through the system and if you don’t keep them at the right level at the right time that they are going to be behind or they are going to not make friends or they are going to be out of the loop (Orla).

(In reference to testing) I can see why they quantify because everything in neoliberalism is about quantifying so it can be a saleable object … All the constant testing, saying well we have this school at this level and it is competing with these other schools … everything is quantifying (Ethan).

Certainly society did have an influence. Yes definitely a pressure (Olivia).

Comments like these emphasised the role of social networks, the wider community, and system of education (macro-environment) in the activity of choice. The nature of these intra-actions emphasised that choice did not reside purely within the domain of the parent, but within society found within social networks, the wider community and the macro-environment as explored in the next three sections of this chapter.

5.4.1 Social network

The social networks that parents were a part of appeared to be a key component within the activity of parental choice. They formed the basis for the development
of friendships and connections between parents but also between their children during sessions at the parent and toddler groups or at nursery. Not only did these connections act as a conduit for information, they also enabled a sense of belonging with like-minded individuals, a sense of belonging that the parents in this study sought to maintain as they moved onto the next stage of their child’s education.

All parents participating in this research said that their primary source of information about the educational choices available to them was through word-of-mouth from within these social networks:

- It’s definitely word of mouth … I think we just heard that everyone was pretty happy (Frankie).
- Well you definitely rely on just word of mouth don’t you … I heard about it from our friend working there (Louise).

Ball and Vincent (1998) refer to this passing on of knowledge as ‘‘hot’ knowledge’ (p.380) that is embedded within social networks based on experience and emotions. An example of how ‘hot’ knowledge impacting upon educational choices came from Maisie when she stated; ‘my friend’s had a really bad experience with their kids at Steiner … and they were like no, no, you really don’t want to go to the school’. Although Maisie had been interested in a Steiner education because of their use of creativity in the curriculum, her friend’s anecdote means that she will now not consider this educational approach at all, even though there are other Steiner schools in the area to consider. These examples highlight how conversations with peers were influential in the educational choices parents went on to make. In Maisie’s case a whole educational philosophy was rejected on the basis of her friend’s experience without any further investigation.
As Bakhtin (1981, p.338) states ‘the majority of our information and opinions is usually not communicated in direct form as our own, but with reference to some indefinite and general source’. An understanding of what something might look or feel like (in Maisie’s case a Steiner school), may be based on one’s own experience or ‘directed by someone else’s experience, as if according to someone else’s instructions’ (Vygotsky, 2004, p.17). Maisie was being directed by her friend’s opinion of a Steiner education, her friendship was important to her as she sought to maintain her sense of belonging within the artistic community and so she aligned herself with her friend’s view of the school.

Not only were the comments from individual friends influential in the choices these parents made, so were the social groups they were a part of:

- It was her friendship with those people. That’s what made us choose (David).
- The children are people who, their parents work [with us] so we are all hanging out together at weekends anyway (Zara).

As my research progressed there appeared to be three different groups of parents with four year old children within the community, those attending the local school, those attending other schools, and those who were home educating. Although there were only a small number of participants in this research, the connections within and between parents in this community were interesting to note and this can be more clearly seen within a social network analysis (Borgatti et al., 2017). By drawing on the connections referred to during interviews, I was able to gain insight into the potential networks and relationships between participants and settings (see social network maps in appendix eleven). At each stage in their child’s early education, social connections were formed and reformed: at parent and toddler groups, through nursery or pre-school, and then at four after their child had started their chosen
Each network map provided a snapshot of the structure of social networks and a visual representation of the relational ties between the parents and their educational choices (Mamas, 2019).

As well as showing what nursery settings a parent was and was not attending, the network maps also provided a visualisation of the friendship network of parents. Connections were visible between the early years setting a parent sent their child to, and their social network. Those parents who had chosen to home educate all knew each other, as did those who attended the local primary school. Those who went to the Montessori nursery were visible as a separate social group linked to their educational choice. Of note was how the apparent connections formed in the parent and toddler groups, continued on into nursery, and then on into their educational choice when their child was four. A link can be made here to the role of history and experience within the activity of educational choice in that an individual’s sense of belonging and social identity develops as ‘history-in-person’ (Holland et al., 1998, p.18), in and through the social groups they were a part of. These social networks indicate how the relationships formed by the parents at the start of their child’s life established the basis for their own and their child’s connections within society into the future.

Zara wanted to build connections within the local community where the majority of children attended the local mainstream primary school, stating ‘it really does strengthen that feeling of place I think, being part of the local school’. She felt that she should send her child to the local school even though this was not the educational approach she was familiar with, but soon found that ‘there’s this cultural barrier between me and the school. I didn’t feel like I fitted in there, and I felt like it was quite a closed door’. There was a need for Zara to psychologically identify with and belong to her social group through shared beliefs, attitudes and
behaviours (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This is because people derive part of their identity from the groups they belong to as a cognitive process of categorisation. The categories are not ‘out there’ as external constraints, but are self-defined internal representations of a given context (Hogg & Reid, 2006). In Zara’s case the social group of parents sending their child to the local school did not provide that sense of belonging she was looking for, whereas those parents accessing a Steiner education did.

We have got lots of other friends … who have their kids in a Steiner school, there’s a community, a Steiner community isn’t there I suppose (Zara).

Zara’s beliefs about school were formed through her own experiences in a democratic school and through the experiences of her social group attending Steiner schools. These beliefs were not shared by members of the parent and toddler group linked to the local primary school and she ended up forming a separate group with a small number of parents from the Montessori nursery who held shared beliefs about education. Zara’s narrative was not unique as the connections between families and the wider community became important:

I thought I’d go to the [local school] just because, we’ve got the children on the next farm down the road, they go there (Maisie).

It’s only really been since November that I’ve been involved with everything so it’s good for me. It’s good to meet people, and to recognise people on the school run (David).

The role of the social networks that parents were a part of became important within the parents’ narratives of educational choice. The identity of being a ‘good parent’ as explored in 5.3.2 was justified through encounters with the past, but identity was also being constructed within social situations (Holland et al., 1998), formed through activity within society. Through interaction within society a ‘good parent’ (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013, p.216) had educational beliefs that were shared by their social group.
The use of social network maps, such those in appendix eleven, brings a danger of over-simplifying the relationships portrayed. The small number of participants means that this analysis can only be seen as a snap-shot of larger relationships within the community, and the formation of different social groups, it cannot be taken as representative of the local population as a whole. However, it does give some insight into the connections between the social networks of parents and the educational choices they made for their children through their shared attitudes and beliefs. ‘There is a collectivity to choosing’ (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995, p.48) as relationships in society framed the choices being made.

The interpretations I have made should not be considered in isolation but as part of my own intra-action with the data as I sought insight into the activity of educational choice. The differences between each social network, as well as the effects of these differences, highlights the important role of social connections within the activity of educational choice. These connections and relationships between parents changed when their children moved onto different settings at four years of age and the group of parents interested in Steiner education became more socially isolated. The relationships and connections between parents within their social networks are therefore influential in the activity of choosing education with the potential to mediate the activity of choice. As Leontiev (1981) discussed, individuals are social beings governed by biology and social laws; their intra-actions within society are always mediated by relationships with others. This intra-action arising between parents, their history-in-person, social group and cultural practice, became a point of mediation within the activity of choice.
5.4.2 Community

A sense of belonging within a community was also important to the parents in this research, as experiences from the past were developed through the cultural resources available. The parent-participants in this study lived within a small rural town, a place or community that they wanted to feel a part of. For some parents this was more important than the school’s ranking, as David said, ‘we wouldn’t live on the top of a mountain … for an amazing school’.

For the parents there was a link between the importance of having friends and the importance of belonging to a place, feeling part of a community for themselves and for their child. Community in this sense was both within the school and the wider geographical area (town or parish):

It seemed friendly … you just get a feel about somewhere, I felt that I could fit. Just by looking at people, a good sense of community and stuff … I don’t think we would have moved to a place we didn’t like just for the school (David).

To do things and to be able to involve them in the community and things … We’ve met a lot of people here that we will still keep in contact with (Orla).

So for us, we really wanted the local school to be the one that worked, um for our children … you know it’s just sort of more community building. And that was really important to us (Zara).

The definition of ‘community’ and the place of community studies in research have been an issue of debate for decades (Crow, 2002; Crow, 2008; Day, 2006; Delanty, 2018; Hall, 1990; Mooney & Neal, 2008). In research ‘community’ has been defined as an aspect of place, interest, or identity (Crow & Mah, 2012), and so my use of community as a place is appropriate. However, during my interview with David he mentioned the word ‘community’ 22 times, in connection with ‘a sense of community’, ‘a real community thing’, ‘you choose here because of the community’. David’s use of the word community did not sit neatly into place, interest or identity. Instead, ‘community’ brought a life of its own,
something living and breathing, as having a feel-good factor, as a warm, cosy and comfortable place. ‘It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day’ (Bauman, 2001, p.1).

My interview with David and Morag emphasised the importance of belonging for this family, to such an extent that they were willing to move in order to find a place where they felt that they belonged. This concept of belonging, of being part of the community, was a principal element in the choice of education they made for their child and was more important that the school ranking or Ofsted outcome (not willing to live on the top of a mountain for an amazing school). Day (2006) links this notion of belonging with identity as a ‘sense of solidarity and identification with the others around us’ (p.1-2). For David and Morag the church provided that sense of belonging and access to the wider community. Although declared atheists they took part in church activities and felt supported by the local community through the church.

I am enjoying [the Christian community]. Enjoying it, like on Sunday we go down [to the school] and we have breakfast with everybody. It was the most lovely thing (David).

‘Community’ in this sense was not seen as a physical location but as a sense of belonging, of feeling supported by those around them, and to be able to identify with them. All participants in this research highlighted the importance of feeling part of the local community, and for those that chose to travel to a school out of the immediate locality, the potential loss of belonging was a concern.

It feels a little bit like a sub-culture but that’s not how I’d like it to be. I’d like to feel more integrated. I’d like [my child] to feel more integrated (Zara).

For Zara, although she belonged to a social group, it was a small group that was to be found on the periphery of the town. Bauman (2001) highlights how a sense of belonging within a community brings with it good will, understanding, trust,
support, and safety. Community makes us feel good but evokes ‘everything we miss, and what we lack … another name for paradise lost’ (Bauman, 2001, p.3). This search for something they did not have is what David and Morag describe, but in order to gain this sense of belonging they have become church goers, having ‘Breakfast with God’ (Morag), on a Sunday morning. Their stance as declared atheists is being challenged and as Bauman (2001) states, they have ‘paid for the privilege of ‘being in a community’ … the price is paid in the currency of freedom’ (p.4). I am not sure if David and Morag feel that they have lost anything in their choices. They claim to now feel part of the local community and ‘are quite good friends with the vicar’ (Morag). For them the choice to join church activities has been positive, it has brought with it a sense of belonging that they did not have before, and which in turn has influenced their choice of accessing a Church of England school for their child.

When conceptualising ‘community’ as ‘belonging’, elements of connectedness are at play. Participants within this research wanted to feel a connection with people in their physical locality but also for their children in their place of education.

Part of being at the school was really amazing actually… suddenly everybody knows your child, and you meet so many more people… it really does strengthen that feeling of place I think, being part of the local school (Zara).

Crow and Mah (2012, p.9) explore connections in terms of ‘common bonds’ or ties, and a sense of belonging. They highlight the multi-directional nature of connections, through history and social capital (defined by Bourdieu (1986), as the aggregate of resources linked to a durable network of acquaintances and their collectively owned capital). Of interest are the connections the parents participating in this research made to their own educational and social
experiences when making a choice for their children’s education. Understandings of ‘community’ in this sense have been constructed from the individual’s own experiences, based on their beliefs and knowledge.

As Taylor (2009, p.230-231) highlights, ‘community’ is an ‘outcome… realized as a performance’, constructed through a relationship between subjects and materialised through language. It continually reproduces itself ‘through the seeds of its own contradiction’ (p.238), community is perpetually ‘constructed on the edge of chaos’ (p.239). Within this research parents have sought to become part of a community, to realise a sense of belonging within the town for themselves and their children. In so doing, they were simultaneously acting upon that community creating contradictions and change. Community ‘refers to those things which people have in common, and which binds them together, and give them a sense of belonging with one another’ (Day, 2006, p.1). It is the boundaries we place around these commonalities that create argument through inclusion and exclusion, the boundary of place locates social groups within the community or external to it.

For parents such as Zara, Frankie, Nathan and Olivia their membership within their smaller social groups outside of the town’s primary school community brought a sense of shared educational purpose and belief and this was stronger than their need to feel part of the town. For others such as David, Morag, Orla and Maisie being part of the town’s community was important. Thus a need to feel a part of the community mediated the educational choice being made, certainly for Maisie from a school outside of the community to one that was located within the parish boundaries.
5.4.3 Macro-environment

The role of the macro-environment (system of education) in the choices made by parents was not something they specifically referred to within their narratives but can be seen in terms of the pressure parents felt to send their child to school at four. The parents in this research had different understandings of the system of education they were acting in; what compulsory education was, their rights as parents, and the choices available to them.

When asked what age compulsory education started at only one parent specifically knew that it was the term after a child turned five years of age, although two others acknowledged it was after a child had turned five. Despite this knowledge all parents (apart from those home educating) still felt the need for their child to be in a school at four. Similarly the parents lacked knowledge about their rights to send their child to school part time until they were five, to defer entry (start school later within the academic year) or to delay entry (start school outside of their normal year group):

I always thought it was the September when they started and I've always wondered how come some children go at Christmas (Morag).

We weren't aware of [the right to request a delayed entry] … I think if either of the schools in question had supported, cause we were asking those questions, but they were saying very much “No. she falls into this academic year group so therefore she has to start school” (Frankie).

I tried [part time attendance] with the local school and [the Head] said no. And then I found out later that actually I did have a right for him to be there for three days but she didn’t … the Head Mistress was not up for that at all (Zara).

There was a bit of pressure to keep her in [school]. And we were sort of expecting that so we told them it was just temporary and we’d keep up with the curriculum if she wanted to come back (Olivia).

There was a perceived norm, a shared understanding of education that described and prescribed behaviour (Hogg & Reid, 2006), and with it the
concept of starting school full-time at four, and starting education before then in nursery settings. The parents in this study felt under pressure to send their child to the local primary school in the September after they turned four years of age. To send a child to a setting other than the local primary school, or to delay school entry until five would mean not conforming to the perceived norm, others might disapprove, there may be social sanctions:

Already at two there’s quite a lot of pressure that they are going to go through the system and if you don’t keep them at the right level at the right time that they are going to be behind or they are going to not make friends or they are going to be out of the loop … because everybody else is sending them at that time (Orla).

Certainly society did have an influence. Yes definitely a pressure (Olivia).

The parents in this study were choosing education for their child within a system of English schooling that positioned education as something that took place in a school, starting in a reception class after a child turned four. Such a view brought with it a pressure to start school early and to achieve well in standard assessment tests.

Leontiev’s (1975) ideas on collective activity and Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of field helps to explain this sense of pressure, positioning the individual within the collective field of education and recognising the dynamic interplay through the conditions or operations that shape individual activity in terms of policy and legislation, and the power they yield in society. Parents making an educational choice are doing so as part of a relational web of society where power is exerted in space, time and activity (Foucault, 1979) as explored in 3.3.2. The policy of the local authority to send out a school preference form for parents to complete when their child was only three exemplified the power of space, time, and activity. Education is presented as something that takes place in a school that follows the national curriculum, starting the September after a child turns four.
years of age, and the activity of choosing such a school takes place through the completion of a school preference form within a specific timescale accompanied by threats if this is not done (by threats I refer to a lack of a school place, lack of school transport). The preferences listed are expected to be informed by the school comparison site, distance from home, Ofsted and examination results (Gov.uk, 2018). Parents would then be informed of the school their child has been allocated to in April ready for a September start as demonstrated in the figure below.

**Figure 10: Boundaried school preference process**

There was little information given to parents about educational options other than school, and the majority of parents within this research felt under pressure for their child to start education at four, in school, even when they recognised that there was no requirement to do so.

5.4.4 Summarising mediation in society

The role of society within the activity of educational choice has been influential for the parents within this study. Society in the form of friendships, social groups, the wider community, and the macro-environment have mediated the choices parents have made in terms of when their child would start education and where. Through the intra-actions arising within society, beliefs about education were formed and meanings constructed that were different for each individual. For some the opinions of friends were significant and mediated their whole way of
thinking about education. For others, it was their sense of belonging within a particular social group or within the wider community that was important.

The intra-actions arising between a parent and their social group, community and the wider macro-environment mediated how parents thought about education. Each of these mediating activities were not separate elements of choice but represented different facets for thinking about how choice had been constructed by parents within this study. Complexity and relationality within the activity of choice have been emphasised with individuals being positioned, not as separate from society but as interacting within society.

5.5 Relationalities within the environment

The third component of choice highlighted by Vygotsky in his cycle of constructing activity was represented by relationalities. Relationalities refers to the emotional experiences arising from a situation or an environment (as explored in 2.3.1). It is a thread that extends across all components of activity mediating how a parent responds to their experiences and their intra-actions within society, but also to their environment. It is this aspect of the environment that I wish to consider in this section – the relationships, emotions and feelings evoked through a parent’s intra-action with the features and materials of education. When applied to the activity of thinking about educational choice these ‘elements from reality’ (Vygotsky, 2004, p.18) referred to by parents included the inspection outcome, cost, practicalities, examination results, school ranking, vaccinations, curriculum, specific educational needs (SEND), religion, and the materials of education (materialities) such as the school building, technology, resources, and facilities.
What became apparent was that it was not the feature or ‘thing’ itself, for example an inspection outcome that the parent listed as instrumental in the educational choice they made, but their reaction to it, what it meant to them, their *perezhivanie* as the features or elements of choice were ‘refracted through the prism of [the parent’s or] child’s emotional experience’ (Vygotsky, 1994, p.339). In some cases two parents would refer to the same thing but the meaning this evoked was very different. Whilst Vygotsky was referring to child development in terms of the impact of emotional experience (*perezhivanie*) his drawing together of personal characteristics and situational characteristics is of note as it emphasises the role that the environment plays not only in child development but in individual activity and thus the activity of educational choice. The notion of relationalities in this sense means more than just a connection between things but highlights Vygotsky’s concept of mediation as a dynamic and iterative activity.

5.5.1 The features of education

‘Features’ are those distinctive attributes or aspects of education that the parents in this study referred to during their narratives about choice, for example, the inspection outcome, examination results, and the curriculum, as already mentioned. Not all parents referred to every feature, different attitudes and emotions were at play. What became interesting was the influence of the feature of education on the choice the parent went on to make for their child.

For Frankie a feature such as the school league table ranking brought positive connotations when she stated ‘[we are] very lucky to have [the independent school] because it is nationally ranked isn’t it’. For Frankie national ranking meant that the school was good, it brought with it associations of a school that
would support her children’s academic achievement. Her own experiences of independent schooling and the recommendation from others within her social network framed her view of the school as a good choice to make.

For Orla the curriculum in a mainstream school was restrictive whilst the Montessori philosophy of education meant that her child’s individual needs would be met.

The [National] Curriculum it's just so set to this age does this and this person does that and if you are not at that level at that stage then … You know you just get left behind and I like the way the Montessori caters for every child and their individual needs and they can grow as a person and as a learner at their own rate and I think that is really important (Orla).

Orla was emotional about the idea of her child being left behind going on to state ‘this is my daughter’s education and her life. It becomes very serious. It’s that idea of being behind, them not being able to achieve what they want to achieve’. This belief was based on her own experiences of Montessori education as a child and her observations of children who had not benefitted from such an education and were struggling in college.

The issue about being ‘behind’ or not achieving in standardised testing was raised by several parents but in very different ways. For Masie standardised testing at seven years of age was an unnecessary pressure ‘you know push, push, there’s this thing about having SATS when they’re seven you know, and we’re really not happy about that’. Maisie’s interest in the arts and her concern about creativity being pushed out of the curriculum as well as her own experiences of education were framing this view. For those parents who were opting out of mainstream education this was not such a concern:
‘I went to Steiner school and I learnt to read when I was eight, and [being behind] … that doesn’t faze me at all, but I think if you haven’t that’s quite a drama, quite alarming probably’ (Louise).

I do believe in children … I’ve seen a lot of kids that have been excluded from school … and all of them are great, I didn’t meet one of them who wasn’t a little genius ready to go. They all had something about them they were interested in, you start talking to them and it will come out (Ethan).

For Ethan and Olivia who were Unschooling there was a concern about the future ‘I still worry that [Unschooling] is going to impact on her places for university or something’ (Olivia). This statement was made at a time when their eldest child was applying for a place at university. For Olivia her current concerns and the emotions she was feeling were colouring her view of home education for her youngest child (much like Vygotsky’s description of how a prism would refract light). Applying for a university place was not straightforward for young people without traditional qualifications such as A-levels and GCSEs in a centralised system such as the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). In contrast, a recent assessment for their son with Asperger Syndrome had found that ‘by not being in school he has hit all of his marks. [The education psychologist] found that he was educationally exactly where he was meant to be’ (Ethan). These separate experiences brought tension to their view of education for their youngest child. On the one hand their older children were doing well in terms of their academic abilities, on the other they would not hold the traditional set of qualifications expected within the mainstream system of education in England.

Another feature of education highlighted by parents regarded the influence of an inspection outcome on their choice. For some (such as Frankie) the school ranking was important but for others the inspection outcome was just one facet of choice. David’s initial statement that ‘[the Ofsted rating] is important because
it’s the only thing you’ve got as a guide’ was then renegotiated when he said ‘it didn’t have quite the Ofsted rating, but it was still rated as good’. This comes from an experience at another school that started off with an Ofsted ‘good’ and was downgraded to ‘requires improvement’ within a few months of his oldest child starting at the school. David’s experience was that even when a school has a good inspection outcome it may not stay that way and did not necessarily mean that the school would be good for his child.

Equally, Zara’s setting had been rated as ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted shortly after her child had started there. Although some of the report content was of concern to Zara she choose to keep her child at the school.

You don’t want to be judged on something you are not actually aiming to achieve if you know what I mean. They are doing all these other things, and they are not on the Ofsted report … and those are actually things that I really value, and that’s why I wanted to send my children there (Zara).

An unexpected feature of education that was raised during interviews with parents was a concern about vaccinations taking place in school. Medical freedom and vaccinations featured in the choice narratives of three parents participating in my research and was not an element of choice that I found within my review of the literature or a subject I expected to hear about during interviews:

We’ve got concerns about medical freedom within schools. My kid’s health is the most important thing to me really. And I don’t want that being over-ruled (Maisie).

I don’t know whether [vaccinations] would totally put me off the school. Hopefully you would be able to talk to them about it (Orla).

[Vaccination] is a massive issue I think. Not just within the school but within the local community. The things people say about you not vaccinating your children is really full on (Zara).

Each parent felt that the giving of vaccinations (or not) to their children was their choice and responsibility and that vaccinations should not take place in schools
or be a requirement for entry to school. For Maisie, her desire for medical freedom was based on her experience of illness in the family, her own lack of vaccination as a child, her concern for her children's health, and the experiences of others within her social network.

I've got a lot of family members and friends who have had problems in that they've not consented for their children to have the flu vaccine ... they've signed no on the consent form and the school has given it to them anyhow (Maisie).

The emotions evoked by the concept of schools requiring vaccinations and / or giving vaccinations was a concern for Maisie at the time (pre Covid-19) and as a result she was considering home education as an option should this be necessary.

A parent's relationship with each of these features of education, and the choice they were making for their young child, was mediated by material and psychological factors that impacted upon their thinking about education. For some parents the educational choice they were considering was strengthened by each feature of education, for others their choice was changed, opening up possibilities and new ways of thinking.

In education policy, features of education such as inspection outcome, examination results, absence levels and schools finance are positioned as key to making an educational choice and parents can search and compare schools along these lines (Gov.uk, 2018). In practice, there were more elements than these statistics that featured in the activity of choice for the parents participating in this research, and it was the meaning, the history and emotion arising between each parent and each feature of choice that became important.
5.5.2 The materialities of education

Of particular interest was how the parents related to the materialities of education: the material things found in classrooms or as part of a schooling experience such as the school building itself, the physical environment, technology and resources. Here, parents were often referring to exactly the same material object but the emotions evoked by these materials were at times very different.

The role of the material appeared to be influential in parental choice, not as an object on its own but wrapped in emotion and feelings. As an example, the school building and playground were not just representations of school, for Orla it was ‘like a prison’ when she said ‘their [new] playground is like a concrete block with a massive fence around it. It’s horrible, it’s like a prison’. When David referred to the same school he felt differently ‘it’s got a good feeling about it… It seemed friendly, you just get a feel about somewhere’.

Specific materials in the classroom were mentioned such as the taps, locks on doors, activity tables and fabric. Not just as taps, locks, tables and fabric but as representations of a child’s independence, of being engaged, of feeling safe and happy and comforted:

They can press the taps themselves, they can dry their hands themselves, they can lock the doors but can’t get locked in because we can go in and undo them. Everything is just made for their size (Tara).

In this little play area they have got different activity tables so if they get there early they have got stuff to do immediately. And they change it so it is not the same all the time (Frankie).

It’s a really lovely school. It’s got a lovely environment, it’s really … the teachers are great, the kids feel safe and happy there. I mean you walk in and they’re all mucking about gaily, there’s no-one sulking in the corner sort of waiting to be picked up … It’s just a really nice place to see all the kids having a good time (Frankie).
I remember being really impressed with all the fabric, it made it seem really soft (Sam).

Considering the technological world in which we now live the use of technology in the classroom was not framed in a positive light by any of the parents, with a concern that it presented a barrier to reality, to being outside, of a young child’s health and well-being:

Every lesson they do on a computer screen and on IPads which, I just don't like the idea of that. It just doesn't seem the right way to go for me …They don't do a lot of stuff outside, a lot of their PE apparently is done inside on a screen (Orla).

He didn’t want [our child] to have all that influence from the screens because there’s enough of that going on in life anyway isn’t there. It felt like it was too young (Zara).

In addition to the narratives of parents, a photographic elicitation of the things setting leaders felt were important to parents emphasised the potential role of the material when making an educational choice (see appendix twelve for photographs). A toilet featured in photographs from setting leaders as important for parents to see when visiting the setting. It became entangled in the activity of choice as a site of significance that advocated the purposefulness of resources (a small size to promote independence), as hygienic (we think about your child’s health), as relationship building (we understand your concerns as a parent). Things, for example, the resources, visual displays, coat pegs and sandpits were also captured in the images taken by setting leaders and yet no mention of these things was made by the parents.

As visuals by themselves these images said nothing (Mason & Davies, 2009) and only emphasised a mismatch between what the setting considered important for parents to see and the relational, socially situated nature of educational choice. Instead, parents explored their experiences and feelings, how the features of the system of education made them feel, or the associations
they made. Frankie’s comment about the activity tables was not about the activities themselves but about how the staff knew the interests of the children, and that the children had something to do on arrival. For the parents engaged in this research materialities became agential in the activity of choice with a school building described as having a good feeling, warm and cosy, bright and airy or claustrophobic and depressing, technology / screens were inhibiting learning, or resources were open-ended and accessible:

Inside the classroom it’s nice and bright and cheerful, very much like any reception class you’ll see… the only think I don’t like is the whiteboard (Frankie).

It is just one of those things I don’t think they need to do every lesson on a screen. It’s too much (Orla).

I visited [the Steiner school] and I thought well why wouldn’t I want this for my child? It’s so thought through, it’s what I thought about Montessori. Like there is so much thought gone into everything, and they have so much choice of activities (Zara).

[The Steiner school] only use natural materials, and unformed, and toys that really can be anything the child wants it to be if at all possible (Kirsten).

What these comments indicate is how the school building on its own does not educate children, nor does the environment or a person. As Loris Malaguzzi would say ‘the child has a hundred languages’ (Malaguzzi, 2012, p.3), and a child’s education was about supporting these one hundred languages, ways of thinking, playing and speaking through a mesh of activity comprising space, time, materials and people that created environments for learning (Nutbrown, 2001). ‘The subject and the object are both embedded in activities, and cannot be understood in isolation from those activities’ (Levant, 2017, p.255). The example of a school building has a specific discursive practice as education, configured as a place to learn, dynamically reconstituted within society, a material reconfiguration of education that is not static or merely evolving, but as dynamic and iterative. The parent’s intra-action with the material of the school
building arose through their own history-in-person, their experiences of education in a building like that or not and through their intra-actions within society. The intra-action arising between one parent and a school building became a place for education, but for another a place of violence and abuse, and another a place of state control.

The notion of materialities within the activity of educational choice illuminates how objects became agents in choice, mediating activity, generating formations of meaning as relational phenomena emerging between an individual’s history and experiences and that of the school’s (Poromaa, 2017). Agency resides within all bodies, human and non-human built upon discursive practice and the material phenomena. The activity of choosing education was taking place within this manifestation of parent, community and the material that was already conceived, it was ‘an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements’ (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012, p.54).

The parents in this study were doing more than interacting with static materials and practices associated with education: the toilet, an Ofsted report, the technology in a classroom, a school building. They were ‘embedded within object-orientated social practices’ (Levant, 2017, p.249), as part of an entanglement of interacting phenomena arising between parent, materials and practice. Meaning emerged, reshaping concepts of what a particular educational approach may offer for their young child. The activity of educational choice was built upon these parents’ experiences of education, mediated through an entangled web of society and material artefacts. Stimuli, for example, a school building, a white board, toilets, coat pegs and sandpits existed as objects in reality for all of the parents participating in this research but evoked different emotions and meaning making for each individual.
5.5.3 Summarising relationalities

As I became more involved in the world of educational choice, the interplay between the tangible and intangible facets of choice (external and internal mediating objects / elements of choice) became increasingly important and highlighted the interconnected nature of experiences and things (Mason & Davies, 2009). There was a ‘turn to the material’ (Levant, 2017, p.249) when parents emphasised the role of things and the meanings evoked by the school building, classrooms, play areas, technology and resources in the choice they were making. Perhaps this should not have been so unexpected when considered in light of Leontiev's (1978) theory of individuals and their activity as embedded within ‘the material conditions of their lives’ (Marx & Engels, 2010, p.31). There was a dynamic engagement between parents, settings, and the features and materials of choice. This turn to the material, ‘repositions the human as embedded in a larger living and thinking material world’ (Levant, 2017, p.252).

The concept of relationalities within the activity of educational choice refers to the subjective nature of a parent’s intra-actions with the features and materials of education (Duncan et al., 2004; Rey, 2016; Walker & Clark, 2010) and were prevalent throughout this research. They were dynamic and iterative, mediating choice as part of a relational process emerging through history and experience (Poromaa, 2017). By positioning the features and materialities of education as relational, they became embodied, contextualised by internal conditions (Reay, 2004b; Wheelahan, 2004).

These parents were not all starting from the same position when they were making an educational choice, they brought with them individual experiences
and identity, they had different connections within social networks and the wider community, and they responded to forces within the field of education in diverse and unpredictable ways. At times there were ‘unexpected things in store’ (Leontiev, 1975, p.51), for example, the role of vaccinations / medical freedom. These features and materialities did not have causal power in themselves, but were relational as they mediated choice activity and sometimes led to new associations with education (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994).

5.6 How facets come to matter

Although the components of choice have been presented as separate sections in this thesis, this has been for the purposes of explanation. Within the activity of choice there was an entangled network of connections within and between each component as history and experiences informed a parent’s identity and sense of belonging. This in turn influenced the social connections parents made. Whilst relationalities have been presented as a separate component (section 5.5) with a focus on relationalities within the environment, within the whole activity of educational choice relationalities became a thread that linked the past with the present and the future. Relationalities framed how a parent responded to their intra-actions within society and brought meaning to the features and materials of education. The concept of relationalities highlights choice as iterative and dynamic, as an activity that is alive, living and breathing, always moving and constantly changing, it never returns to what it was before as each new experience changes a parents perception and thinking about education, how they then go on to interact with the next situation or aspect of the environment.
The separate facets of educational choice (the micro and macro environment) are important to the study of activity because they facilitate an orientation, an understanding of the points of mediation. What has come to matter has not been the elements themselves but *how* they mediated choice. Through the framework of mediated activity, educational choice can be seen as an iterative, dynamic and relational process. The different facets of choice do matter, but not on their own as isolated elements. Instead, it was the intra-action, the meaning that emerged between the parent and each element of choice that became influential for the educational choice they went on to make. It is at this juncture that a diffractive lens helps to explore what happens next in the activity of choice. This is explored in chapter six.
6.0 The complex activity of educational choice

The previous chapter has set out the research findings through the lens of mediated activity. It is the largest section of this thesis as it considers the components of choice activity and their connectedness as a unity of activity that cannot be separated into different chapters. I concluded in 5.6 that the mediating effects of history, society and relationalities were important in the activity of choice.

It was at this juncture that I found myself questioning Vygotsky’s language of interaction and connections as these can denote a duality, a separateness between subject and object, parent and thing. The parents’ narratives of choice made reference to material things (for example the classroom whiteboards and iPads), as agents in choice, which cast light on how they were ‘embedded in a material world that [was], in some ways, alive, thinking, and acting’ (Levant, 2017, p.249). It was not the whiteboards themselves but the intra-action arising between the parent and the whiteboard, the emotions they evoked and the meaning they held:

So they had the big interactive whiteboard which they used basically every lesson. And they had the tablets as well. And so when I was going to … um, when you go to the parents evening and stuff you get these print offs from the tablets, of what they had done. And for me I found that really shocking (Zara).

It is just sad having so much screen time in children’s lives. Even between [my oldest child] starting school and [my youngest] there’s just such a massive change in culture. But I suppose it is just what’s happening isn’t it. At some point people will reassess and decide how much is a healthy amount to have. I don’t think it should be nothing (Frankie).

This turn to the material acknowledges that matter and meaning are inseparable, as are the elements and components of choice, and there is a need to examine this in more detail. I now need to go further, to examine more closely
how these intra-actions impacted on parental choice, to consider what happened as a result of that activity, to address important questions … so what?

6.1 Using diffractive activity to (re)configure parental choice

At this point my theoretical thinking about *diffractive activity* in chapter two provided a framework for my continuing analysis of educational choice bringing together the concepts of diffraction, dissociation and association, and transformation. *Diffractive activity* (re)configures parental choice to move away from parent and choice, subject and object dualisms, to acknowledge how intra-actions arise within activity ‘constituted in their inseparability (entanglement)’ (Barad, 2014, p.175). My use of brackets above emphasises a re-configuration, not to reconfigure a structure that was, but to iteratively intra-act and diffract with writing, language, and theory, to think about parental choice as dynamic and untimely.

In applying the framework of *diffractive activity*, it is possible to visualise how chapter five explored the intra-actions arising between the parent and the components of choice much like the moment the water in a stream hits rocks in its path. An entangled web of activity results through which the notions of diffraction and Vygotsky’s concepts of dissociation and association support an exploration of what happens next, to help explain how a parent makes sense of their intra-actions as they disregard some experiences and reinforce others. I then consider how a parent transforms their thinking about education into a choice for their child.

6.1.1 An entangled web of activity

For the parents participating in this study, there have been multiple mediating facets, with each situation or aspect of the environment influencing their thinking
about education in different ways and at different times. In effect, the situation or an object in the environment was part of their whole activity, that moved in multiple directions as an entangled meshwork or web of intra-action as portrayed in the figure below:

![Figure 11: Web of intra-action within the educational choice process](image)

Each intra-action changed how a parent was thinking about education as part of an entangled web of activity that changed over time, in different spaces and places as exemplified by Maise and Ethan’s comments about being ‘in the know’:

I’ve just heard from other people talking to other parents at baby group and stuff (Maisie).

How do you find out about it? It’s because you’re in the know …I’m sure these things are self-selecting in terms of whether you are looking, whether you are pushing for your kids to find things or not … There’s nothing to help you, that is what I think is the downside of that (Ethan).

Similarly the school building was not just a building but an experience, a feeling that was positive, stifled or natural:

I just don’t know what they do differently but what you experience when you walk in is that the energy of the place is positive… they
engage with all the children, and they are very sweet with all the children as well. It’s nice and cosy (Frankie).

It’s a nice big clean bright space. Modern lots of light. It’s good for the kids … Having said that sometimes I do feel that the learning environment in the school is a bit stifled and not so much of a democracy as I would like but then that is the world that we live in (David).

It’s actually really nice inside. It’s got nice light and it’s all fresh and new, so yes, it’s going to be nice for him. They all seem very positive there…It seemed quite natural, they learn through play through their interests … they’ve got a thing on the wall with all the months of the year, and everybody’s birthday, their name on it for their birthday, which seems quite nice (Maisie).

The parents in this study accounted for the educational choice they made through their narratives with me. They used this time to bring together a series of experiences and intra-actions to explain their activity; the intra-actions arising through the different facets of choice, and how these intra-actions influenced the choice they made. What became clear were the effects of difference through those intra-actions and it is here that the notion of diffraction supports an interpretation of what was happening.

As an example, the intra-action arising between Orla and the fencing around the school made her think of a prison ‘Their playground is like a concrete block with a massive fence around it. It’s horrible, it’s like a prison’. As a result Orla has chosen a different educational approach for her child that she felt was freer and followed her child’s interests.

I think [the Montessori philosophy] inspires, I think because you can do it yourself, and you are left to work things out yourself, and follow what you are interested in at that time Just so much quicker and easier to learn, I think that is really important (Orla).

When a parent’s thinking encountered an obstacle or a component of choice, that facet was not inert but was an active constituent within that engagement,
creating waves of energy that diffracted and expanded their thinking about education in different ways.

Each parent’s path to making an educational choice was not straightforward and unimpeded, it was multi-faceted and even when a choice was made there remained the possibility for change. A parent choosing education was not intra-acting with one element of choice at a time, instead multiple intra-actions were taking place that combined to strengthen a particular view of education or in some cases created interference and changed (diffracted) how a parent was constructing their understanding of education to build new associations or ways of thinking. For the parents thinking about education for their child, their history and experiences, their intra-actions within society, and with the features and materials of choice represented possible points of diffraction, an obstacle or aperture they encountered in their activity towards making a choice of education for their child. Rather than refining the activity of choice into key elements, choice became bigger and more complex bringing anxiety for some and whole new ways of being in the world for others as David and Morag found when they became involved with church activities:

A lot goes on around the church, and we are not from a churchy sort of background at all, but we found ourselves getting more and more involved in their stuff that goes on because the group that [our child] goes to is run by the church, there’s another group that is run by the Gospel Church, there’s a thing on a Sunday in the school where you can go and have breakfast with everybody and things. So it’s just really, really, really lovely you know (David).

Even once an educational choice had been made it was not fixed but remained open to change as child and family intra-acted within their chosen form of education and made choices to stay, to move on, choice of transport, after school club and so on. Diffraction within activity recognises this complexity as each intra-action creates opportunities for new possibilities, new ways of
thinking about education as Zara exemplifies following an inadequate Ofsted report.

I did go through a big wobble … but we went to some parent forums and heard from the new Acting Head about what would happen. And actually, I would say right now I am feeling quite excited about the school … I think now would actually be quite a silly time to walk away from it because it’s got to improve itself in lots of ways and I am quite excited about that now (Zara).

The messiness of choice sits on the edge of chaos and like the water in a stream that crashes against the rocks, there is a danger of being sucked into a whirlpool where it is hard to breath, or to see what your options are. In such confusion parents may feel that they have little choice but to go with the ‘current’ of mainstream schooling as explored in 3.2.1. To make a pro-active choice of education it is important to find the calm waters, to slow down, take stock and consider the options.

6.1.2 Dissociation and association

Whilst diffractive waves denote an expansion and overlapping of ideas that get more complex and potentially chaotic, at some point there needs to be a conclusion reached and a choice of education made. What comes next in the diffractive activity of choice is a consideration of how a parent may then make sense of these initial intra-actions, and Vygotsky (2004) used the language of dissociation and association to describe this process.

Next comes a very complex process of reworking this material. The most important components of this process are dissociation and association of the impressions acquired through perception (Vygotsky, 2004, p.25).

Just as water flowing down a stream would intra-act with rocks in its path, the resultant diffractive waves create an initial turbulence. This is then resolved by
a process of constructive and destructive interference as the waves re-combine to form a new pattern, possibly even changing the direction of the stream itself.

When applied philosophically to the activity of educational choice diffraction denotes the effects of an intra-action arising between a parent and a facet of choice. The parent may have associated the results of an intra-action with previous ways of thinking thus strengthening the choice they were making (constructive interference), or they may have chosen to dissociate from the intra-action, to dismiss it as not relevant to their choice or to change their choice as a result (destructive interference). For Zara the process of dissociation and association can be seen in how she dealt with the tensions presented through an Ofsted inspection. Her concept of a Steiner education and the school’s practices were reconfigured, some were discarded, as shown in the way Zara dismissed the Ofsted outcome: ‘you don’t want to be judged on something you are not actually aiming to achieve’; others were kept such as Zara recognising a need for improvement in the support of children with special educational needs.

The interviews with parents and settings were provoked by my initial enquiry into the type of education they were interested in, but unstructured in nature afterwards. Respondents were not asked to comment on specific aspects of choice; instead the materials and practices that were important to each participant emerged during their narratives as an association they had made. For David and Morag the Ofsted outcome pushed them away from one school (dissociations) and towards another (associations), whilst the church community gave them a sense of belonging further strengthening their association with the new school as demonstrated in the table below.
### Table 3: Associations and Dissociations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Associations</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dissociations</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[We have] family [there] so that kind of felt good, and the school was rated as Ofsted Good, and we thought well lets give it a go (David).</td>
<td>So we moved there. And then within a few months the school was down-rated from Ofsted good to Ofsted Requiring Improvement in every area, and [it] was awful (David).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It didn’t have quite the Ofsted rating, but it was still rated as good (David).</td>
<td>The school was awful. Yes, terrible. To the point where you know they couldn’t even find a key between the staff to open the door and we were stood outside … So there was lots and lots of frustrations there (David).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We literally got a map, put a ring round every town that we thought might be interesting, so we had a list of all the Ofsted ratings of all the schools … and the secondary schools … And we drove town to town, and we ended up [here] and we had a cup of tea … and we thought this is really nice, and we contacted the school and said have you got space, and they said yes (David).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s important because it’s the only thing you’ve got as a guide. It is important to us (David).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So [our child] was used to the Church of England system, so it was another plus for us … if it wasn’t a Church of England I don’t think we would have not gone with it. But we were pleased to see that it was (Morag).</td>
<td>I have always been completely, not anti but like sort of atheist really, and I can’t say I have had any God thoughts (David).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes its really, really, inclusive, and a lot goes on around the church, and we are not from a churchy sort of background at all, but we found ourselves getting more and more involved in their stuff that goes on (David).</td>
<td>I’ve never, ever thought of having … a relationship with a vicar (David).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like that they go to the church and stuff as well. And that they do all their little prayers (Morag).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this example David and Morag associated a ‘good school’ with the Ofsted rating but once it was down-graded they began to pick up on what was wrong with the school eventually leading to a change of path that involved not only a move to a different school but moving house to live in a different community. As
atheists they did not initially associate with a Church of England School, but their experiences with the church brought new associations that strengthened their sense of belonging within the community.

For Maisie medical freedom was of concern in terms of what this meant for her children’s health and how vaccinations taking place in schools took away her control and voice as a parent stating ‘they’ve said no, they’ve signed no on the consent form and the school has given it to them anyhow’.

For David and Morag the school building was something that drew them to the school, ‘we drove past it and we saw a big white beautiful building and it had a big field in front of it’ (Morag), it brought with it a sense of belonging, of comfort and happiness. For others the school building looked too big ‘it looks like quite a big school, they've probably got lots [of children]’ (Maisie), here Maisie was concerned about her child’s wellbeing, whether they would be noticed, if they would be safe and happy.

The concepts of dissociation and association cast light on how each parent’s choice of education was constructed through the effects of these intra-actions arising within activity. The combination of these intra-actions brought meaning for the parents as they exaggerated or minimised internal and external experiences based upon their history and experiences of education, their intra-actions within society, and the emotions evoked by the materials or practices of education. The environment surrounding a parent and setting was dynamic and always changing. Within this ever-changing environment came a need for dissociations and associations to be reworked as part of a continuous cycle of *diffractive activity*. 

171
6.1.3 Transforming activity into choice

The process of dissociation and association brings each parent’s activity of choice to a point where they have re-worked their experiences and constructed their understanding of what they would like education to look like for their child. At this stage the activity of choice needed to be transformed from an internal process of thinking about educational choice to an external manifestation of choosing a specific form of education and in some cases choosing a specific school.

Vygotsky (2004) referred to this point in his cycle of activity as crystallisation or transformation. It is here that the entangled strands of thinking about education are brought together, transformed into external reality. Described in this way there is a danger of viewing the cycle of activity as a stepped process that moves in one direction towards a goal, where each component of activity builds on the one before. In practice, the activity of choice is a dynamic and iterative process that moves in multiple directions through time and space as an entangled meshwork. Previous experiences of an educational approach may have framed how a parent thought about sending their child to the local primary academy school but then a new school building may have brought different associations as the old building with echoes of the past gets knocked down. A choice of education may be made, but then an Ofsted report identifies areas of concern. A parent may have been planning to send their child to the local school but their friends are all sending their children to the Steiner academy.

Even after the internal activity of choice has moved to transformation, the act of transformation may bring with it new mediating stimuli. Zara’s experience of finding out that her choice of education had no spaces meant that she ended up sending her eldest child to the local primary school.
[The Steiner school] was full for the first few years. So [my eldest child] couldn’t get a place there. And then um, when he did get a place that sort of changed all our options really (Zara).

Maisie continues to be concerned about a potential lack of creativity in the local primary school curriculum. Although she has chosen to send her child to this school she remains unsure and is open to the possibility of flexi schooling if she feels this is necessary to meet the needs of her child and to provide opportunities to think, be and act creatively.

I think again I can't imagine [the school] dropping the creative stuff when they are little. I think it will be when they are older so I think when they are older we do flexi school so they can do creative subjects. It would be probably the same days every week that we would pull out of so it might be a bit more settling for them when they are bigger than doing it when they are little people. I think we are just going to take it as it comes and see (Maisie).

For the parents who had arrived at a decision to send their child to a state funded educational provision (the local Church of England primary academy or the Steiner academy) the transformation period was crystallised through the completion of the local authority school preference form. This external activity required the parents to list their top three school preferences, in so doing the decision of which setting their child would be offered a place, was transferred from the responsibility of the parent to the local authority and as David stated when he described the process, ‘it wasn’t particularly pleasant [and] it almost felt like they were doing you a big favour’.

For the family who had chosen to send their child to an independent school it meant applying directly to the school by submitting an application form and passing an academic entrance assessment. For entry into the reception class at four years of age this assessment was carried out through observation during a taster session at the school with a focus on interaction, behaviour, reading,
drawing and practical handling skills (The [Independent] School, 2020). With older siblings already in the school the possibility of the younger child not being accepted would have been significant for the family in terms of relationships and every day practices.

For the family who are home educating the external manifestation of engaging their four-year-old in education was a continuation of their work with their older children. The Unschooling philosophy followed by this family meant that their daily rhythm and parenting practices did not change before or after their child reached the age of compulsory education. Education in this sense was not something ‘done to’ the child but a process of self-directed learning facilitated by the parents. Transformation in this case was externally manifested by choosing not to do anything different.

The ever-changing environment in terms of society, culture and practice is part of a continuous cycle of **diffractive activity** that is life. Indeed, one could argue that the activity of educational choice is only limited by time through the legal necessity in England of ensuring a child is engaged with full time education by the term after they turn five years of age. Choosing a school at four represents only one point in time providing a foundation for choices made later on in a child’s life. For the parents in this study educational choice at four years of age was part of the activity of choosing education at eleven or even at eighteen:

> When we were living in [the city] and we were thinking about schooling then we kind of knew that we didn’t want the girls to go to the local senior school (Frankie).
> I still worry that that is going to impact on her places for university or something (Olivia).
> So the reason that I wanted him to come here was … the catchment area for secondary school (Tara).
The activity of educational choice does not stop at this first point of transformation when a parent makes a choice, but continues on to preparing for the first day of school, starting school and progressing through education. As Vygotsky (1978) notes, every transformation (choice made), provides the conditions for the next stage and is itself conditioned by the preceding one; thus, transformations are linked like stages of a single process, and are historical in nature (p.46).

Experiences, culture, society and materials are not inert, they are lively, shaping how parents think about educational choice, in constant motion through diffractive matterings (Barad, 2007; 2014).

6.2 Educational choice as a unity of ‘Diffractive Activity’

This chapter has examined the activity of choice through three strands, namely entanglement, association and dissociation, and finally transformation. This has facilitated a stepped approach to thinking about educational choice that is not so linear in practice. In reality the parents participating in this research were engaged in educational choice as a ‘unity’ of activity where each intra-action, each dissociation and association was part of their whole experience.

*Diffractive activity* has provided a framework for thinking about the whole activity of educational choice recognising not only the role of intra-action but also what happens next and how this activity transforms into an external manifestation of choice. Each element of choice represents a potential point of diffraction or change of direction, an obstacle or aperture that the parent must negotiate as they consider what education might look like for their young child. *Diffractive activity* recognises that educational choice is an activity that starts as an internal process of thought long before a child starts school, it is a relational, dynamic
and iterative process that takes place over time and is in constant motion even after a child has started education.

At the time of offering this thesis the country is in the midst of a Coronavirus pandemic and parents such as Frankie who had declared ‘I’m not sure I’m cut out for home-schooling’ have found themselves supporting their children’s education in a virtual environment, (largely using laptops or other screens). 

_Diffractive activity_ supports the recognition that the constant intra-activity of life may diffract the educational choices made last year to become something different next year. Maisie already had home education as a future possibility and had identified a barn at the back of her house for this purpose. At the same time the Steiner school has been re-brokered and is now part of a multi-academy trust that no longer follows Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy of education, and the Montessori school does not yet have its own dedicated building. For all parents participating in this research, their educational choice has not turned out as they had envisaged when their child was still only three.

The development of _diffractive activity_ has encapsulated the entangled unity of choice. It casts light on the mediated, intra-active nature of the process, and recognises that choice begins as an internal activity of thinking before it is transformed into external activity. The intra-action arising between each parent and an element of choice has been very different, several parents may refer to the influence of the same thing (such as an inspection report or a school building) but in very different ways.
7.0 Transforming the discourse of educational choice

This research has used Vygotsky’s (2004) ideas as the basis for a theoretical frame to gain insight into the activity of choosing education. My particular interest is with the unity of activity; the possibilities for pre-compulsory education presented by the English system of educational choice, the relationalities or emotional experiences of choice, and the entanglements of choice as a multitude of interconnected phenomena. Building on the review of the literature I have adopted facet methodology as a strategy for conducting this research (see section 4.3.1 for details) that recognises the multi-dimensionality of lived experience. Facet methodology places an emphasis on the relational in order to gain insight into the activity of educational choice through a strategically illuminating set of intertwined facets. On this basis the research questions laid out at the start of this research were focused on the whole activity of educational choice to ask:

- How are the possibilities for pre-compulsory education conceptualised by parents?
- How do relationalities feature within the lived experience of choosing pre-compulsory education?
- How does the nature of entanglement help to explore the activity of educational choice?

The following analysis reviews each of these research questions in turn before moving on to consider the implications for policy, practice, research, and my personal professional development. I then consider the limitations of the project before making suggestions for future research.
7.1 Exploring the possibilities, relationalities and entanglements of choice

Through the development of diffractive activity parental choice of pre-compulsory education has been reconfigured to recognise the very different ways that parents engage with choosing education for their child. Importantly, it reimagines educational choice not as a choice between things (schools) but as an activity towards that choice. This section brings together the different facets of choice through the language of ‘possibilities, relationalities, and entanglements’ to emphasise the complex nature of educational choice.

7.1.1 How are the possibilities for pre-compulsory education conceptualised by parents?

By reframing educational choice as starting with an internal activity of thinking before it is externalised, choice becomes open to possibilities rather than being limited to the available schools in a particular area. This is emphasised in Orla’s case where her educational choice was a Montessori school even though there were no Montessori schools available. Thinking about education in this way conceptualises parents as active choosers open to thinking about education in different ways and to the possibilities available for their child. It is important because it changes the way we might think about educational choice from a choice between schools to a choice of education that might not be in a school. It repositions the school choice discourse to include home education and alternative education, and brings back into focus the general principle in law that states that a child’s education may be ‘in accordance with the wishes of their parents’ (HM Government, 1996, p.5).

This research was located within a specific community in South West England. There was one mainstream primary school located within the town and yet only nine children from the whole community were enrolled into the school's
reception class in 2018/19 (Tara - Mainstream School, 2019). Despite the challenges that choosing a different educational approach to the local school presents, the parents in this study were open to possibilities, to transform ‘what is’ (the local primary school) to ‘what might be’ (other educational options). This way of thinking positions education as other than school (Bamsey, 2020), it symbolises how it might be possible to ‘alter course’ (Cameron & Moss, 2020, p.2) and view education in different ways. In this context, parents let their thinking about education take them wherever they wanted even if their ideal of education may not be feasible in reality. They were considering a range of options and were willing to travel further, to be creative and to step outside the social norm of attending the local primary school, to access an educational approach, which they believed was right for their child.

Through an exploration of ‘what might be’ the families in this study have identified and navigated choice possibilities. They have developed their thinking based upon their experiences of education, their intra-actions within society and their relationalities with the features and materials of education. They have also posed questions and formulated an idea of education for their child. This idea became their target of thought (predmet), and ultimately their goal, as their choice activity moved from an internal divergent thinking process, to convergent thinking where their ideas became externalised as reality in a choice of school or choice to home educate.

The diffractive activity of educational choice is one that is full of complexities and possibility thinking. It is not without boundaries in terms of access to information and geographical borders. For a rural community different schools and educational options may not be readily available, and parents would have to work much harder to choose and implement an educational option other than
the local school. Even the task of searching for educational options is not straightforward with the local authority search tool remaining limited to choice by distance, school type, examination results and local authority boundaries. Equally the government website ‘find and compare schools in England’ (Gov.uk, 2018) limits an online search for schools by postcode or town within a selected distance, and by type with several inaccuracies. Perhaps more importantly these search tools do not give the qualitative information the parents in this research were interested in such as curriculum details, the use of technology or classroom resources.

Educational choice is taking place within a ‘changing field of possibilities’ (Bradbury, McGimpsey & Santori, 2013, p.248), as part of a complex and evolving picture. The marketisation of education is part of a neo-liberal concern built on the premise of improving educational outcomes in order to better compete in the global marketplace. It advocates individualism and choice whilst also conditioning and regulating the field, ‘nudging’ consumers towards making better choices. Issues of power (Foucault, 1979) are at play between policy maker and policy actor and this can be seen within the field of educational choice where the information provided through school dashboards relates to educational achievements and Ofsted outcome. Whilst the choice rhetoric has promoted both individualism and control, in practice the ‘irrationality of choosers’ (Bradbury, McGimpsey & Santori, 2013, p.250) means that education is not being chosen purely on the basis of school performance and as a consequence the marketisation of education is not driving school improvement.

For parents within this community there were other possibilities for educating their child and this move away from mainstream schooling is a trend seen at a national level (Ball, 2018; Mills, Hunt & Andrews, 2019; National Statistics,
2019). As Ball (2013) notes ‘parental choice is one of the most contested and most difficult of concepts’ (p.147). On the one hand parents are free to educate their child as they wish and on the other schools are becoming increasingly disconnected from democratic oversight as academy conversion moves the control of schools away from local communities and into the hands of the Secretary of State (Ball, 2013). Much of the extensive debate around educational choice centres upon the difficulties in the operation of choice in practice with as many barriers to choice as there are opportunities. When the focus shifts to consider choice at the age of four, this research has indicated that educational possibilities were not constrained by class or the specific elements of choice, but by the way families thought about education and its purpose – by their possibility thinking.

The possibilities for pre-compulsory education that the parents in this research could access were many and not limited by the practicalities of time, space, and place as much as the government search tools would imply. Despite there being only one primary school within the town the parents within this study were willing to engage in quite extraordinary activity in order to realise the education they envisaged for their child. For Zara this involved a ‘logistical nightmare’ of car sharing between numerous families, for Orla the start of her own Montessori school. David, Morag and Frankie relocated, Ethan and Olivia changed their work and way of life in order to accommodate their Unschooling philosophy.

Possibility thinking conceptualises all parents as active choosers open to considering ‘what might be’ (wanting a Montessori education even though there was not a Montessori school in the area) instead of ‘what is’. How a parent thinks about education opens up possibilities that are not limited by time, space and place until the point of transformation when choice becomes externalised. Some
of the parents in this study were willing to stay outside of the system of choice to choose education on the basis of their own history and intra-actions within society rather than follow the mainstream schooling route. In this regard the possibilities for pre-compulsory education conceptualised by parents were limitless, restricted for the individual only by their own thinking about what might be. It was only at the point of transformation that possibility thinking became framed by what is.

7.1.2 How do relationalities feature within the lived experience of choosing pre-compulsory education?

This research has shown that the meaning of education comes into existence through a parent’s relationalities within the field of education. Meaning is thus derived from their own history and experiences, through their intra-actions within society, and with the features and materialities of education. A consideration of relationalities within the activity of choice is important because it emphasises complexity. It reconstructs the activity of educational choice as a dynamic and iterative entanglement of becoming instead of a commodity to be bought and sold.

The concept of ‘relationalities’ therefore means more than simply the relationships or connections between things, as this signifies a dualist position; instead it emphasises how meaning comes into existence through intra-activity (Barad, 2007). The activity of choosing education for the parents within this research was a mediated and diffracted activity, composed of relationalities, embedded within a parent’s history, and their social practice. Vygotsky (1994) referred to this as ‘perezhivanie’ (p.339), an emotional experience relating to something in the environment but experienced internally. The lived experience
of choosing education as narrated by parents attended not so much to the elements of choice but to the relationalities arising between parents and things. Vygotsky emphasised relational thinking in his drive to overcome subject–object dualism, highlighting the role of the mediating environment between the subject and their target of thought as part of a ‘living process of adaptation’ (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.222). A parent’s lived experience of choosing education for their child was ‘embedded in an ensemble of social practices’ (Levant, 2017, p.255), as a relational process of entanglements. The parents’ narratives of choice enabled meaning making, they put into words how their experiences and intra-actions in society and with the features and materialities of education had influenced the educational choice they went on to make. For each of these components of choice (see chapter five for details), their narrative explored not the thing itself (such as an experience, a building or a friendship) but the role of relationalities – the intra-action.

The type of education a parent had experienced as a child gave meaning to what education meant to them and for their child today. The sort of building education would take place within, how a child would feel, what they would learn and so on. For each parent, their own experiences of education meant that choosing education for their child became relational - meaning making. As Vygotsky stated ‘to study something historically means to study it in motion’ (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.43). History is not simply a fact from the past but is part of the relational process of thinking now about education. Going to a ‘normal state school’ as David had said did not automatically mean that they would send their child to a state school and indeed, they had considered the Montessori nursery as an alternative. In Ethan’s case he considered education within ‘a normal state
school’ as ‘abusive’ and he would not consider this form of education for his child.

‘The past and present are inseparably merged’ (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.41). Time present, and indeed time future, can only be seen through the light of time past. Ethan’s view of education in a ‘normal state school’ today is based on his experiences of the past and even though education has changed over the intervening years, schooling for Ethan still brings with it connotations of hurt and anger that intra-acted with his thinking about education today for his youngest child. Experiences from the past were also revisited within narratives of educational choice in the present as parents envisaged what might be in the future and through each parent’s relationship with the past, the meaning of what education should look like today emerged. The mediation of society then built on past experiences as the parent formed relationships and intra-actions emerged through and with the materials and features of education.

Vygotsky (2004) emphasised how the individual process of imagination (applied within this research as ‘thinking’) was not limited to the boundaries of an individual’s own encounters but could be assimilated through social-cultural experiences. Behaviour (activity) is ‘established and regulated by the social environment’ (Vygotsky, 1992, p.226), affected by the social group an individual belongs to, from intimate relationships, to small social groups and the wider community. The social network that a parent is a part of provides affordances and barriers / filters to choice as information is shared according to the priorities of that group. Parents rely on what they have heard about schools, acquiring information that persists even when school data is contradictory (Bagley, Woods & Glatter, 2001; Ball & Vincent, 1998; DeJarnatt, 2008; Reay & Lucey, 2000).
The parents who directly participated in this study did not all grow up within this community but have moved to the town as adults. Their social networks have formed through the parent and toddler groups they attended or through their extended family relationships within the community. Relationalities within these social groups mediated the choices that parents made and in some cases contradictory beliefs were shared about the same setting. More widely, the culture of a community can promote education in a certain way. ‘Tools’ (such as the local authority school preference form) and ‘conditions’ (legislative requirement for children to be in education) are used to reconfigure and stimulate choice. Michael Cole (1999) compares this to the tending of a garden and the ‘conditions for growth’ (p.92) where the ‘field’ of education is ‘tended’ by tools. Knowledge is needed to tend the garden allowing particular forms of education to flourish or fail, and the wider ecological system within which the garden is located dictates the conditions that will sustain or inhibit growth. The social norm in England is for children to start in funded education at the age of four (National Statistics, 2018) and yet within this particular community little over half of four-year-olds started at the local primary school in September.

Relationalities within this community promoted new diffractive patterns of education that were different to the local primary school, ‘tending’ the ideal of a Steiner education for seven children, and home education, Montessori and independent schooling for others. The conditions for different forms of education were promoted through the parent’s knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of their rights and the possibilities for education. Alternatives to the local school reception class were flourishing and a home education group offered regular weekly sessions. The majority of parents in this study who had chosen not to attend the local school moved within the social network formed through their
child’s time at the Montessori nursery. The lived experience of choosing education at four for parents within the Montessori social network was shaped by their attendance at a nursery that was already following a different philosophy of education to that offered by the local school, a philosophy that they sought to continue within the next stage of their child’s education.

Relationalities formed with the materialities of education diffracted choice even further as parents intra-acted with objects such as school buildings, resources, toilets, displays, coat hooks, IPads, the pet rabbit, a slide, candles, gardens, trees, local authority paperwork, websites, and Ofsted reports. Each of these objects was more than a thing but were of a ‘dual material-conceptual nature’ (Cole, 2003, p.117) that evoked memories of childhood, of feeling safe or feeling vulnerable, concerns of hygiene, promoting independence, ABC’s and 123’s, community building or isolated learning, sustainability and advancing technology.

Relationalities have a central feature within the lived experience of choosing pre-compulsory education. Each parent made sense of their experiences through perezhivanie as their history and experiences informed their intra-actions within society and with the features and materials of education. ‘Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder’ (Barad, 2007, p.3). Choice is an active process produced through ‘the flow of activity within specific social situations – from the cultural resources at hand’ (Holland et al., 1998, p.4). The findings from this research have shown how the lived experience of choosing pre-compulsory education is a process of relationalities. Relationalities with the past, with the present, and with the future. Relationalities
emerging through intra-active entanglements with history and with materialities in society to diffract the activity of choice.

7.1.3 How does the nature of entanglement help to explore the activity of educational choice?

Recognising entanglements within the activity of educational choice is important because choice is alive and inescapable from the lived experience. It is an activity that is threaded through time, space, and place that is never finished. The notion of entanglement (re)configures choice as an unfinished process that can only be viewed as a moment in time, as an emergence through activity.

Educational choice is an entangled activity of coming to know, formed through the intra-actions between parent and their experiences, within society and through the features and materialities of education. Choosing education cannot be viewed as an uninterrupted linear process or procedure. Instead, a parent’s activity is diffracted by the multiple facets of choice that they encounter; just like the flow of water in a stream each intra-action creates ripples that bend and spread producing an entangled pattern that is unique to each parent and the choice they are making.

My use of Vygotsky’s (2004) ideas as a theoretical frame has given me insight into the activity of choosing education. This has acted as a thread within my work recognising that choice is a constantly evolving process. However, there is also a danger of breaking down experiences into component elements as this may overlook the entangled complexity of the whole. Vygotsky refers to complex relationships, tools, associations, phenomena, a complex world, and a complex re-working of elements, and experiences. His theory was about moving away from the dualism of mind and behaviour (Vygotsky, 1997b); to recognise the entanglement of relationships among things. To over-simplify his ideas would
be to neglect the very complexity he sought to explore, yet in order to explore activity as a whole, Vygotsky acknowledged the need to identify the component parts. Through the framework of *diffractive activity* I have explored educational choice through a consideration of history and experience, culture within society, and the relationalities evoked through the features and materialities of education. I have done so in order to investigate the ‘unity’ of educational choice as a complex whole.

This entangled complexity in terms of a parent’s activity toward making an educational choice, creates tension with the more linear process of school choice policy that asks parents to express a school preference. The narratives of parents engaged in the activity of educational choice did not follow a linear process, but moved dynamically in their thinking about education between the past, present and future, they referred to the experiences of others and to their intra-actions within social groups, with things and with conditions. With each intra-action came diffraction and a parent’s thinking about education became iteratively reconfigured as new associations were made (Cypher, 2018). Any attempt to capture these entangled intra-actions only pin-points one view of education at one moment in time, rather than the meshwork of growth and *movement* symbolised through the notion of entanglement (Ingold, 2010).

Carvalho and Yeoman (2019) argue that the analytical lens of entanglement offers a method for conceptualising relationships within activity. In this sense, the concept of entanglements can be used to conceptualise the relationalities that tie parents, history, society and things together within the activity of educational choice. Entanglement tells us that the *diffractive activity* of educational choice is not fixed in advance but emerges through activity.
As an example, one intra-action between Maisie and a friend whose child was given a flu vaccination at school against her wishes, ignited feelings linked to her own child’s serious illness the past, her history-in-person as a vegan, and her experiences of having had very few vaccinations herself. This intra-action nudged her away from choosing the same school and to consider the alternative of home education. Simultaneously Maisie was concerned about the need to build relationships with other families and children within the community, and she associated this concern with her neighbour’s plans to send their child to the local school. By September Maisie had crystallised her thinking and had decided to send her child to the local school. Movement is seen within this example through an intra-active meshwork of experiences, associations and dissociations, even now Maisie remains open to the possibility of change in the future towards home education.

Through the entanglement of history, society, the features and materials of education, and the meaning each elicits within the person, new entangled patterns emerge (Barad, 2010). The activity of educational choice is not a pathway with a beginning and an end, it is an iterative process of reconfiguring without boundaries between the past, present, and future. It is as much an internal activity of thinking as it is an external activity of choosing education. Intra-actions with the past and the present, in society and with materials, create new associations, which in themselves may go on to affect other things (Vygotsky, 2004).

The nature of entanglement helps to us to conceptualise the activity of educational choice not a stimulus-response process but one of complexity. ‘To be entangled is not simply to be entwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence’ (Barad,
Educational choice cannot be contained within boundaries, it is not located as a fixed point in time, but is diffracted as an intra-active process of growth and movement throughout life. Even when the internal activity of thinking about education transforms into an external action of choosing a specific school, these entanglements, in turn entangle others.

The tensions within the field of educational choice are productive forces that coproduce practices (Murris, 2021), and transcend dualism. This research has shown that educational choice is a complex and mediated activity. Using the concept of ‘entanglements’, the activity of educational choice becomes alive and inseparable from lived experience. A movement threaded through time, place and matter that is never finished. The duality of parent and choice becomes undone, and reframed as a meshwork of intra-activity.

7.1.4 Intra-actively (re)configuring a parent’s choice of pre-compulsory education

This research set out to explore the system of education that a parent is acting within (chapter three, history, legislation and policy), and the process of educational choice in terms of the individual parent, their history and intra-actions within society (chapter five). Whilst parental choice was introduced as a mechanism for improving schools (3.1.2), this research indicates that education is not chosen purely on the basis of school performance, but as part of a diffractive activity; a dynamic and iterative process that arises through a parent’s experiences and intra-actions within society and within the system of education.

The language of possibilities, relationalities and entanglements (re)configures educational choice as an internal activity of thought that comes before a specific school might be chosen. It is important because it provides the basis on which a school choice is eventually made and yet does not appear to have been
considered in today’s marketised system of education. In effect, this means that the intended policy of introducing parental choice into the English system of education may not result in the improvement of schools. Instead ‘policy-in-use’ (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p.100) has opened up choice to be more than a choice between schools to become a choice of education, to consider other possibilities. This can be seen in the declining number of children accessing funded education at four years of age (National Statistics, 2019).

Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated that the activity of educational choice is a relational, dynamic, and iterative process formed through intra-actions with experiences, society and the features and materials of education. Each intra-action has represented a potential point of diffraction (change of direction) as at times the choice to be made became clear (as if it were standing in a spotlight) at other times the facet of choice diffracted thinking, bringing confusion, and sometimes the unexpected.

In adopting a Vygotskian standpoint that argues against dualism, the individual is located within their environment and the activity of educational choice becomes more significant than individual elements. This is important because it highlights how educational choice is an entangled process that is multi-faceted, open to possibilities, and subject to relationalities.

7.2 Implications

In chapter three I set out the context of educational choice in terms of history, policy and practice, endeavouring to show how each of these strands are connected as they frame the activity of choice for parents today, and continue to do so into the future. Whilst this research has been located in one community with a small number of participants, it has demonstrated that choice may be
intra-actively (re)configured as *diffractive activity* that is unique for each parent and child. It emphasises the relational nature of humans acting in society and has implications for policy, practice, research and my own professional development.

7.2.1 For policy

This research has shown that education policy is one that has developed over time rather than being designed specifically for the twenty-first century. Tensions can now be seen in terms of the policy focus on improving school standards through a marketised system of education, the practice of parents being asked to state a school preference when children are still only three, and a parent’s focus on their child’s wellbeing, identity and sense of belonging.

The findings indicate that parents who are making an educational choice for their very young child are not making a choice between mainstream schools that are the same (the same curriculum and testing regime), but a choice between different approaches to education. For policy makers this may mean that there is a need to review the purpose of marketising education based on school performance and the practice of asking parents to make educational choices at such a young age when achievement in tests is not such a priority.

School improvement is assessed through inspection outcomes and children’s progress towards standardised assessment criteria. This is integral to a marketised system of education where parents are positioned as consumers and expected to make a choice of school in an objective and goal orientated fashion. It has been forty years since the introduction of parental preference into legislation (HM Government, 1980) and whilst the government league tables indicate that school provision has been enhanced with improved examination
results and inspection outcomes, the parents participating in this research view a ‘good education’ as more than statistics and are choosing education based on relational considerations. The individualist repertoire results in examples of non-compliance by parents and increasing numbers of children are leaving mainstream schooling altogether. There is then a need to promote difference in education rather than the current appeal to uniformity.

The English system of parental preference expects parents to submit a school preference form to the local authority when their child is only three with an assumption that they will start in a school reception class at four even through compulsory education does not start until five years of age. This practice means that parents are being asked to think about their child starting school up to two years before education is compulsory. It assumes that education is school and does not account for educational practice other than school (Bamsey, 2020).

Policy makers need to recognise the tensions between the drive for school improvement, the age of compulsory education, and parents nevertheless being asked to make an educational choice when their child is only three. More information needs to be made available for parents in terms of their rights and the options they have so that informed choices can be made that meet the needs of each family.

For the parents in this research, educational choice is part of a process of identity formation, of belonging, a way of being in the world, a sense of well-being and happiness. These parents were not choosing between schools but choosing an educational approach that aligned with their sense of self and their vision of the future for their child. Educational choice for a child at four years of age is an individual affair not so concerned with the politics of school improvement. It is a diffractive activity that arises through a process of intra-
action that is unique to each parent and child. Children and families do not come from the same starting point, they have different histories and experiences, they think about education and intra-act within society and with the features and materials of education in different ways. In order to meet these different needs education in schools should not be based on a set of standardised criteria across all settings.

The tensions between school improvement policy, the system of parental preference, and a parent’s vision of education for their child has created diffractive patterns of choice that denote difference. As the policy intention is to raise standards in education then difference needs to be celebrated, not shaped into conformity through policies of standardisation.

7.2.2 For practice

This research positions choice as relational, as a dynamic activity emerging through intra-action in practice rather than a choice between things. The implications for practitioners are two-fold – firstly, to how practitioners relate to parents making an educational choice for their young child. Secondly, to recognise the practices of choice beyond selecting a specific school.

There is need for educational practitioners to be aware of the activity of parents making an educational choice for their child as this will enable settings to work closer with families and support their needs. This study has shown that educational choice is an intra-active, entangled process and as such there is a need to think beyond quantitative measures of quality and things, to instead recognise the qualitative uniqueness of the individual and their experiences.

The parents in this study were making a choice of education for their four-year-old child based on their intra-actions within the field of education, through their
emotions and feelings (*perezhivanie*). They were seeking a connection, a sense of belonging within a setting and as a consequence more information about a settings approach to education needs to be made available. Parents and their children need an opportunity to visit, to spend time in a setting and to feel part of that community.

When promoting their school to parents the practitioners in this study and their school prospectuses focused on the facilities and resources in the school, the work that children did and their curriculum. The focus was on what children do rather than how they or their parents might feel in that place. This study has shown that educational choice for children at four years of age was about meeting the needs of the parents as much as the children. It was about the parent’s history and experiences, their intra-actions and sense of belonging within the school community. If the parent felt that they belonged then they felt their child would too. In order to move beyond statistics and things practitioners need to start with and connect to prospective parents and their child, to ask what they are looking for in education and then to demonstrate how their setting can meet these needs.

Although the focus of this research has been on parents making a choice of education for their child at four years of age, educational choices are made at other times in a child’s life such as a choice of early years setting, secondary education, further, higher or special education. Choice is part of the activity of everyday life for adults and children alike, whether that be a choice of activity in the classroom, a choice of friendships, a choice of food or perhaps a choice of career. By positioning choice as diffractive activity the influence of history, experiences, society and relationalities can be seen in practice, not as things
but as intra-actions. In this way choice becomes alive and a greater depth of understanding is brought to what, why, and how decisions are made.

7.2.3 For research

The conceptual framework of *diffractive activity* positions human activity as intra-active, relational, and entangled. It supports the researcher to focus on human practices as opposed to notions of dualism that separate subject and object. This is important both for the development of social research practices, and for challenging what is being researched in the first place.

Research is often positioned as a linear process from undertaking a literature review, to designing a methodology, findings and conclusions (for example: Crotty, 2015). In practice research is not a linear process, it is messy with multiple threads of thinking that are liable to shoot off in a variety of directions. Whilst boundaried frames of thinking may bring structure to the research process, there is a danger in sticking with the traditions of research that constrains practices since such traditions will only produce more of the same. For research to make a difference, to be meaning making, the researcher needs to be willing to step outside of paradigmatic boxes, to engage in possibility thinking about what might be, rather than sticking with what is. In practice research is a dynamic and iterative activity that arises through intra-action - the intra-actions emerging through the mutual entanglement of researcher, literature, participants, and data. These intra-actions are what become important in research where meaning is constructed through a process of dissociation and association before being transformed into a published piece such as a journal article or research report.
When undertaking research the language used is often in relation to investigating something. In so doing there becomes a separation, a subject and object dualism where the researcher (as subject) seeks to examine the object of their investigation without acknowledging either their own history that informs their way of seeing the world or the intra-action arising within the research process. This research has shown that it was not the choice of education that was fascinating or new but the activity of educational choice and patterns of difference.

As an example, imagine the activity of a young child (as researcher) eating a plate of spaghetti (the object). For the child, it is not the spaghetti itself that is important but the intra-action, the feeling of the spaghetti as it slips between the child’s fingers, the sensations, the movement as it slips off the plate. Through this intra-action, the child is making associations with the spaghetti, what happens, how it feels in their hands, in their mouth, in their stomach, how it changes over time as it gets colder and stickier. Through this intra-action the child is making associations with spaghetti, whether they like it and what it means to them. The next time they come across spaghetti their intra-action will be different as it is built on their previous experiences and constructions of understanding. By focusing on the intra-actions within activity the investigation becomes of the world, located in practice, time, space and place.

*Diffactive activity* enables a different way of thinking about research, it foregrounds intra-action, relationalities and entangled patterns of difference and in so doing enables possibility thinking that moves research on from ‘what is’ to ‘what might be’. This investigation has focused on parents making an educational choice for their four-year-old child, it also provides a framework for
future research into other areas of choice at different stages in a child’s education, in the classroom and outside of the school gates.

7.2.4 For professional development

Throughout this research project I have been engaged in an iterative, dynamic and entangled activity that has shaped how I think about human practices and the choices they make outside of education and this has opened my mind to the possibilities, relationalities and entanglements in life. My engagement with the research process, and the thinking about diffractive activity has opened my mind to my own position personally, as an academic, and early career researcher.

This research has necessarily been shaped by my own history and experiences, positionality and interest in different forms of education, leading to the activity of researching educational choice at four. Through intra-action within society with parent-participant’s, new associations informed my research to become longitudinal in nature, to include setting leaders, photographs, and a documentary analysis of setting philosophies. The relationship built with research participants, members of the doctorate programme, and conference delegates from BERA and EECERA, led to possibility thinking, building partnerships between the university, setting providers and knowledge exchange, evaluating the EYFS consultation (Bamsey et al., 2020b), and meeting with the Department for Education as part of a coalition of early years providers. The relationalities formed through the materialities of research diffracted my direction of travel in terms of the literature, but also the use of research tools such as NVivo to collate data and identify emerging themes. The photographs taken by setting leaders diffracted my thinking about the materiality of choice, and communication with participants by email opened the door for
them to continue their relationship with me beyond the time-frame of data collection leading to future research avenues. Through a process of *dissociation and association*, each of these possibilities, relationalities and entanglements have mapped my research as a ‘meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement’ (Ingold, 2010, p.3) to a point of *transformation*, crystallised within this thesis. This does not mark the end of my research journey but a moment of *diffraction* as I present my research to external examiners, follow further lines of enquiry, and continue with my studies as an early career researcher.

On a personal level this research has supported my own construction of educational choice and the use of theory. I have learnt to question my own thinking, to look beyond the obvious and unpick what came before. I have become more confident in my intra-actions with other researchers, receiving a bursary and a ‘Best SIG Paper’ award as part of a BERA symposium in 2019. More recently, I had both an individual paper and a symposium proposal accepted for BERA 2020. I have started to develop my academic writing and am beginning to work collaboratively with other researchers. At the time of writing this thesis we are in the midst of a Coronavirus lock-down that has made home education the new social ‘norm’. I am interested in building on this research to follow my research participants through to compulsory education and beyond. To question how the current experiences of home education may have diffracted the choices they made at four to create new associations and ways of thinking.

As an academic, my own experiences as a researcher have changed how I intra-act with my students both on a pastoral level and academically. I recognise how each component of activity (history and experiences, society and relationalities) may create intra-actions that diffract student practices. This
increased awareness has helped me to offer pastoral and academic support that is tailored to the needs of the individual student enabling their own possibility thinking about what might be. In teaching I encourage students to question the what, how, and why of education, to look beyond what is and be open to opportunities.

As an early career researcher diffractive activity has helped me to construct my own understanding of research as relational, and always in motion. As such research cannot be a linear process toward a pre-defined object but an entangled web of activity that arises through intra-actions with literature, participants, colleagues and with the data I collect. The possibilities for engaging in further research are immense, and I need to retain a sense of practicality in terms of time and resources. Conscious that my own history, relationalities and intra-actions in society have shaped both my research and my positionality, I acknowledge that my views form but one facet of the choice discourse. This research has focused on choice of pre-compulsory education and there is opportunity to build on this, to investigate choice in different areas of education and in practice. Of particular interest has been the increasing number of families choosing to home educate and this is an area I am keen to explore in terms of its practice.

7.3 Limitations of the study

There are limitations to this study in the time-bound nature of the doctorate programme, the number of participants, and data collected.

The time-bound nature of this research positioned it within a specified period of time when parents were making a choice of education and following that after they had started their chosen form of education. As the local authority
paperwork for identifying a school preference is required to be submitted by mid-January ([Local] County Council, 2020), the first stage of my research should have taken place in the autumn term or very start of the spring term while the educational choice was being made. This sat at odds with the Doctorate timeframe since I was unable to start recruiting participants until the late spring/summer term, after the choice had been made. I do not feel that this has detrimentally affected the data collected as parents were still able to articulate the activity they engaged in and what may have influenced their decisions, before their child had started education. The second interviews did all take place in the autumn term, as planned, after the children had started education and I was able to discuss with parents their child’s experiences of starting education, and whether this had met their expectations arising from their initial choice.

My recruitment of participants has been framed by my positionality, constructing the method of participant recruitment, data collection, my analysis and interpretation of educational choice. I chose to recruit parent-participants through parent and toddler groups and a local nursery; this meant that those not attending the groups on the day I was present were unable to participate in the research. At the point of recruitment I was unaware of the age of the children involved, other than that they were at pre-school age. As it turned out two of the children were to remain in preschool for a further year before they began reception class and in both cases the parent was talking about starting preschool rather than starting reception class. This in itself highlights how different ‘frames of meaning’ (Giddens, 1993, p.86) influence the responses from parents. Different interpretations of ‘going to school’ and ‘compulsory school age’ meant that in both cases the child was going into a foundation stage
unit on a school site that included children from two to five years of age, rather than into a reception class.

The data I collected were gathered through the voluntary involvement of participants. Due to the evolving nature of the research the settings were those chosen by the parent-participants and as a result the specific setting leaders had not bought into the research process from the start. As would be expected in social research, participation was voluntary and I was unable to interview setting leaders from the independent school or the Steiner school chosen by parents. Therefore I did not have the personal voices of those leading or working in these settings but had to rely on the publicly available documents or view of a membership body. Both of the settings that did not participate were schools that were actively recruiting children and I question whether this had an impact on their non-participation. The settings concerned may have felt that my research could put them at risk through their relationships with parents and the wider educational community, and vulnerable in respect to confidentiality and my use of the data collected (Celestina, 2018; Shamim & Qureshi, 2013).

Limitations in terms of time, participants and data may be seen as adversely impacting on the validity and reliability of this research. However, in taking a social constructionist position I have sought, not to report my results as a truth, but to promote ‘insight, understanding or dialogue’ (Searle, 2018, p.568). Using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) terminology this research seeks not for a truth value but for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

In order to bring credibility to the research I have sought critique from other researchers through the presentation of papers at research conferences both in the UK and abroad. In addition, the longitudinal nature of this research across a number of different educational approaches has enabled me to identify recurring
themes in and between the different educational choices being made, supported by the use of theory that casts light on the sociological elements of educational choice. The concept of transferability between this research and other contexts could be challenged in that this project took place in one specific community in South West England. As a social constructionist I argue that necessarily, every local context is unique and thus un-transferable.

*Dependability* and *confirmability* were supported through critical reflexivity. Internal auditing through the use of NVivo (QSR International, 2018) maintained the connections between the codes identified and the original transcript. The research participants have had the opportunity to audit the data collected and analysed through confirming the transcripts of our conversations and reviewing the initial analysis of data. My development of diffractive activity has brought multi-dimensionality to my research that has in turn given insight into the lived experience of educational choice.

7.4 Future directions for research

This research has focused on parents making a choice of education for their four-year-old child (when they might typically enter reception class in school). This was an important focus because the majority of literature on choice relates to choosing a secondary school. My development of diffractive activity as a framework for thinking about educational choice provides an approach for considering the practice of choosing education and as such it would be interesting to explore the activity of parents and children making choices at other stages of their education as well as within educational practices.

This study has focused on the activity of parents choosing education and not the activity of the child. The parents in this study made reference to their child’s
needs but did not elaborate on how they knew what those needs were. Although the voice of the child may not be apparent, it is the child that will be experiencing the education that is chosen and this understanding should guide future research in this area.

Through an insight into the child’s voice, and research into choice through *diffractive activity* at other stages of education as well as practice within education, it is anticipated that a greater depth of understanding could be achieved.
8.0 References


Department for Education (2013b) Early years outcomes. A non-statutory guide for practitioners and inspectors to help inform understanding of child development through the early years. Department for Education London: Department for Education,.


Department for Education (2017a) Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. London: Department for Education. [Online]


Kennedy-Macfoy, M. (2013) ’It’s important for the students to meet someone like you.’ How perceptions of the researcher can affect gaining access, building rapport and securing cooperation in school-based research'. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 16 (6), pp. 491-502.


9.0 List of publications, presentations, workshops and conferences


Bamsey, V. (2019c) 'Puzzling over materiality in Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The complexity of choice in pre-compulsory education'. BERA. Manchester: BERA.


### FACULTY OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES
#### Education Research Ethics Sub-committee

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL OF RESEARCH**

*For EdRESC use only*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application No:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chairs action (expedited)</th>
<th>Yes/ No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk level -if high refer to UREC chair immediately Cont. Review Date</th>
<th>High/ low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome (delete as necessary)</th>
<th>Approved/ Declined/ Amend/ Withdrawn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

ALL PARTS OF THIS FORM MUST BE COMPLETED IN FULL IN ORDER TO GAIN APPROVAL. Please refer to the guidance notes.

**Part A: PROJECT INFORMATION**

1. **Investigator** *Note1*
   - **Victoria Bamsey**
   - If Student, please name your Director of Studies or Project Advisor: **Jan Georgeson**
   - **Course/programme:** Doctorate in Education
   - **School/directorate (if not PIoE):** PIoE
   - **Contact Address:** [address removed]
   - **Tel:** [number removed]
   - **E mail:** [email removed]

2. **Title of research:** The factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

3. **Nature of approval sought (Please tick relevant boxes) *Note 2**
   - **a) PROJECT:** ☒
   - **b) TAUGHT PROGRAMME (max. 3 years):** ☐

   *If a,) please indicate which category:
   - **Funded/unfunded Research (staff)**
   - **Undergraduate** ☐
   - **MPhil/PhD, ResM, BClin Sci, EdD**
   - **Or Other (please state)** ☐
   - **Taught Masters**

4. **a) Funding body (if any):** none
   - **b) If funded, please state any ethical implications of the source of funding, including any reputational risks for the university and how they have been addressed. *Note 3**

5. **a) Duration of project/programme: *Note 4**
   - **b) Dates:** April 2018 – May 2021

6. **Has this project received ethical approval from another Ethics Committee?Yes ☐ No ☒**
   - **Committee name:**
   - **Are you therefore only applying for Chair’s action now?** Yes ☐ No ☒

7. **Attachments (if required):**
   - **Application/Clearance (if you answered Yes to question 6)** Yes ☐ No ☒
   - **Information sheets for participants** Yes ☒ No ☐
   - **Consent forms** Yes ☒ No ☐
   - **Sample questionnaire(s)** Yes ☒ No ☐
   - **Sample set(s) of interview questions** Yes ☒ No ☐
   - **Continuing review approval (if requested)** Yes ☐ No ☒


1. Principal Investigators are responsible for ensuring that all staff employed on projects (including research assistants, technicians and clerical staff) act in accordance with the University’s ethical principles, the design of the research described in this proposal and any conditions attached to its approval.

2. In most cases, approval should be sought individually for each project. Programme approval is granted for research which comprises an ongoing set of studies or investigations utilising the same methods and methodology and where the precise number and timing of such studies cannot be specified in advance. Such approval is normally appropriate only for ongoing, and typically unfunded, scholarly research activity.

3. If there is a difference in ethical standards between the University’s policy and those of the relevant professional body or research sponsor, Committees shall apply whichever is considered the highest standard of ethical practice.

4. Approval is granted for the duration of projects or for a maximum of three years in the case of programmes. Further approval is necessary for any extension of programmes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8</th>
<th><strong>If you are staff</strong>, are there any other researchers involved in your project? Please list who they are, their roles on the project and if/how they are associated with the University. Please include their email addresses. <em>(Please indicate School of each named individual, including collaborators external to the Faculty/University):</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No other researchers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9</th>
<th><strong>If you are a student</strong>, who are your other supervisors? Rowena Passy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you discussed all ethical aspects of your research with your Director of Studies prior to submitting this application?  Yes ☒  No ☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10</th>
<th><strong>Summary of aims, objectives and methods (max 250 words)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The aim of this research project is to explore the factors that influence parents when they are choosing an early years setting for their four year old child. With a focus on one rural community in South West England I wish to examine the different settings children attend such as the mainstream reception class provision, home schooling, Montessori, Steiner and a community group. I will discuss with parents what led them to make their setting choice, to cast light on the cultural, historical, geographical, economic, political, and sociological influences, and to compare this to the setting ethos and pedagogy. A rural community has been chosen in order to focus on parents making a proactive decision to educate their child other than through mainstream schooling, a decision which would have been made harder by the rural situation they live in. The chosen community is an historic market town, with a population of approximately 1,500 mostly white, Christian, UK passport holders (Uk Census Data, 2012). This is an aging population with only 10% under the age of ten years. There is one single form entry primary school. Parents must travel some 16-25 miles to access other provision. I plan on taking a staged approach to my research: Pilot Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For full details of the amendments procedure, please see the guidance notes.
I will conduct an open interview with one parent in April 2018 who has chosen a different approach to education for their young child as opposed to mainstream schooling. I will use this pilot study to consider how my proposed approach to data gathering casts light on the factors influencing parental choice and this will, in turn, inform my research design, the interview schedule and the questions I will ask at the next stage. By choosing one parent in a different community to the target area I will not influence future data gathering through potential discussions within the community. The data gathered within this pilot study will not be used in the final piece of research, analysis of data or written thesis.

Stage One
I will conduct open interviews with 4-6 parents at a parent and toddler group in the community who are in the process of making their choice of educational provision for their young child ready for the Autumn term when they are four years of age. This will take place in the summer term before the child starts the setting in September. This will allow me to gain an insight into the decision making process which is current and not yet influenced by their day-to-day experience of a particular setting for that child. The open interview will first ask the parents which setting they are choosing for their young child, and then delve deeper into their response to ask what influenced this decision.

I will then analyse the data gathered in order to identify any emerging themes and topics.

Stage Two
I will conduct semi-structured interviews with parents of four year old children who have just started pre-compulsory education at age four, this may include some parents from stage one. I plan on interviewing one parent from each setting type (4-6 settings), drawing on the emerging themes from the responses gathered from stage one. The interview is semi-structured in that it will evolve from the parent’s responses to initial questioning. With permission I will use a voice recorder to record discussions, I will start by asking the parents to describe for me their chosen setting (looking for input on the setting philosophy, ethos, feeling, practice, and outcomes). I will then ask parents what influenced this choice (due to the focus on different setting types, the semi-structured interviews may be with different parents to those initially questioned). Drawing on the parent’s responses at this point I will seek to delve deeper into the cultural, historical, economic, political and sociological influences on choice, phrasing my questions to suit the parent’s use of language and their ideas.

I will then analyse the data gathered to draw together emerging themes linked to my focus on the historical, social, cultural, and political context of choice in pre-compulsory education.

Stage Three
At this stage I wish to compare parental responses regarding their choice of setting to the setting’s ethos and practice, to examine how each setting (each system of education) meets the parent’s perception of the provision. The methods used to compare the settings ethos and practice to the parent’s expectations will be informed by the themes emerging from the initial data collection. Mason’s ‘Facet Methodology’ (2011) recognises this approach to research highlighting the importance of insight, bringing value to intuition, imagination, and inventiveness in the research process, providing ‘telling knowledge’ (p.81).

I plan to review setting documentation which sets out their ethos and practice, to interview setting managers in order to explore how they put this ethos into practice. Such interviews will be semi-structured and will follow responses from stage two. With permission I will use a voice recorder and start the interview by asking the setting manager to describe for me the setting ethos. I will then build on responses to ask how this ethos is put into practice, to delve deeper into the activity of the education provided – the environment, rules, community, division of labour.
This three staged approach to research, each stage building on the one before, will provide a rich set of data which casts light on the factors which influence parental choice of pre-compulsory education. It will also consider how the activity in each system of education meets parental expectations, highlighting educational choice as relational between parent, setting, and society, informed by history and culture.

11. When do you need/expect to begin the research methods for which ethical approval is sought?
   Stage one will commence during the Summer term 2018
   Stage two and three Autumn term 2018

How long will this research take and/or for how long are you applying for this ethical approval?

The data gathering will take six – eight months
I am looking for ethical approval which lasts for three years to April 2021. (This will allow for data analysis and writing up)

12. What will be the outcomes of this project?
   The completion of my thesis for a Doctorate of Education.
   Journal articles / publications linked to my thesis

13. Is the project subject to an external funding bid?
   ☐ Yes (please complete questions 14-18)
   ☒ No (please go to Part B)

14. Bid amount:

15. Bid status:
   ☐ Not yet submitted
   ☐ Submitted, decision pending
   ☐ Bid granted

16. University Project Finance Team costing approved with Dean’s signature?
   Yes: ☐ No: ☐ (Please contact the University Project Finance Team as soon as possible)

17. Has the funding bid undergone peer review?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

18. Partners & Institutions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (including title)</th>
<th>School:</th>
<th>Institute / Organisation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

   234
Part B: ETHICAL REVIEW STATEMENT

The purpose of this statement is to clarify whether the proposed research requires ethical clearance through an Ethics Protocol. Please read the relevant section of the guidance notes before you complete your statement.

Please indicate all the categories into which your proposed research fits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection / analysis involved:</th>
<th>Action required:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 This study does not involve data collection from or about human participants.</td>
<td>➢ Complete this Ethical Review Statement and add a brief (one page) description of your research and intended data collection methods.  Part C not required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 This study involves the analysis or synthesis of data obtained from/about human subjects where such data are in the public domain (i.e. available in public archives and/or previously published)</td>
<td>➢ Complete this Ethical Review Statement and add a brief (one page) description of your research, the nature of the data and intended data collection methods.  Part C not required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 This study involves the analysis of data obtained from/about human participants where the data has been previously collected but is not in the public domain</td>
<td>➢ Complete this Ethical Review Statement ➢ Please complete Part C – Ethical Protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 This study draws upon data already collected under a previous ethical review but involves utilising the data in ways not cleared with the research participants</td>
<td>➢ Complete this Ethical Review Statement ➢ Please complete Part C – Ethical Protocol ➢ Submit copy of original ethics protocol and additional consent materials (if relevant) attached.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 This study involves new data collection from/about human participants</td>
<td>➢ Complete this Ethical Review Statement ➢ Please complete Part C – Ethical Protocol ➢ Submit copies of all information for participants AND consent forms in style and format appropriate to the participants together with your research instruments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please Note: Should the applicant wish to alter in any significant regard the nature of their research following ethical approval, an application for amendment should be submitted to the committee together with a covering letter setting out the reasons for the amendment. The application should be made with reference to one or more of the categories laid out in this document. ‘Significant’ should be interpreted as meaning changing in some fundamental way the research purposes and processes in whole or part.
Part C: ETHICS PROTOCOL

Please indicate how you will ensure that this research conforms to Plymouth University’s Research Ethics Policy - The Integrity of Research involving Human Participants. Please complete each section with a statement that addresses each of the ethical principles set out below. Please note that you should provide the degree of detail suggested. Each section will expand to accommodate this information.

Please refer to Guidance Notes when completing this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Informed consent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Please attach copies of all draft information / documents, consent forms, questionnaires, interview schedules, etc. intended for the participants, and list below. When it is not possible to submit research instruments (e.g. use of action research methods) the instruments should be listed together with the reason for the non-submission. Please also indicate the attachments in Question A7.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Written consent will be gained from each participant in advance of the research being carried out. In addition participants will have the opportunity to review interview transcripts to confirm that my records have recorded what the participant said and to give opportunity to edit, as appropriate. The instruments to be used are listed below:

- Participant Consent Form
- Participant Information Sheet
- Covering Email for Parents
- Indicative Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Parents
- Covering Email for Setting Managers
- Indicative Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Setting Managers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Openness and honesty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2 | It is generally accepted that research with human participants would not involve deception. However if this is not the case, deception is permissible only where it can be shown that all three of the following conditions have been met in full.

1. Deception is completely unavoidable if the purpose of the research is to be achieved.

2. The research objective has strong scientific merit.

3. Any potential harm arising from the proposed deception can be effectively neutralised or reversed by the proposed debriefing procedures.

If deception is involved, applicants are required to provide a detailed justification and to supply the names of two independent assessors whom the Committee can approach for advice. Please attach relevant documentation and list below. |

- This research does not involve deception.
3 Right to withdraw  

*Please provide a clear statement regarding what information has been provided to participants regarding their right to withdraw from the research.*

- The participant’s right to withdraw is set out within the ‘Participants Information Sheet’.
- The participant’s right to withdraw is time-bound within the data gathering phase of the project and before data analysis begins.
- This time-bound period will be within two weeks of when the data is gathered and/or transcribed for each participant so as to not impact on the analysis of data for either the second or third stage of data collection.

4 Protection from Harm  

*Indicate here any vulnerability that may be present because of the:*  
- participants e.g. children or vulnerable adults.  
- nature of the research process.

If you tick any box below, please indicate in “further information” how you will ensure protection from harm.

*Does this research involve: none of the participant types listed below are intended to be included as participants in the research process.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulnerability</th>
<th>Ticked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable adults</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive topics</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permission of a gatekeeper in place of consent from individuals</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects being academically assessed by the researcher</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research that is conducted without full and informed consent</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research that could induce psychological stress and anxiety</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrusive intervention (eg, vigorous physical exercise)</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further information:  
- By casting light on the factors that influence a parent’s choice of education for their child it is possible that sensitive areas are covered such as the parents own experiences of education, their history, culture and beliefs. I will signpost to support services where appropriate, this may include services such as the Samaritans, Citizens Advice, Home Start, Relate, and counselling services.

*Do ALL researchers in contact with children and vulnerable adults have current DBS clearance?*  

| Yes: ☒ | No: ☐ | N/A: ☐ |

**If Yes, Please give disclosure number(s)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Bamsey</td>
<td>[number removed]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**If No, please explain:**
| 5 | **External Clearance**  
*I undertake to obtain written permission from the Head of any external institutions (school, social service, prison, etc.) in which research will be conducted. (please check box)* | ☒ |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | **Participant/Subject Involvement**  
*Has this group of participants/subjects already been the subject of research in the current academic year?* | Yes ☐ No ☒ |
| 7 | **Payment**  
*Please provide details of any payments, either financial or in kind, made to participants for participation, compensation for time given, etc.* |  
- No payments either financial or in kind will be made to participants.  
- Depending on where the participants would like to be interviewed there is the possibility that refreshments will be provided. |
| 8 | **Debriefing**  
*Please provide a clear statement regarding debriefing of participants following their involvement in the study. This should include:*  
- *when debriefing will take place,*  
- *who will debrief the participants,*  
- *how the debriefing will take place,* and  
- *what information has been provided to participants regarding debriefing.* |  
- Information about debriefing is included within the participants information sheet  
- Debriefing will take place on a procedural basis.  
- A full interview transcript will then be sent to participants to check that what I have written is what they said during their interview, and that I can take the information forward into my analysis. This provides opportunity for participants to add or amend anything I have transcribed, supporting the co-construction of ideas.  
- Conformation of their agreement for me to use this data in my analysis will be requested within two weeks of sending out the interview transcript.  
- I will send a summary of findings to participants following the initial analysis of data. |
| 9 | **Dissemination of Research**  
*Please provide a clear statement regarding what information has been provided to participants regarding dissemination of this research.* |  
- Information about the dissemination of research is included within the Participants Information Sheet.  
- A summary of findings will be sent to participants following the initial analysis of data.  
- My research will be published within my completed thesis  
- Further to this the research will be used for journal articles and related academic presentations |
| 10 | **Confidentiality**  
*Please provide a clear statement regarding what information has been provided to participants regarding confidentiality issues.* |  
- The Participants Information Sheet will include a statement on confidentiality.  
- The participants’ identity will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used within the analysis and writing up of the research.  
- I will be the only person who can identify participants and all data kept on a laptop will be password protected. |
• Settings included in the research are accessed by the community, not necessarily located in the community. This brings further anonymity to the data gathered.
• Participant’s and setting names will not be used at any time in the data gathering process, storage of data (written or digital), analysis or writing up.
• Cloud storage systems will not be used.
• If setting photographs are used this will be when children are not present. Any photographs taken will only be used in the data analysis and not published within the thesis or related publications.
• Primary research data will be kept for a minimum of ten years after completion of the research project in line with University Ethics Policy (Plymouth University, 2013, p.11).

11 Ethical principles of professional bodies

Where relevant professional bodies have published their own guidelines and principles, these must be followed and the current University principles interpreted and extended as necessary in this context. Please state which (if any) professional bodies’ guidelines are being utilised.

The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association have been followed in the compilation of this ethics application.

12 Declarations:

For all applicants, your signature below indicates that, to the best of your knowledge and belief, this research conforms to the ethical principles laid down by Plymouth University and by the professional body specified in C.11 above.

For supervisors of PGR students:
As Director of Studies, your signature confirms that you believe this project is methodologically sound and conforms to university ethical procedures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name(s)</th>
<th>Signature (electronic is acceptable)</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applicant</td>
<td>Victoria Bamsey</td>
<td>[signature removed]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other staff investigators:</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Studies (if applicant is a postgraduate research student):</td>
<td>[name removed]</td>
<td>[signature removed]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Completed Forms should be forwarded by email to Faculty Research Ethics Administrator (artsresearchethics@plymouth.ac.uk).

Meetings dates are published on the intranet (Information for the Education Research Ethics Sub-Committee). In order to be considered at the next available meeting, applications must be received no later than the last day of the preceding month.
You will receive approval and/or feedback on your application within 2 weeks of the meeting date at which the committee discussed this application.

**Reference List**


The exemplar consent form below was completed by participants in conjunction with reading the ethics protocol outlined within the Participants Information Sheet.

**Researching the factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education**

**Consent Form**

This consent form is in connection with research I am carrying out to explore what may influence parents in their choice of education for their four-year-old child. This research will contribute to my thesis for a Doctorate in Education at Plymouth University.

I attach a ‘Participants Information Sheet’ which sets out my ethics protocol including how I will keep your identity confidential, your right to withdraw, and how I will share my findings with you. Please take the time to read through this before you sign to confirm your agreement to participate in this research, and to give permission for me to use a voice recorder to record our discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have read and agree with the information in the ‘Participants Information Sheet’ attached and understand my right to withdraw and to see a summary of the research findings.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tick here to confirm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I agree to the use of a voice recorder to record our discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I agree that our discussions can be used within your doctorate research and any related publications in a confidential manner.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
1.2 Exemplar Participants Information Sheet

The Information sheet below sets out the ethics protocol I followed with participants in my study. Participants were given the time to read this and to consider whether they were willing to become part of the research project before signing their consent to participate.

**Reseaching the factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education**

**Participants Information Sheet**

**Who I am**

My name is Victoria Bamsey and I am undertaking a Doctorate of Education at Plymouth University. My contact email address is [address removed]

**What the project is about**

I am carrying out research to explore the factors that influence parents when choosing education for their four-year-old child.

This is a personal project that will inform my practice in my work and future studies and will culminate in a written thesis to conclude my Doctorate in Education. Although the knowledge gained will support my practice it is not being undertaken in relation to my employed positions within the early year sector.

**Data collection**

With permission, data will be collected using a voice recorder during interviews with parents and setting managers, and through visits to settings. Any data collected will be used solely for the purposes of my doctorate and related publications. All data will remain confidential to me and pseudonyms will be used within any written work.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Participants have the right to withdraw their individual responses from the project dataset within two weeks of receiving the interview transcript or following a setting visit.

**Protection from Harm:**

My work is carried out within the safeguarding parameters set out within the local authority. Should any concerns arise during the process of this research local authority safeguarding protocol will be followed and participants will be signposted to support services.

**Debriefing and publication:**

Interviews will be transcribed and sent to participants to check that I have recorded what they said and to confirm that I can take the information forward.
into my analysis. Participants will be sent a summary of findings following my initial analysis of data.

My research will be published within my completed thesis and any related journal articles / academic presentations.

Confidentiality:

The information collected will remain confidential at all times and no participant names will be used in the analysis or summary of data. Cloud storage systems will not be used and all digital data will be kept on a password protected hard drive, accessible only by me. Primary research data will be kept for a minimum of ten years on completion of the project in line with the University Ethics Policy.

If there is anything you would like to discuss regarding my research please contact me by emailing [address removed]. If there is anything further you would like to discuss my Director of Studies is [name removed] who can be contacted by emailing [address removed]
1.3 Exemplar email to Parent Participants

The exemplar covering email below was sent to parents before interview setting out the intended topics of conversation. This gave participants an outline of the interview so that they were prepared and are not surprised by my line of questioning.

Researching the factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

Exemplar Covering Email

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your choice of education for your child.

As discussed, please find attached an information sheet about my research which sets out how I will keep your identity confidential, how I will share my findings with you, and your right to withdraw. For your information, I also attach a consent form which I will bring with me to our discussion, confirming your agreement to participate in this research.

So that you are prepared for our meeting, I would just like to share with you the types of questions I may ask.

- To start with I would like to explore what type of education you have chosen for your child.
- I would then like to move on to explore what factors influenced your decision. I would not want to limit you in this discussion but examples of such factors could relate to the choice available to you, costs, social group, policy, perhaps your own educational experience, or maybe relating to the way you feel the setting meets both your needs and the needs of your child.

If you have any questions or comments to make before we meet please do not hesitate to get in touch. Otherwise I will look forward to seeing you at XXtimeXX on the XXXDateXXX, at XXXaddressXXX.

With kind regards

Victoria Bamsey
1.4 Exemplar Parent Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This semi-structured interview schedule was designed as an outline of the types of questions I asked participants at the semi-structured interview stage. This was informed by my analysis of the initial open-interview transcripts and was therefore subject to change in order to adapt to participant contributions.

Researching the factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

Exemplar Parent Interview Schedule

This interview record has been developed in order to document how parents are influenced when making an educational choice for their young children.

The interview schedule will follow the parent’s lead in the discussions surrounding their choice of educational setting. As such the sections set out below are only indicative of the types of questions which may be asked. I wish to record the parent’s ideas and not to unduly influence the answers they give.

No participant names will be used in this data collection, analysis, or writing up of the research findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Information.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent pseudonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Can you describe for me the type of education you have chosen?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In this discussion I am looking to explore the parents view of the settings philosophy / ethos, how the setting feels, outcomes, approach, practitioners, location …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What influenced you to choose this approach to educating your child at this age?

In this discussion I am looking to explore:
Policy (focus on exam results, meritocracy)
Finances (personally and on a wider scale)
Social group (that the parent has come from, feels part of, would like their child to be in)
Culture (that the parent has come from, feels part of, would like their child to be in)
Own schooling experience (type of education, what went well, what not so well)

Would you like your child to stay in this setting next year or do you expect to change settings?

Here I am interested in whether choice is influenced by the start of compulsory education at aged five.

Additional Information

Is there anything else you would like to say about your choice of educational approach that you feel has not already been covered?
1.5 Exemplar email to Setting Leaders

The exemplar covering email below was sent to setting leaders before interview setting out the intended topics of conversation. This gave participants an outline of the interview so that they were prepared and are not surprised by my line of questioning.

Researching the factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

Exemplar Covering Email

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your setting.

As discussed, please find attached an information sheet about my research which sets out how I will keep your identity confidential, how I will share my findings with you, and your right to withdraw. For your information, I also attach a consent form which I will bring with me to our discussion, confirming your agreement to participate in this research.

So that you are prepared for our meeting, I would just like to share with you the types of questions I may ask.

- I would like to explore your setting ethos and how you put this into practice.
- This may include aspects such as your environment, way of working with parents and children, your philosophical approach or perhaps your curriculum or policies. It may be that your setting ethos has evolved over time and I am interested in how this has developed.
- Ultimately I am interested in discussing why you think parents have chosen your setting for their young child and how you feel you meet their needs.

If you have any questions or comments to make before we meet please do not hesitate to get in touch. Otherwise I will look forward to seeing you at XXtimeXX on the XXXDateXXX, at XXXaddressXXX.

With kind regards

Victoria Bamsey
1.6 Exemplar Setting Leader Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This semi-structured interview schedule was designed to indicate the types of questions I asked setting leaders. This was informed by my analysis of interviews with parents and was therefore subject to change in order to adapt to participant contributions.

Researching the factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

Setting Leader Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This interview record has been developed in order to document how setting leaders interpret their approach to learning, in terms of the environment, routine, and practitioner interactions with children, parents and the community.

The interview schedule is built on a primary analysis of data gathered from interviews with parents about their choice of educational approach for their four-year-old child. The purpose of interviewing setting leaders at this stage is to expand on the responses from parent interviews, to gather information about how the setting enacts their ethos and values.

No participant names will be used in this data collection, analysis, or writing up of the research findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Information.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting Leader pseudonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Provision Type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your setting ethos?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here I am looking to explore the setting’s character / how it is manifested in attitudes and aspirations / how the ethos has been influenced by history and culture / what does the setting want for the children who go there? Objective / motive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Can you describe for me how you put this ethos into practice?

Here I am interested in discussions surrounding adult / child led activities, routine, indoor / outdoor play, homework, assessment, areas of learning. In particular:  
Environment (furniture, access to the outdoors, decoration, resources, natural or artificial light)  
Practitioner Interaction (working at child level, support with self-care, tone of voice, expectations)  
Working with parents (information sharing, use of IT, welcoming parents into the setting)  
Links with the community (open days, charity events, visit to the community, visitors into the setting, volunteering)  
Rules that the setting follows (EYFS, National Curriculum, staff qualifications, other policies / legislation)

Why do you think parents have chosen your setting for their four-year-old child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything else you would like to say about your setting provision that you feel has not already been covered?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.7 Ethics Approval

This letter below is a copy of the grant of approval for me to conduct my research

10 May 2018

CONFIDENTIAL
Victoria Bamsey
[address removed]

Dear Vicky

Application for Approval by Education Research Ethics Sub-committee

Reference Number: 17/18-216
Application Title: The factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

I am pleased to inform you that the Education Research Ethics Sub-committee has granted approval to you to conduct this research.

Please note that this approval is for three years, after which you will be required to seek extension of existing approval.

Please note that should any MAJOR changes to your research design occur which effect the ethics of procedures involved you must inform the Committee. Please contact [details removed].

Yours sincerely

[signature removed]

[name removed]
Chair, Education Research Ethics Sub-committee - Plymouth Institute of Education
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
This letter below is a copy of the grant of approval for my amendment to my original ethics application.

10 May 2019

CONFIDENTIAL
Victoria Bamsey
[address removed]

Amendment to Approved Application

Amendment Reference Number: 18/19-257
Original application Reference Number: 17/18-216
Application Title: The factors influencing parental choice of pre-compulsory education

I am pleased to inform you that the Education Research Ethics Sub-committee has granted approval to you for your amendment to the application approved on 9 May 2018.

Please note that this approval is for three years, after which you will be required to seek extension of existing approval.

Please note that should any MAJOR changes to your research design occur which effect the ethics of procedures involved you must inform the Committee. Please contact [details removed]

Yours sincerely

[signature removed]

[name removed]
Chair, Education Research Ethics Sub-committee - Plymouth Institute of Education
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Appendix Two – Additional Paperwork used in research

The paperwork used in the research was aligned with that set out in Appendix One including the participant’s information sheet and consent form. In addition the adoption of a facet methodology meant that I sought to cast light on my investigation in different ways and in doing so allowed my research methods to develop during each stage of the research, each approach leading from the one before.

One such example was permission to use photographs within my research. The move to include photographs was initiated by a setting leader who offered to take pictures of her setting environment and send them to me. Although this action was initiated by the setting I felt it important that written consent was in place for these images to be used in my research.

2.1 Consent Form for the use of Photographs

This consent form is in connection with research I am carrying out to explore what may influence parents in their choice of education for their four-year-old child. This research will contribute to my thesis for a Doctorate in Education at Plymouth University.

I attach a ‘Participants Information Sheet’ which sets out my ethics protocol including how I will keep your identity confidential, your right to withdraw, and how I will share my findings with you. Please take the time to read through this before you sign to confirm your agreement to participate in this research, and to give permission for me to use a voice recorder to record our discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tick here to confirm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have read and agree with the information in the ‘Participants Information Sheet’ attached and understand my right to withdraw and to see a summary of the research findings, and I consent to the terms of this research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| I agree to the use of photographs of the setting environment |
| I agree that such photographs can be used within your doctorate research and any related publications in a confidential manner. |

| Name |
| Signature |
| Date |
2.2 Flyer for Recruiting Participants

Another setting asked me to produce flyers that could be handed out to parents to recruit participants.

**Researc**ing Educational Choice for four-year-old children

My name is Victoria Bamsey and I am undertaking a Doctorate of Education at the University of Plymouth. I am researching the factors that may influence parents when choosing education for their four-year-old child.

With some eighteen years’ experience in the early years sector I understand how educational choice for four-year-olds can be a huge step for both families and settings, whether that be mainstream education, an independent school, home education, Montessori or perhaps a Steiner approach. I hope that by identifying the factors that may influence such choice, settings are more able to support parents through this process, and parents are better equipped to make an informed choice that suits both their children and their family circumstances.

What is involved:

- Discussions with parents this summer term who are making or have just made that choice.
- Discussions with parents in the autumn term, once their child has started education, in order to understand what has influenced their decision.
- Discussions with setting leaders in order to identify their perspective of why parents may choose to send their child to them.

Your involvement in this project is very important to me. If you are willing to talk with me about the educational choice you have made or are making, please add your contact details to the tear of slip below and hand to Ruth Beck. In the meantime if you have any queries please contact me via email [email removed]:

Name:

Email address

Telephone number:
2.3 Parent Second Interview Schedule

In addition, although this was not given out to parents the following interview schedule did inform the semi-structured second stage interviews with parents and was developed from the first stage interviews.

Second interview questions

When we last spoke you were about to make or had just made an educational choice for your young child. Now that you have had some time within this setting / using this educational approach I am interested to know how you are feeling about your choice.

1. Now that you have experienced your chosen education for a while can you tell me about your experiences of the setting’s ethos, practice and outcomes
2. Is it as you expected?
3. What do you particularly like?
4. Is there anything you are not happy with?
5. If you could wind back the clock would you make the same decision? Why?
6. Are you planning to send your younger child to the same setting when they are older? Why?

As I was analysing the transcript from our discussion a number of questions came to mind that I would like to explore with you.

1. I wonder if you could tell me how you initially found out about this school / educational approach?
2. Did you find any information about the educational choices available to you? If so, where was it, and what type of information was it?
3. Were there any barriers to you finding out about your choices?
4. Was there any other information you would have liked?
5. Did you receive the local authority paperwork? When? In what form? Did you complete it? How did it make you feel?
6. How did the local authority’s school admissions paperwork influence your choice of education for your child?
7. Did you feel that there were any political influences on the choice you made?
8. Did you know what the age of full-time compulsory education is?
9. You have the right to access school on a part time basis until your child is of compulsory school age. What do you think about this?
10. You have the right to defer admission until later within the school year or until your child turns five. What do you think about this?
11. You have the right to request a delayed admission to school starting school in reception class a year later when your child turns five. What do you think about this?
I would also like the opportunity to speak with your setting in order to gain the settings perspective on why families may choose to send a child to them. I just wanted to check that you are happy with this? (Setting contact details)

Questions specific to the educational approach you have chosen

Steiner
- How did / does the school’s recent Ofsted inspection outcome affect you?

Independent school
- When we last met you mentioned the schools ranking, I wonder if you can explain a little more to me about this – what ranking were you referring to?
- Why is it important to you for your children to go to a school which is ‘nationally ranked’?

Unschooling
- Tell me a little more about the philosophy of unschooling
- What is your daily and weekly routine?
- What resources have you got?
- What is your role?
- What other people are involved?
- Were logistics a factor of choice such as your desire to take children out of school for holidays / trips, restrictions on flexi-schooling, the need for childcare, the distance to the school.

Montessori
- How are your plans to set up your own Montessori school progressing?
- Is this impacting on your future educational plans?
2.4 Setting Interview Schedule

Finally the interviews with setting managers were based on the schedule included in Appendix One

**Setting interview questions**

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. As discussed, I am carrying out research looking at parental choice in pre-compulsory education. I am keen to explore with you why you think parents might choose to send their four year old child to your setting.

Why do you think parents might choose to send their four year old child to your setting?

Can you tell me about your setting ethos?

Can you tell me about the environment and resources you provide?

Can you tell me about the community you have within your setting? *(People, staff parental involvement, culture, religion, feeling, friendships)*

Can you tell me about the regulations you follow? *(EYFS / legislation / specific ‘rules’ within a philosophy of education / Ofsted / ISI / Academy expectations)*

Can you tell me about the key people in your setting and their role / task distribution? *(If not already covered in community above – staff, parental involvement, outside professionals)*

I am interested in understanding how you market your provision to prospective parents. Can you tell me a little about this? *(Advertising, prospectus, handbook, paperwork sent to parents, school visits etc)*
Appendix Three – Key literature

The table below lists the key literature reviewed during the course of this research in order of publication date. Of note is the wealth of literature produced following the implementation of the Educational Reform Act in 1988 and the seminal literature by key authors (Bagley, Ball, Bowe, Coldron, Crozier, Exley, Gewirtz, Gorard, Reay, and Tooley). Other observations include the educational stage each article pertains to and the link to this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>author 1</th>
<th>author 2</th>
<th>author 3</th>
<th>date</th>
<th>title</th>
<th>article search thread</th>
<th>link to research</th>
<th>link to research</th>
<th>stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Ghaye</td>
<td>Christine Pascal</td>
<td></td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Four-year-old children in reception classrooms: participant perceptions and practice</td>
<td>Reception and Four</td>
<td>starting school at four</td>
<td>child-school incorporation process</td>
<td>reception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coldron</td>
<td>Pam Boulton</td>
<td></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Happiness as a criterion of parents choice of school</td>
<td>Coldron</td>
<td>criterion of choice</td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Kenway</td>
<td>Chris Bigum</td>
<td>Lindsay Fitzclarenc e</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>marketing education in the post modern age</td>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
<td>postmodern markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Gewirtz</td>
<td>Stephen Ball</td>
<td>Richard Bowe</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Parents, privilege and the education market-place</td>
<td>Ball</td>
<td>social class</td>
<td>Bourdieu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Bowe</td>
<td>Sharon Gewirtz</td>
<td>Stephen Ball</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Captured by the discourse? Issues and concerns in researching ‘parental choice’</td>
<td>Ball</td>
<td>rational choice</td>
<td>metaphor of landscapes</td>
<td>secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Reay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Contextualising Choice: social power and parental involvement</td>
<td>Reay</td>
<td>constraints of choice</td>
<td>Bourdieu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Bagley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Black and White Unite or Flight? The racialized dimension of schooling and parental choice</td>
<td>Bagley</td>
<td>policy race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

257
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Tooley</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>On School Choice and Social Class: a response to Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz</td>
<td>Gill Crozier</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Empowering the Powerful: a discussion of the interrelation of government policies and consumerism with social class factors and the impact of this upon parent interventions in their children’s schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Carroll</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Spoilt for Choice’: the working classes and educational markets</td>
<td>Geoffrey Walford</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Parents’ responses to the school quasi-market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clyde Chitty</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Privatisation and Marketisation</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Higgs, C.J. Webster, S.D. White</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>The use of geographical information systems in assessing spatial and socio-economic impacts of parental choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil De Reybekill</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Vouchers, Inclusion and the Limits of Freedom</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary Thomas, Peter Vass, Robin McClelland</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Parents in a market-place: some responses to information, diversity and power</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoffrey Walford</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>School Choice and the Common Good: a reply to Brighouse</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Reay</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>‘Always knowing’ and ‘never being sure’: familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice</td>
<td>Reay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann Browne</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>The Effect of the Voucher Initiative on Early Years Provision</td>
<td>Preschool and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Ball, Carol Vincent</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>‘I Heard It on the Grapevine’: ‘hot’ knowledge and school choice</td>
<td>Ball</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Reay, Stephen Ball</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Making their Minds Up’: family dynamics of school choice</td>
<td>Ball</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill Crozier</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Parents and schools: partnership or surveillance?</td>
<td>Crozier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Social Movement in Undeveloped Markets: an apparent contradiction</td>
<td>Gorard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>The Role of Nostalgia in School Choice</td>
<td>Gorard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela Munn</td>
<td>Parental influence on school policy: some evidence from research</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>School and Choice parental influence on school policy</td>
<td>John Coldron</td>
<td>A case study of a patent’s educational practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>Well. That about wraps it up for school choice research’: A state of the art review</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Gorard the field of school choice recognises need for primary and alternative choice research</td>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>What you pay is what you get choice and fee-paying schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Section Title</td>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Subsection Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard, John Fitz</td>
<td>Investigating the determinants of segregation between schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>desegregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Reay, Helen Lucey</td>
<td>Children, School Choice and Social Differences</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Diane Reay</td>
<td>children's experience of choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Gibson, Sheena Asthana</td>
<td>What's in a number? Commentary on Gorard and Fitz's 'Investigating the determinants of segregation between schools'</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Alex Gibson</td>
<td>methodology critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>Here we go again: a reply to 'What's in a number?' by Gibson and Asthana</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>critique of critique!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Bagley, Philip Woods, Ron Glatter</td>
<td>Rejecting Schools: Towards a fuller understanding of the process of parental choice</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Carl Bagley</td>
<td>reasons not to choose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Williams, John Coldron, Kathy Stephenso n et al</td>
<td>Parents' Experiences of the Process of Choosing a Secondary School</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>John Williams, John Coldron, Kathy Stephenso n et al</td>
<td>experience and criterion of choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Bagley, Philip Woods, Glenys Woods</td>
<td>Implementation of School Choice Policy: interpretation and response by parents of students with special educational needs</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Carl Bagley</td>
<td>policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick White, Stephen Gorard, John Fitz et al</td>
<td>Regional and Local Differences in Admission Arrangements for Schools</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Patrick White, Stephen Gorard, John Fitz et al</td>
<td>admission procedure s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard, Chris Taylor, John Fitz</td>
<td>Does school choice lead to 'spirals of decline'?</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>private schools</td>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>reduction in standards?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

261
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen Lucey, Diane Reay</td>
<td>Carrying the beacon of excellence: social class differentiation and anxiety at a time of transition</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Education and Choice policy consequences</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Adnett, Peter Davies</td>
<td>Education as a Positional Good: Implications for Market-Based Reforms of State Schooling</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Education and Choice education as a positional good</td>
<td>education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Ball</td>
<td>The Risks of Social Reproduction: the middle class and education markets</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Ball choice history and future</td>
<td>class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Tooley</td>
<td>Why Harry Brighouse is Nearly Right about the Privatisation of Education</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Tooley defending privatisation of education</td>
<td>class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Reay, Helen Lucey</td>
<td>Stigmatised Choices: social class, social exclusion and secondary school markets in the inner city</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Reay class practice and choice</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Brighouse</td>
<td>What’s Wrong With Privatising Schools?</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Tooley social justice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izhar Oplatka</td>
<td>The characteristics of the school organization and the constraints on market ideology in education: an institutional view</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Education and Choice institutional theory of organisational on marketisation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice Aurini, Scott Davies</td>
<td>Choice without markets: homeschooling in the context of private education</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Specialization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine Teelken</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Frictions between formal education policy and actual school choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>single sex education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geert Driessen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Case studies in an international comparative perspective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederik Smit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn Jackson</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Gender and school choice: factors influencing parents when choosing</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>single sex education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moray Bisset</td>
<td></td>
<td>single-sex or co-educational independent schools for their children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Luis Bernal</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Parental choice, social class and market forces: the consequences of</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>elements of choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>privatization of public services in education</td>
<td></td>
<td>class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Sliwka</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Choice, Diversity and 'Exit' in Schooling — A Mixed Picture</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>choice exists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Istance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>all incl home education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Bagley</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>School choice and competition: a public-market in education revisited</td>
<td>Bagley</td>
<td>policy and marketization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>What counts as evidence in the school choice debate?</td>
<td>Gorard</td>
<td>desegregation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Fitz</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>quantitative study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa Benn</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Diversity and Choice: the spin doctor’s route to selection</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne West</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>School choice, equity and social justice: The case for more control</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>the need for equity in choice system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Power</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Markets and Misogyny: Educational research on educational choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>focus on mothers in school choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen Lynch</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Markets, schools and the convertibility of economic capital: the</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>Irish education system and interesting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Moran</td>
<td></td>
<td>complex dynamics of class choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Contributions</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Sliwka, David Istance</td>
<td>Parental and Stakeholder ‘Voice’ in Schools and Systems</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>comparisons!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Croxford, Lindsay Paterson</td>
<td>Trends in social class segregation between schools in England, Wales and Scotland since 1984</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>trends in social segregation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila Dainton</td>
<td>What Works: real research or a cherry picker’s paradise?</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>a critique of ‘higher standards better schools for all’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie Mars, Jools Page</td>
<td>Extended Review of ‘Childcare, choice and class practices’ by Vincent and Ball 2006</td>
<td>Ball class</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>early years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Payler</td>
<td>Opening and closing interactive spaces: shaping four-year-old children's participation in two English settings</td>
<td>Reception and Four</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>pedagogy of early learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Oria, Alejandra Cardini, Stephen Ball et al</td>
<td>Urban education, the middle classes and their dilemmas of school choice</td>
<td>Ball policy and class</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill Crozier, Jane Davies</td>
<td>Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home–school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents</td>
<td>Crozier home-school relations, race</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>yr 6 to FE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Noden, Harvey Goldstein</td>
<td>A brief response to Gorard and Fitz</td>
<td>Gorard methodology critique</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Beck</td>
<td>Education and the middle classes: against reductionism in educational theory and research</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>class and cultural reductionism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie Marsh</td>
<td>Jools Page</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Review of ‘Childcare, choice and class practices’ Vincent and Ball 2006</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>review of Vincent and Ball</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Russell</td>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Keeping the faith</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>faith schools and social cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coldron</td>
<td>Emily Tanner</td>
<td>Steven Finch</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Secondary School Admissions</td>
<td>Coldron</td>
<td>trends and process of admissions secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill Crozier</td>
<td>Jane Davies</td>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>‘The trouble is they don’t mix’: self-segregation or enforced exclusion?</td>
<td>Crozier</td>
<td>racial integration secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill Crozier</td>
<td>Diane Reay</td>
<td>David James et al</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>White middle-class parents, identities, educational choice and the urban comprehensive school: dilemmas, ambivalence and moral ambiguity</td>
<td>Crozier</td>
<td>class and choice secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Reay</td>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Tony Blair, the promotion of the ‘active’ educational citizen, and middle-class hegemony</td>
<td>Reay</td>
<td>reliance on rational choice Bernstein</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Tooley</td>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>From Adam Swift to Adam Smith: How the ‘Invisible Hand’ Overcomes Middle Class Hypocrisy</td>
<td>Tooley</td>
<td>social justice and private schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Taylor</td>
<td>Jesse Mackay</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Three decades of choice in Edmonton schools</td>
<td>Education and Choice establishing alternative education schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan DeJarnatt</td>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>School choice and the (Ir)rational parent</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>elements of choice race, class social networks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coldron</td>
<td>Ben Willis</td>
<td>Claire Wolstenholme</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Selection by attainment and aptitude in English secondary schools</td>
<td>Coldron</td>
<td>admissions research secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel Pennell</td>
<td>Anne West</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Campaigns by parents to set up new schools in England: issues and barriers</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>setting up new schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saeeda Shah</td>
<td>Catherine Conchar</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Why single-sex schools? Discourses of culture/faith and achievement</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>single sex education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Kelly</td>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Globalisation and education: a review of conflicting perspectives and their effect on policy and professional practice in the UK</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>globalisation and education markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Vincent</td>
<td>Annette Braun</td>
<td>Stephen Ball</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Local links, local knowledge: choosing care settings and schools</td>
<td>Ball</td>
<td>class and choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coldron</td>
<td>Caroline Cripps</td>
<td>Lucy Shipton</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Why are English secondary schools socially segregated?</td>
<td>Coldron</td>
<td>class segregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaap Dronkers</td>
<td>Silvia Avram</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>A cross-national analysis of the relations of school choice and effectiveness differences between private-dependent and public schools</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>comparing public and private school choice to achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Wilkins</td>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Citizens and/or consumers: mutations in the construction of concepts and practices of school choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaap Dronkers</td>
<td>Georges Felouzis</td>
<td>Agnès van Zanten</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Education markets and school choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>editorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Robert</td>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Social origin, school choice, and student performance</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>class, choice, achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill Crozier</td>
<td>Diane Reay</td>
<td>David James</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Making it work for their children: white middleclass parents and working-class schools</td>
<td>Crozier</td>
<td>class and choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Gorard</td>
<td>Shou Chen Cheng</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Pupil clustering in English secondary schools: one pattern or several?</td>
<td>Gorard</td>
<td>class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

266
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Michelle Jackson</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Bold choices: how ethnic inequalities in educational attainment are suppressed</th>
<th>Education and Choice</th>
<th>ethnic inequality</th>
<th>FE and HE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn E. Grogan</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Parents’ choice of pre-kindergarten: the interaction of parent, child and contextual factors</td>
<td>Preschool and Choice</td>
<td>preschool childcare choice rational and relational factors</td>
<td>preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Vincent</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Being strategic, being watchful, being determined: Black middle-class parents and schooling</td>
<td>Ball</td>
<td>involvement in schools</td>
<td>race secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Allen</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>The effect of changes in published secondary school admissions on pupil composition</td>
<td>Coldron</td>
<td>school admissions code</td>
<td>secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dympna Devine</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Review of ‘White middle class identities and urban schooling’ by Reay, Crozier and James 2011</td>
<td>Reay</td>
<td>book review of class practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Colburn</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Responsibility and School Choice in Education</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>market mechanisms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayna Davey</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Using Bourdieu’s concept of doxa to illuminate classed practices in an English fee-paying school</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>Bourdieu Doxa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansjorg Hohr</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>The Concept of Experience by John Dewey Revisited: Conceiving, Feeling and “Enliving”</td>
<td>Relational and choice and education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raewyn Connell</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Just education</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>education is dangerous</td>
<td>neoliberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Journal/Book</td>
<td>Education Phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Bradbury</td>
<td>Education policy and the ‘ideal learner’: producing recognisable learner-subjects through early years assessment</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rational and choice and education constructing a learner</td>
<td>Early years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia F. DiCarlo</td>
<td>Using structured choice to increase child engagement in low-preference centres</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Preschool and Choice organisatio of classrooms and children’s choice of activity</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Karlsson</td>
<td>Morality in parents’ stories of preschool choice: narrating identity positions of good parenting</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>School and Choice childcare in Sweden identity formation</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia Exley</td>
<td>Making working-class parents think more like middle-class parents: Choice Advisers in English education</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Exley choice advisors and class Bourdieu, Lipsky</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Ball</td>
<td>Social mix, schooling and intersectionality: identity and risk for Black middle class families</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Ball class and race Bourdieu secondary and further</td>
<td>Secondary and further</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Byrne</td>
<td>What factors influence the decisions of parents of children with special educational needs when choosing a secondary educational provision for their child at change of phase from primary to secondary education? A review of the literature</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Other choice and SEN Bourdieu, Foucault, Deluize, Butler</td>
<td>SEN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coldron</td>
<td>Review of 'School trouble: identity, power and politics in education', by Deborah Youdell 2011</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Coldron politics in schools Foucault, Deluize, Butler</td>
<td>SEN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia Exley, Judith Suissa</td>
<td>Private Schools, Choice And The Ethical Environment</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Exley private schools and public attitudes towards choice</td>
<td>SEN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Journal and Choice</td>
<td>Market Mechanisms</td>
<td>Neoliberalism and Rationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Bradbury, Ian McGimpsey, Diego Santori</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Revising rationality: the use of ‘Nudge’ approaches in neoliberal education policy</td>
<td>Rational and choice and education</td>
<td>Rational and choice and education</td>
<td>Neoliberalism and Rationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Ann Wood</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Free choice and free play in early childhood education: troubling the discourse</td>
<td>Relational and choice and education</td>
<td>Relational and choice and education</td>
<td>Early Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirstine Hansen</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Moving house for education in the pre-school years</td>
<td>Preschool and Choice</td>
<td>Moving house for primary school</td>
<td>Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Miller, Barrie Craven, James Tooley</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Setting up a free school: successful proposers’ experiences</td>
<td>Tooley</td>
<td>Setting up free schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier Dumay, Vincent Dupriez</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Educational quasi-markets, school effectiveness and social inequalities</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.M. Camina, P. Iamone</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Housing mix, school mix: barriers to success</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill Crozier</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Middle-class privilege and education</td>
<td>Crozier</td>
<td>Neo liberal, class privilege</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Bagley, Sam Hillyard</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>School choice in an English village: living, loyalty and leaving</td>
<td>Bagley</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Bourdieu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morena Cuconato</td>
<td>’Doing transitions’ in education</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Link between education and work</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas Walther</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven J. Courtney</td>
<td>Mapping school types in England</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>Types of schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence Angus</td>
<td>School choice: neoliberal education policy and imagined futures</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>Neoliberal class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenys Mann</td>
<td>Choosing a school: parental decision-making when special schools are an option</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Rational and choice and education</td>
<td>Rational and choice and education</td>
<td>Choice process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica Cuskelly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Moni</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geert Driessen</td>
<td>The gross and net effects of primary school denomination on pupil performance</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>Reputation v impact of religious schools on outcomes</td>
<td>Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orhan Agirdag</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael S. Merry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia Exley</td>
<td>’Critical friends’: exploring arm’s length actor relationships to local government in education</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Exley</td>
<td>Exley</td>
<td>Foucault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Tooley</td>
<td>Extending access to low-cost private schools through vouchers: an alternative interpretation of a two-stage ‘School Choice’ experiment in India</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Tooley</td>
<td>Tooley</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Subtitle</td>
<td>Year Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Palmer</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Nursery schools or nursery classes? Choosing and failing to choose between policy alternatives in nursery education in England, 1918–1972</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>nursery schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley E. Lavery</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>What parents still do not know about No Child Left Behind and why it matters</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>no child left behind agenda (USA)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia Lee</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>School choice with education vouchers: an empirical case study from Hong Kong</td>
<td>Bagley</td>
<td>education vouchers in Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard Barker</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Can high-performing academies overcome family background and improve social mobility?</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td>background influences attainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma E. Rowe</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Politics, religion and morals: the symbolism of public schooling for the urban middle-class identity</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>campaign for a new school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pär Isling Poromaa</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>The significance of materiality in shaping institutional habitus: exploring dynamics preceding school effects</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td>institutional habitus materialism and Bourdieu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicolás Brando</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Between equality and freedom of choice: Educational opportunities for the least advantaged</td>
<td>Tooley</td>
<td>egalitarian v libertarian approaches to choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Longfield, James Tooley</td>
<td>School choice and parental preferences in a poor area of Monrovia</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Tooley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marco Pitzalis, Mariano Porcu</td>
<td>Cultural capital and educational strategies. Shaping boundaries between groups of students with homologous cultural behaviours</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma E. Rowe, Christopher Lubienski</td>
<td>Shopping for schools or shopping for peers: public schools and catchment area segregation</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Gurney</td>
<td>Choosing schools, choosing selves: exploring the influence of parental identity and biography on the school choice process in Delhi, India</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Williams</td>
<td>Bold beginnings or pressure from the start</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Reception and Four</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Larsson, Elisabeth Hultqvist</td>
<td>Desirable places: spatial representations and educational strategies in the inner city</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>School and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Hemming, Christopher Roberts</td>
<td>Church schools, educational markets and the rural idyll</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cath Gristy, Rebecca Johnson</td>
<td>Home-to-school transport in contemporary schooling contexts: an irony in motion</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Elwick</td>
<td>New forms of government school provision – an international comparison</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Education and Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Ball</td>
<td>The tragedy of state education in England: Reluctance, compromise and muddle—a system in disarray</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Jerrima, Sam Sims</td>
<td>Why do so few low- and middle-income children attend a grammar school? New evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Hartley</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>the emergence of blissful thinking in the management of education</td>
<td>Rational and choice and education</td>
<td>educational management theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huan Chen, Alice Bradbury</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Parental choice of childcare in England: Choosing in phases and the split market</td>
<td>Other childcare choice, three phases</td>
<td>Early years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Four – Key legislative changes since 1870

This table summarises relevant legislative changes since the introduction of education for all children with the 1870 Forster Act.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Parents duty</th>
<th>Local authority duty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Elementary Education Act 1870 (Forster Act)** | - Gave provision for schools to be set up                                   | - 74. Every school board may from time to time, with the approval of the Education Department, make byelaws for all or any of the following purposes:  
   (1.) Requiring the parents of children of such age, not less than five years nor more than thirteen years, as may be fixed by the byelaws, to cause such children (unless there is some reasonable excuse) to **attend school** |
| **Elementary Education Act 1876**        | - Made education compulsory                                                   | - 4. It shall be the duty of the **parent of every child to cause such child to receive efficient elementary instruction** in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and if such parent fail to perform such duty, he shall be liable to such orders and penalties as are provided by this Act.  
   - 7. The provisions of this Act respecting the employment of children shall be enforced -  
   (1.) In a school district within the jurisdiction of a school board, by that board; and  
   (2.) In every other school district by a committee (in this Act referred to as a school attendance committee) appointed annually, if it is a borough, by the council of the borough, and, if it is a parish, by the guardians of the union comprising such parish. |
<p>| <strong>Elementary Education Act 1880 (Mundella Act)</strong> | - Made school attendance compulsory                                           | - 2. It shall be the duty of the local authority (within the meaning of the Elementary Education Act, 1876,) of every school district in which byelaws respecting the attendance of children at school under section seventy-four of the Elementary Education Act, 1870, are not at the passing of this Act in force, forthwith to make byelaws under that section for such district. |
| <strong>Elementary Education Act 1891</strong>        |                                                                               | - 2. It shall be the duty of the local authority (within the meaning of the Elementary Education Act, 1876,) of every school district in which byelaws respecting the attendance of children at school under section seventy-four of the Elementary Education Act, 1870, are not at the passing of this Act in force, forthwith to make byelaws under that section for such district. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Education Act 1902 (Balfour Act)</strong></th>
<th>Established a system of secondary education, replaced school boards with local education authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1918 (Fisher Act)</strong></td>
<td>Extended educational provision to fourteen; gave provision for state funded nursery schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.- (1) Subject as provided in this Act, <strong>no exemption from attendance at school</strong> shall be granted to any child between the ages of five and fourteen years, and any enactment giving a power, or imposing a duty, to provide for any such exemption, and any provision of a byelaw providing for any such exemption, shall cease to have effect, without prejudice to any exemptions already granted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1921</strong></td>
<td>'Consolidated all previous laws relating to education including the 1918 Education Act's provision for the school leaving age to be raised to 14' (Gillard, 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>42. It shall be the duty of the parent of every child between the ages of five and fourteen, or, if a byelaw under this Act so provides, between the ages of six and fourteen, to cause that child to <strong>receive efficient elementary instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43.- (1) It shall be the duty of the local education authority for elementary education, after due warning to the parent, to complain to a court of summary jurisdiction with a view to obtaining a school attendance order under this Act in the following cases:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a) If the parent of any such child habitually and without reasonable excuse <strong>neglects to provide efficient elementary instruction</strong> for his child; or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) If any such child is found habitually wandering or not under proper control, or in the company of rogues, vagabonds, disorderly persons, or reputed criminals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1936</strong></td>
<td>The 1921 act still stands – this version increased the age of compulsory education from fourteen to fifteen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.- (1) Subject to the provisions of this Act, the age of fifteen shall be the age up to which byelaws under Part IV of the Education Act, 1921 (hereinafter called &quot;the principal Act&quot;), shall require parents to cause their children (unless there is some reasonable excuse) to <strong>attend school</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1944 (Butler Act)</strong></td>
<td>36. It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause him to <strong>receive efficient full-time education</strong> suitable to his age, ability, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37.- (1) If it appears to a local education authority that the parent of any child of compulsory school age in their area is failing to perform the duty imposed on him by the last foregoing section, it shall be the duty of the authority to serve upon the parent a notice requiring him, within such</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
aptitude, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

76. In the exercise and performance of all powers and duties conferred and imposed on them by this Act the Minister and local education authorities shall have regard to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.

time as may be specified in the notice not being less than fourteen days from the service thereof, to satisfy the authority that the child is receiving efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability, and aptitude either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

39.- (1) If any child of compulsory school age who is a registered pupil at a school fails to attend regularly thereat, the parent of the child shall be guilty of an offence against this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Act 1953</th>
<th>free dental treatment for children, amendments to school attendance orders procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 1959</td>
<td>Increased grant payments for school building maintenance and aided schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 1962</td>
<td>Introduced grants for teacher training degrees and clarified school leaving dates to tie in with school terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 1964 (Boyle Act)</td>
<td>Provided for the creation of middle schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 1967</td>
<td>Increased powers in relation to grants and loans to aided and special agreement schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 1968</td>
<td>Rules about changing the character of schools to comprehensives (2) government of further education and special schools by LAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1970</strong></td>
<td>Extended the provision of free school milk to juniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1971</strong></td>
<td>Abolished free school milk for juniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1973</strong></td>
<td>Provisions for educational trusts and local authority awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1975</strong></td>
<td>Grants for further education students and increased funding for aided and special agreement schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1976</strong></td>
<td>Amended school leaving date in relation to summer term Requested LAs to plan for the reorganisation of comprehensive secondary education in line with abolishing selective education (Grammar schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1979</strong></td>
<td>Allowed LAs to retain existing selective schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1980</strong></td>
<td>Introduced parental preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1986 (no.2)</strong></td>
<td>Increased parental involvement in education as governors, and to hold annual parent meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Reform Act 1988</strong></td>
<td>Establishes national curriculum and testing regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Act 1980</strong></td>
<td>6-(1) Every local education authority shall make arrangements for enabling the parent of a child in the area of the authority to express a preference as to the school at which he wishes education to be provided for his child in the exercise of the authority's functions and to give reasons for his preference.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Education Act 1993                                                                 | 192 (8) In this section "suitable education", in relation to a child, means **efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude** and to any special educational needs he may have.  
198.—(1) If a parent on whom a school attendance order is served fails Offence: failure to comply with the requirements of the order, he is guilty of an offence, comply with unless he proves that he is causing the child to receive suitable education school attendance otherwise than at school. | 192.—(1) If it appears to a local education authority that a child of School attendance compulsory school age in their area is not receiving suitable education, orders either by regular attendance at school or otherwise, they shall serve a notice in writing on the parent requiring him to satisfy them within the period specified in the notice that the child is receiving such education. |
| Education Act 1994                                                            | **Established teacher training authority**                                                                 |                                                                 |
| Education Act 1996                                                            | **Established teacher training authority**                                                                 |                                                                 |
| **Consolidated all previous legislation.**                                    | 7. Duty of parents to secure education of children of compulsory school age  
The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.  
8 Compulsory school age  
(1) Subsections (2) and (3) apply to determine for the purposes of any enactment whether a person is of compulsory school age.  
[page 5]  
(2) A person begins to be of compulsory school age when he attains the age of five.  
9 Pupils to be educated in accordance with parents' wishes  
In exercising or performing all their respective powers and duties under the Education Acts, the Secretary of State, local education authorities and the funding authorities shall have regard to the general principle that | 13 General responsibility for education  
(1) A local education authority shall (so far as their powers enable them to do so) contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient primary education, secondary education and further education are available to meet the needs of the population of their area.  
437 School attendance orders  
(1) If it appears to a local education authority that a child of compulsory school age in their area is not receiving suitable education, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise, they shall serve a notice in writing on the parent requiring him to satisfy them within the period specified in the notice that the child is receiving such education. |
pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, so far as that is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

| Education Act 1997 | 52 (2) A person begins to be of compulsory school age—  
(a) when he attains the age of five, if he attains that age on a prescribed day, and  
(b) otherwise at the beginning of the prescribed day next following his attaining that age.” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 2002</td>
<td>Allows for school innovation, deregulate teacher employment provision, introduction of EYFSP,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act 2005</td>
<td>Changes to inspection regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 Education and Inspections Act</td>
<td>Refers to the functions of local authorities, duty to consider parental representations, parental consultation, parent councils, restriction on selection by ability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2006 School Admissions Code | Enable parent preferences to be met where possible, sets out admissions criteria, use of a common application form and ranking of preference.  
2.31 A catchment area does not prevent parents expressing a preference for the school if they do not live in the area.  
2.40 0 The law does not require a child to start school until the start of the term following the child’s fifth birthday. The date compulsory school age is reached is determined by dates set by the Secretary of State for the autumn, spring and summer terms. These are 31 August, 31 December and 31 March  
2.49 Where the admission authority for a primary school offers places in reception classes to parents before their children are of compulsory school age, they should offer |
the parents the option of deferring their child’s entry until later in the same school year. The effect is that the place is held for that child and is not available to be offered to another child. The parent would not however be able to defer entry beyond the beginning of the term after the child’s fifth birthday, nor beyond the academic year for which the original application was accepted.

This must be made clear in the admission arrangements for the school.

19 The home local authority’s form invites all parents resident in the area to name three or more preferred schools, in order of preference, by 24 October. On 1st March ‘Offers sent out to parents by local authorities, including offers to parents living in other local authorities’ (p.73).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2008 School Admissions Code</strong></td>
<td>Strengthened admissions process, duty of LAs to consult process with parents, improved information to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reception Class</strong></td>
<td>Defined by section 142 of the SSFA 1998. An entry class to primary schools for children who are aged 5 during the school year and for children who are younger than 5 who it is expedient to educate with them (p.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010 Academies Act</strong></td>
<td>Allowed for the expansion of academies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2011 Education Act</strong></td>
<td>increased schools' powers relating to pupil behaviour and exclusions, further diminished the role of local authorities, further expansion of academies etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2012 School Admissions Code</strong></td>
<td>Parents must be consulted, limiting infant class size to 30, appeals code and regulations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix Five - Research Fieldwork inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting Type</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Transcribed</th>
<th>NVivo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>David Morag</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>06/06/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>Maisie</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>13/06/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiner</td>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>Community Farm</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>18/07/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Independent</td>
<td>Frankie</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>24/07/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Orla</td>
<td>Pub Side Room</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>06/09/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Education</td>
<td>Olivia Ethan Hannah</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>12/10/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>David Morag</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>29/11/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Education</td>
<td>Olivia Ethan</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>04/12/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiner</td>
<td>Zara Louise</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>07/12/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary /</td>
<td>Maisie</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>17/12/18</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Orla</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>15/01/19</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Independent</td>
<td>Frankie</td>
<td>Parent’s home</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>21/01/19</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Pub Side Room</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>01/02/19</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>11/03/19</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiner</td>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>17/05/19</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>Permission not granted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority</td>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>Responded to interview questions via email</td>
<td>18/04/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>08/05/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>22/03/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Permission not granted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Independent</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Permission not granted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>Documentary Analysis</td>
<td>13/06/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Documentary Analysis</td>
<td>13/06/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiner</td>
<td>Documentary Analysis</td>
<td>13/06/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Independent</td>
<td>Documentary Analysis</td>
<td>13/06/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Education</td>
<td>Documentary Analysis</td>
<td>13/06/19</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Six - Range of Methods and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting Type</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Setting Interview</th>
<th>Photographs</th>
<th>Documentary Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary</td>
<td>Both parents and Foundation Lead</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicly available photographs reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Primary / Creativity</td>
<td>Mother and Foundation Lead</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicly available photographs reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Mother and Setting Manager</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicly available photographs reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiner</td>
<td>Mother, Sister-in-law and Early Years Lead</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicly available photographs reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Independent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>Permission not granted</td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicly available photographs reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Education</td>
<td>Both parents and eldest daughter</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publicly available photographs reviewed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Seven – Initial analysis of data

The initial findings from interviews with research participants summarises my analysis of data during the research process. They were sent to research participants in order to provide an opportunity for them to review how their voice could be used within my research and to comment, add, or change the data I held.

7.1 Summary of interviews with parents

Findings from research with parents into the influences on their choice of pre-compulsory education

March 2019

Introduction

This document summarises the initial findings from parent interviews carried out as part of a Doctorate in Education investigation into the influences on parental choice of pre-compulsory education.

Focusing on one rural community (a specific locality, which for ethical purposes is not my home) within South West England the majority of four year olds (UK Census Data, 2011) are seen to attend the local mainstream provision, by which I refer to the nearest primary school funded by the state. However, there are a number of parents within the community that have proactively chosen to take a different approach to their young children’s education. I am interested in investigating why parents have made this decision, how their own educational history and culture has influenced them, and how the different approaches to education accessed by the community satisfy the needs of these parents through the activity that takes place therein.

Open interviews have been carried out with six sets of parents representing different approaches to, and views of, education. This included accessing the local mainstream primary school, an interest in flexi schooling / creativity in the curriculum, Montessori education, Steiner education, a selective independent school, and home education following an ‘unschooling’ philosophy.

The parents interviewed included the father in two cases and a range of socio-economic backgrounds were represented.

Parent participants were recruited following a visit to the local parent and toddler group and distribution of flyers within that group, to a local nursery, and following a recommendation from other participants.

Second interviews were carried out with all parents at the end of the autumn term / beginning of the spring term after their child had been engaged in their chosen form of education for approximately one term. This was to explore how the chosen form of education has been going for the child and family, as well as to ask more structured questions arising from the analysis of the first interviews.
Before both interviews parents were supplied with the participant information sheet which set out the research ethics including their right to withdraw and the assurance of confidentiality.

An analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out, and patterns were identified across the dataset which I shall now go on to explore.

Broadly parents identified key areas of importance to them in their choice of education for their young child. For all participants this included rational, or the more measurable factors such as the Ofsted inspection outcome, distance to school and practicalities such as transport, childcare and cost. In addition, relational factors that considered the more subjective aspects of choice were particularly prevalent throughout with all parents identifying factors such as the happiness of their child, a sense of belonging, and friendships being important. The parent’s own history and experiences of education was also highlighted with parents either wanting the same experience for their child or a different ‘better’ experience.

In order to ensure confidentiality pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Rational Aspects of Choice

The concept of ‘rational’ when considering choice and decision making in this case is linked to objective, quantifiable aspects based on the information made available to parents such as cost, transport and Ofsted inspection outcome. In addition, the practical needs of parents in terms of childcare has been considered as a rational aspect of choice, again because it is quantifiable.

All of the parents interviewed cited cost as a factor they had considered when looking at the educational options available to them with statements including:

‘Cost would have been a consideration for sure’ (David)
‘We wouldn’t be able to afford any private schools’ (Maisie)
‘It is significantly cheaper’ (Frankie)
‘I hope the finance isn’t going to be too much of a factor’ (Orla)
‘We don’t tend to pay for anything at all’ (Olivia)
‘It’s definitely the money issue’ (Zara)

After considerations of cost the next most frequently cited consideration for choosing a specific school or approach to education were the practicalities of everyday life. This included getting to and from the school, access to transport, or being able to walk safely to the school, as well as a consideration of the time children would have to spend travelling, and the convenience for work or shopping. In addition, the need to pick children of different ages up at the same time and in the same place, or access to after school care was raised.

Contrary to these latter points the need for an accommodating attitude to school attendance was raised by one parent with a desire for a more flexible approach to school attendance. Only one parent did not specifically refer to logistics as a factor impacting on their educational choice but this may be because their child’s
well-being was more important to them then the practicalities of getting to and from school.

In summary 83% of the parents interviewed highlighted the practicalities of accessing school as a factor when making an educational choice for their young child. Statements included:

‘Obviously we need to pick them both up in the same place’ (Morag)
‘There was an after school facility if you needed to pick up late for some reason’ (Frankie)
‘They’re doing their homework on the bus because the bus would take an hour and a half to stop everywhere and get them back home’ (Maisie)
‘The thing of walking to school in a real thing for them, they really want their children to be able to walk to school’ (Orla)
‘I really wanted him to just go three or four days a week and that wasn’t possible’ (Zara)

In considering rational aspects of quality, interestingly only two parents referred to the Ofsted rating, a school's inspection report, or national rankings

‘It didn’t have quite the Ofsted rating, but it was still rated as good’ (David)
‘I had a look at both schools of their Ofsted and ‘oh yes they’re both fairly good’ (Maisie)
‘[We are] very lucky to have … because it is nationally ranked isn’t it’ (Frankie)

No specific reference was made by any of the parents interviewed to a school’s Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results or Standard Assessment Test (SAT) results as a factor which impacted on their choice. This is interesting when we consider the Department for Education’s focus on school performance as a criterion of choice (Allen, Burgess & McKenna, 2014) and the government’s school search tool focus on school performance in terms of not only the Ofsted rating but also the test results and staffing numbers (Gov.uk, 2018). A similar ‘rejection of league tables’ is also identified by James et al (2010) highlighting how choice is more complex than policy allows.

The next most frequently cited element of rational choice that parents referred to was the type of school. This included the positives and negatives of single sex education, how inclusive the school was, and the pull of the local school as part of the community in which they lived. Five of the six parents interviewed mentioned the type of school as important with statements such as:

‘Girls learn better on their own’ (Frankie)
‘One thing I would never ever do is send them to a single sex school, I think it is very important for girls and boys to mix really’ (Maisie)
‘I mean it would be nice if there was a really lovely local school that she could
go to and it was all great’ (Orla)
‘We want to stay with the normal school’ (Maisie)
‘Well they have to be more inclusive in their admissions thing’ (Zara)

Other elements of rational choice identified from amongst the six interviews included the geographical location of the school, the school size, and the school facilities.

‘We wouldn’t live on the top of a mountain, on a mountain top for an amazing school’ (David)
‘We wanted to be within [this area], we love [this area]’ (David)
‘There’s a little school just in [the town], well just outside [of the town] so let’s stick with here really’ (Maisie)
‘Because they were teaching reception, year one and year two in one classroom I think the differentiation in the classroom wasn’t perhaps as it ought to have been’ (Frankie)
‘You know it’s just not going to happen is it, it’s just too big’ (Orla)
‘I know there’s lots of good things about a new school ... like opening windows, and fresh air and all that sort of stuff! A brighter learning environment, but it didn’t seem as critical... But hey a new school’s great – it has got to be good hasn’t it? Don’t you think?’ (David)
‘I’m sure it will be nice when they’ve got the playground and stuff, will be really nice’ (Orla)

This initial analysis of the rational aspects of parental choice in pre-compulsory education highlights how individual choice is made based on the information available, within specific constraints, and linked to the family’s specific needs or goals. This is clearly highlighted by parents when distance and the availability of transport to school is discussed.

However, the social complexities of choice is not reflected within rational choice. Although parents made 137 references to rational aspects of choice within the six initial interviews carried out, there was more than double the number of references to the more relational aspects of choice as I shall consider below.

Relational Aspects of Choice
Whereas rational aspects of choice such as the Ofsted rating, cost and distance to school, are quantifiable and identifiable, relational considerations are harder to recognize. From this initial analysis of data it would appear that school choice is not simply about selecting a preferred school through the completion of the local authority’s school admissions form, but about the more relational considerations of choice involving social interaction, friendship and belonging.

It is precisely these concepts of friendships and belonging that were highlighted within the initial interviews with friendship, feelings and community cited by all participants.
The feeling of the school was frequently highlighted by parents as a factor when choosing an educational approach for their child. Statements included:

‘It’s got a good feeling about it. All of the kids are nice to each other, the teachers are good…It seemed friendly, you just get a feel about somewhere, I felt that I could fit … Just by looking at people. People watching…We were chasing happiness. We were all chasing happiness at the time’ (David)

‘There’s a very dynamic, energetic feel about the place … it just seemed very relaxed and free … the deciding factor was her happiness’ (Frankie)

‘I think the school or the institution providing it has to be a really happy, energising atmosphere which encourages the children to engage and learn’ (Frankie)

‘Just the ethos really… they always seemed fairly happy… we just want our kids to be happy really’ (Maisie)

‘I just want to give them the best opportunity to be happy with who they are and happy with what they want to do’ (Orla)

‘The true quality of a happy man is the freedom and then he put that in as self reliancey. And that self… you know that you could do anything. It’s very important’ (Hannah)

‘I just want him to feel safe and cared for, and that’s pretty much it. And to be having a nice time would be a bonus’ (Zara)

‘I don’t want them to be somewhere that I don’t feel good about and that I know that they’re not happy’ (Zara)

The importance of having friends was also highlighted,

‘I think they need to be socialising and stuff as well’ (Morag)

‘She’s got a happy life here now. She’s got lots of friends. She says hello to everybody. She gets invited to birthday parties, social things, she’s happy’ (David)

‘We loved the idea of her just walking to school, and being picked up and coming home, and having a friend home to play’ (Frankie)

‘They have local connections and mix with local children and things’ (Maisie)

‘Because [she] likes the whole social thing I don’t know whether having such a small group of people would suit her very much’ (Orla)

’[My daughter] loves playing with kids, she just enjoys being with other girls, boys, anyone who will be nice’ (Olivia)

‘Part of being at the school was really amazing actually. In that it, suddenly everybody knows your child, and you meet so many more people’ (Zara)

Equally the concept of the ‘wrong sort of friends’ was apparent
‘And it’s like certain types like that you just don’t want the kids mixing with…I do worry about them if they fall into a rough crowd …I just don’t want my children to fall into wrong types of people’ (Maisie)

Linked to the importance of having friends was the importance of belonging and feeling part of a community.

“So for us, we really wanted the local school to be the one that worked, um for our children … you know it’s just sort of more community building. And that was really important to us … That part of being at the school was really amazing actually. In that it, suddenly everybody knows your child, and you meet so many more people. And it really does strengthen that feeling of place I think, being part of the local school … I can see myself getting involved with as a parent I suppose, that sort of thing. That appeals to me. So it is also giving me an access into their education in a way which I would like to be involved in it, if that makes any sense… I’m sending my children to [this] school because I can feel safe in my choice. And to not feel persecuted in that choice. (Zara)

And equally, not being part of the community, or the community being unfriendly, was a factor that was raised when considering education for their young child.

‘There was no sense of community, there was nothing. Which was disappointing… Everybody’s heads down in the street, nobody was very inclusive, everybody stood in the playground in set groups. There was nobody there had any aspirations to do anything at all. And it showed. (David)

‘It [was] just the general people in the town. The parents were you know, shouting at each other, in the playground. The children were completely unruly (Morag)

‘Some of the social groups were already, sort of, quite set. So she found it very difficult to get in’ (Frankie)

‘I wish they’d gone to the local school in way because they would have kept, they might have stayed round, because they would have had friends and social stuff going on here’ (Maisie)

‘So what I felt at the local school, there’s lots of great things about it, was that there’s this cultural barrier between me and the school. I didn’t feel like I fitted in
there, and I felt like it was quite a closed door … I never felt, um, comfortable in that school…it felt like it was impenetrable… I’d like to feel more integrated’.

(Zara)

Another aspect of choice that has a social interaction element as highlighted by parents who has selected both mainstream and independent education includes religion.

‘I wanted her to do all the Harvest Festivals, and all those little things because I loved all that… I like that they go to the church and stuff as well’ (Morag)

‘So [our daughter] was used to the Church of England system, so it was another plus for us. I don’t think we would have not gone with it. But we were pleased to see that it was’ (David)

‘[The local school] had nice links with the church, they did all their Nativity plays in there and that was really lovely. They did harvest festival. They’re not a church school but they do bring it in, along with lots of other religions and beliefs (Frankie)

Another influence on choice which emerged from the data collected was the families own history and experiences of education.

‘We both had a normal state schooling, so as for deciding about other even private schooling or home education we just never sort of thought of it’ (David)

‘I like the Church of England thing …because I went to a Church of England School’ (Morag)

‘It is exactly the same layout as the secondary school I went to. Yes. In every way, it is exactly the same’. (David)

I did go to an all-girls school … we were both privately educated. So I guess we come from that, and weirdly [this school] is quite similar to the prep school I went to in the style of the building. (Frankie)

I know my husband went to a grammar school and I always found it interesting… he’s got different things he expects from having an education back then (Maisie)

‘I think the majority of people don’t think about it especially If you have been to a state school like my husband said “well it would never have crossed my mind to send them” … I went to a [specific philosophy] school, I enjoyed that …I was really interested in learning I really wanted to get on with it’ (Orla)

‘I've known people who have been home educated’ (Olivia)

Well I had a bad experience of school because I was dyslexic so I was put into remedial classes which was just crisis management all the time…. I was just in a room full of hooligans. It was like pure violence in that room…. I've virtually had zero education in those classrooms… So I feel that that system was really bad for me and I was very reticent about putting that onto [my daughter], because I knew how damaged I was by my experience of school. (Ethan)
‘I’ve got that experience as well with my brother. Just doing it in his own time. So trusting that as well’ (Olivia)

‘I went to alternative schools myself. I feel like I was really lucky to have the education I had. The fact that I loved school. And I feel like I owe it now to my children that they love school… You want something better for your children then you had don’t you… I think I feel more at ease in a more alternative school environment. (Zara)

Outlying factors

These first interviews with parents were kept open and unstructured simply starting the conversation by asking parents what type of education they had chosen for their child and what may have influenced this choice. At times the interviews felt like they were going off topic and I felt the need to draw the parent back to focus on their educational choice. However, I stopped myself from guiding the conversation too much and instead valued the flow of the conversation and the parent’s interest in the discussion. On reflection the winding nature of the conversations led not to unrelated topics as I had feared, but to insights into influences on educational choice that I had not expected. Such influences included health, the use of technology, specific educational needs and the curriculum.

Health

The relationship between child vaccinations and educational choice was discussed. Although this subject was not highlighted by all parents it was mentioned by half of the parents interviewed, representing three different educational approaches; mainstream, Steiner and Montessori education. Comments included:

‘What we’ve got concerns about is medical freedom within schools … If you are going to medicate don’t do it in a school… my kids health is the most important thing to me really. And I don’t want that being over-ruled… it is just something that I am very passionate about. And it does affect the education for them’ (Maisie)

‘I’m not against vaccinations … I wouldn’t want them to have all the stuff at school… I don’t know whether it would totally put me off the school. Hopefully you would be able to talk to them about it’ (Orla)

‘It was an issue when I felt like I was doing the wrong thing by not vaccinating my children… Yes it is a massive issue I think. Not just within the school but within the local community…The things people say about you not vaccinating your children is really full on’ (Zara)

Technology

As with the emergence of health as a factor when choosing education, the use of technology also appeared to be important for those parents who were choosing Steiner or Montessori approaches to education. This is interesting when
considered alongside the Rudolph Steiner and the Montessori educational philosophies which I will explore more fully within my thesis.

‘Every lesson they do on a computer screen and on Ipads which, I just don’t like the idea of that. It just doesn’t seem the right way to go for me. It is just one of those things I don’t think they need to do every lesson on a screen. It’s too much’. (Orla)

‘So they had the big interactive whiteboard which they used basically every lesson. And they had the tablets as well. And so when I was going to … um, when you go to the parents evening and stuff you get these print offs from the tablets, of what they had done. And for me I found that really shocking’. (Zara)

Specific Educational Needs

The use of the term ‘specific educational needs’ here is deliberate as opposed to the more governmental terminology of ‘special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)’. This is in a move to recognise that all children have needs, whether there is a ‘label’ given to specific needs or not.

The specific educational needs of children was an issue highlighted by some parents as a factor they considered when choosing an educational approach for their child, and was reflected across parents choosing a range of educational approaches including independent schooling, mainstream education and home education. In some cases it was because a child’s needs would not be appropriately supported, however a schools limiting attitude towards a child’s abilities was also highlighted as a potential concern. Comments included:

‘My feeling was that she’s not dyslexic, that the education wasn’t challenging her, or she wasn’t engaging with it’ (Frankie)

‘Because [my son] is high functioning autism … he’s quite challenging because of his literalism and his difficulty with interpersonal emotional so we’ve had to become quite responsive to that … I think if [he] had been at [the mainstream school] he would have been excluded very quickly (Olivia)

‘They think they’re stupid because they can’t do what is expected to do because it is not suitable for them’ (Hannah)

‘A lot of people have been expelled and they are just kids with educational needs … and they are not going to meet their SATs, and that school are happier to kick them out before they bring down the overall level of the school’ (Ethan)

Curriculum and assessment

Although little reference was made to a school’s EYFSP or SATs results as a reason for choosing a specific educational approach, the type of curriculum and teaching approach was raised as an important consideration by the majority of parents.
‘In our experience, children need to be stretched a little, you know, they’re sort of up and running a bit more. We realised that it was a mix of the social stuff as well as the education …. So it seemed to me to be very rounded. It’s got to be all round, it’s got to be everything really, it’s got to be pastoral as well as academic. (Frankie)

‘Children need their childhood. I don’t think education should be all about mainstream, maths, science all that kind of thing… You need lessons that aren’t sitting down at a desk working a maths or writing things down, or copy off the board, it’s nice to do something a bit more like creative’ (Maisie)

‘The curriculum it’s just so set to this age does this and this person does that and if you are not at that level at that stage then you are just sort of, you know, you just get left behind… I’d like [education] to be about learning, you know, the basics of maths English and science and all the rest of it but also about the person, about you becoming a person in the world. Being compassionate and being caring for your community and the wider world and being knowledgeable about the world…. And being a nice person which is something that I don’t think is necessarily factored in the State System… being who you are rather than who you are told you should be’ (Orla)

‘You’re pushing them through [the curriculum], going against the grain sort of thing, because of the curriculum you would have to be helping them with things that they are not interested in, things they don’t want to do, but they have to do it… It’s more to do with finding what they are interested in and then expanding everything out from that’ (Olivia)

‘There was a whole philosophy of education that we didn’t, I didn’t, know about … Un-educating … They become like mini PhD students where you just, they are off on their own doing their own focus and coming to you with really interesting things that they have found way beyond what I know… Kids are an incredible resource that is just so untapped. Their capacity is so much huger than education will tell you’ (Ethan)

‘I don’t want him to feel under any pressure to have to succeed in academic goals, or to be aware of any sort of targets particularly at all… I would say [this type of education] offers, developing the whole child. So not just looking at academic skills, but looking at a whole range of skills, but also the way in which they care for the children… When you don’t have a plan then um, magical things happen…. They have more freedom ,, not a sort of panic that people were going to do things wrong… Keeping childhood going for as long as possible… And what a gift to give to your children really’ (Zara)

Summary of initial findings

This process of interviewing parents representing a variety of pre-compulsory educational approaches has highlighted the complexity of choice. When parents were asked about the influences on their choice of pre compulsory education there was an initial tendency to focus on the rational aspects of choice such as cost, Ofsted rating, and distance to travel. It is only when the conversation develops that the more subconscious relational aspects of choice came to light such as the importance of friendships, a sense of belonging and the feeling that the setting invokes.
In addition to highlighting the complexities of choice this initial analysis of the interviews highlighted how variable parents’ knowledge was about the educational choices available, and the legislative requirements surrounding starting compulsory education. This variability led to second interviews being carried out with parents in order to cast light on how parent’s find out about the choices available to them.

Second Interviews

Second interviews were carried out with all parents after their child had been in their chosen form of education for the autumn term. These second interviews were semi-structured with an aim to find out how the experience of this first term had met with the parents expectations as well as to cast light on the information parents had accessed about school choice and educational requirements. Of particular interest was the parents’ knowledge of the age of compulsory education, their right to access school on a part time basis and the option for a deferred entry or to request a delayed entry to school.

At the end of the first term key points raised by parents linked to the relational aspects of their educational experience, in particular the happiness of their child and the environment they were experiencing. In addition the more rational aspects of choice were reiterated where schools had been inspected or where performance indicators had been revised.

Relational Experiences

The relational aspects of choice highlighted during the first interviews were reiterated during this second visit. This included friendships, a sense of belonging, feelings, relationships with teaching staff and other parents, and being part of the community both within the school and the wider geographical area.

‘Our two girls they have made really great friends … that they can progress along with and be part of the fabric of the community and knew everybody and that's a lovely thing …It's like the sun shines ... People genuinely are really friendly and all talk to each other and also hello’ (David)

‘I just don’t know what they do differently but what you experience when you walk in is that the energy of the place is positive… they engage with all the children, and they are very sweet with all the children as well. It’s nice and cosy … What is more important is that the girls are happy. Because if they are happy then they will learn’. (Frankie)

‘Yes it’s really good, he’s happy I don’t see any reason to do anything else’. (Maisie)

‘You know, if your child’s happy to go there then that’s all you want isn’t it? She loves it and she has made new friends which she absolutely loves so it’s worked well’ (Orla)

The Environment
The impact of the environment was highlighted by four out of the six parents, in respect of the impact the physical environment appeared to have on how the setting felt, whether that be positive or negative. Language used included being positive, cheerful, stifled, or like a prison. Interestingly the negative comments referred to parental observations of settings that they had not chosen for their child and not their own.

‘It’s actually really nice inside. It’s got nice light and it’s all fresh and new, so yes, it’s going to be nice for him. They all seem very positive there…It seemed quite natural, they learn through play through their interests … they’ve got a thing on the wall with all the months of the year, and everybody’s birthday, their name on it for their birthday, which seems quite nice’. (Maisie)

‘It’s a nice big clean bright space. Modern lots of light. It's good for the kids … Having said that sometimes I do feel that the learning environment in the school is a bit stifled and not so much of a democracy as I would like but then that is the world that we live in’. (David)

‘Their playground is like a concrete block with a massive fence around it. It’s horrible, it’s like a prison’. (Orla)

‘So you enter through a little play area which is outside but part of it is covered so if it is wet they can still play outside. So that’s lovely. And in this little play area they have got different activity tables so if they get there early they have got stuff to do immediately. And they change it so it is not the same all the time… Inside the classroom its nice and bright and cheerful, very much like any reception class you’ll see… the only think I don’t like is the whiteboard’. (Frankie)

**Inspection Influences**

Three of the educational approaches accessed by the parents interviewed had undergone some form of inspection process that had impacted on their experiences. Such inspections included Ofsted and outside professionals, but interestingly the outcome of these inspections appeared to have little direct impact on the parents participating in this research.

Where positive feedback was received this was noted by parents and seen as a verification of their choice of education. Where the inspection raised any criticisms, these were noted but the parent’s faith in their choice remained.

_The school had a good Ofsted outcome and it felt like the right place to be_.

(David)

‘You don’t want to be judged on something you are not actually aiming to achieve if you know what I mean… it’s not failing but failing in that system’. (Orla)

‘She was obviously conducting lots of battles. And there were problems with the Ofsted report and you know, she had a specific task to do in the eighteen months she was posted there’ (Frankie)
‘I think it’s different in different areas, because I know that in [other local authority] they have got a different one to [us. They] are quite strict and they are quite judgemental on people’ (Olivia)

‘Actually, I would say right now I am feeling quite excited about the school…I think now would actually be quite a silly time to walk away from it because it’s got to improve itself in lots of ways and I am quite excited about that now…I thought oh well its obviously just because they can’t measure all the wonderful intangible things about the school and put that in their report… those are actually things that I really value, and that’s why I wanted to send my children there’. (Zara)

Accessing Information about educational choice

The general response to questions about the information available to parents when making their educational choice was that information was limited and not freely given. Of note was the lack of information about parental rights when deciding on education for their four-year-old. All parents participating in this research said that their primary source of information was word-of-mouth.

‘I’ve just heard from other people talking to other parents at baby group and stuff … I’m just trying to work out how they do it because they haven’t really explained how it all works. You are not really given much, I don’t think you are given any information really’ (Maisie)

‘I am proactive and I will search and I am thinking about things but I didn’t know there was any other choice … It would have been nice to have been able to make an informed decision. Actually to have that information when we were deciding about schools. Because nobody tell you these things … we needed educating ourselves about what the options actually were’ (David)

‘It’s definitely word of mouth … I think we just heard that everyone was pretty happy. I am sure we would have received something … I tell you what [they weren’t] great at was giving us alternatives. So they didn’t say “these are the alternatives to the local primary” it was just word of mouth’. (Frankie)

‘Well you definitely rely on just word of mouth don’t you … I heard about it from our friend working there’. (Louise)

‘It would have been nice to know those things in case that had been something that would have worked for her better … I mean there might be other schools that would have been available to us that we didn’t know about. So I think that is really important to know, even if they are out of your catchment area, you know, what is out there’. (Zara)

‘How do you find out about it? It’s because you’re in the know …I’m sure these things are self-selecting in terms of whether you are looking, whether you are pushing for your kids to find things or not … There’s nothing to help you, that is what I think is the downside of that’ (Ethan)

All parents were aware that compulsory education started at five years of age but still felt under pressure to start formal education at four.
‘This is my daughter’s education and her life. It becomes very serious. It’s that idea of being behind, them not being able to achieve what they want to achieve … I think I spent last summer worrying whether we had made the right decision’ (Orla)

Already at two there’s quite a lot of pressure that they are going to go through the system and if you don’t keep them at the right level at the right time that they are going to be behind or they are going to not make friends or they are going to be out of the loop. I know it’s for their statistics and they’ve got a lot of pressure but it does just seem a bit of a shame at step one feeling like … not feeling like you’re making wrong choices but feeling like you have to be making the right choice all the time’. (Orla)

‘There was a bit of pressure to keep her in from the school’. (Olivia)

‘Her friends are all going on though, she would want to go with all her friends’ (David)

With regards to part-time education, deferring or delaying entry only one parent was fully aware of their rights. All participants described the difficulty in asserting their rights highlighting the lack of support from the school as the main deterrent.

‘I wouldn’t have known that at all. That that was an option’ (David)

‘She made it very very difficult. Essentially she said that she wouldn’t support it … I think if either of the schools in question had supported … because we were asking those questions, but they were saying very much [that] she falls into this academic year group so therefore she has to start school’. (Frankie)

‘It goes around a sort of hear-say between parents rather than … it would be really nice as a parent to have like ‘these are all your options’ and to be with that first letter that comes through saying these are all plausible things that you could do’ (Zara)

Summary of findings
Generally parents were happy with their educational choice after one term with a particular emphasis on the happiness of their child. Even where the school had been inspected and concerns raised the parents interviewed found ways to ratify their choice.

A principal finding in the second stage interviews was the reliance on word-of-mouth when choosing a form of education. Only one parent mentioned using the internet as an initial source of information about schools in the area and that was because they were relocating and had no personal contacts. All participants emphasised the lack of information available to them about the school choice process, the educational choices available to them, and their parental rights when educating their four-year-old child.

A significant recommendation at this stage in the research project is for information to be made more freely available to parents in an accessible format.
Next Steps

Following this initial analysis of the first and second interviews with parents the next steps in this research project includes an approach to each of the different settings concerned to ask why the settings think parents choose to send their children to them at four years of age. This third stage in the research process has been designed in order to examine whether the settings view of choice mirrors that of the parents, or if it differs. The identification of the parents interviewed is kept confidential throughout and the settings are not told that parents sending their children there have been interviewed.

Preliminary findings from setting interviews to date have highlighted a focus by the settings on their environment, teaching, and resources as opposed to the focus on the relational aspects of choice highlighted by parents. This is interesting when considered in light of the current marketized system of school choice promoted by the current government. In addition, it raises a question over a setting’s understanding of a pupil and parent needs.

The process of writing up my research is expected to take place over 2019 and into 2020 and a short summary of findings will be made available to research participants on completion. In the meantime if there is anything you would like to discuss regarding my research please contact me by emailing victoria.bamsey@plymouth.ac.uk.

If there is anything further you would like to discuss my Director of Studies is Jan Georgeson who can be contacted by emailing janet.georgeson@plymouth.ac.uk.

Reference List


Findings from research with educational providers into the influences on parental choice of pre-compulsory education

October 2019

Introduction

This document summarises the findings from interviews with the local authority and with educational providers, from setting photographs, and from a documentary analysis as part of a Doctorate in Education investigation into the influences on parental choice of pre-compulsory education.

Focusing on one rural community (a specific locality, which for ethical purposes is not my home) within South West England, the majority of four year olds (UK Census Data, 2011) are seen to attend the local mainstream provision, by which I refer to the nearest primary school funded by the state. However, there are a number of parents within the community that have proactively chosen to take a different approach to their young children’s education. I am interested in investigating why parents have made this decision, how their own educational history and culture has influenced them, and how the different approaches to education accessed by the community reflect the perceptions and needs of these parents through the activity that takes place therein.

Open interviews have been carried out with six sets of parents each interested in different approaches to, and views of, education. This included accessing the local mainstream primary school, an interest in flexi schooling / creativity in the curriculum, Montessori education, Steiner education, a selective independent school, and home education following an ‘unschooling’ philosophy.

Where possible the educational providers took part in an interview, and this was followed with setting photographs and a documentary analysis investigating how the providers viewed parental choice and the ways in which their provision might reflect the ideas of the parents. In all cases settings emphasised the importance of parents visiting the school rather than relying on the information available online. The documentary analysis included information that is available online to prospective parents about the educational providers. This included the provider’s website and social media threads, their prospectus, any inspection reports, and the website of any over-arching body.

Before all interviews participants were supplied with the participant information sheet which set out the research ethics including their right to withdraw and the assurance of confidentiality. In order to ensure confidentiality for both individuals and settings pseudonyms have been used throughout. Where educational types are referenced this is with the recognition that there are a number of providers of each type of education within the South West of England thus giving confidence to continued anonymity.

An analysis of the data collected was carried out, and patterns were identified across the dataset which I shall now go on to explore.

Broadly parents identified key areas of importance to them in their choice of education for their young child. For all parent participants this included rational,
or the more measurable factors, such as the inspection outcome, distance to school and practicalities such as transport, childcare and cost. In addition, relational factors that considered the more subjective aspects of choice were particularly prevalent throughout with all parents identifying factors such as the happiness of their child, a sense of belonging, and friendships being important. The parent’s own history and experiences of education was also highlighted with parents either wanting the same experience for their child that they had enjoyed, or a different ‘better’ experience.

The Educational Providers that took part in interviews for this study included the mainstream school, Montessori and Steiner education. They identified key factors that they felt were important to parents when choosing education for their child. These included the environment and curriculum but did also include rational and relational aspects of choice. An interview with the local authority emphasised the importance of the more rational aspects of choice, but also the role of siblings, childcare and the provision to support specific needs as highlighted further in this report.

Environment

The environment was seen as important by all educational providers with specific reference made to the school building, resources, outdoor areas, class size, staffing and the use of technology. This was further emphasised in the photographs taken by some settings with a focus on the resources and the spaces within the school.

School Building

Both the mainstream provider and the Montessori settings mentioned the potential impact of the setting building on parental choice. Of note was how these providers viewed their building as having both a positive and a negative impact on recruitment with the Montessori setting emphasising how the smallness of the building gave it a homely feel with easy access to everything whilst at the same time this very smallness may put off some parents who are looking for a larger setting. Interestingly no photographs were taken of either of the settings’ buildings as a whole from the outside, although I recognise that this may be because the parents would already be in the setting for the visit.

‘I think some of it is to do with the physical lay-out of the school. They quite like it because … it [has] a homely feel. People say that they find it has a very child led environment, that it’s calm, and it is small but everything is level so they can go outside easily, it has got a nice little enclosed garden’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘I think it’s actually our environment that’s maybe against us because it’s quite small’. (Sam, Montessori)

Equally, the mainstream school had just moved to a new school building which had evoked some strong feelings within the community. Comments indicated that there was a certain attachment to the old building and an uncertainty about what the new building would be like as a school.
‘I know a lot of people avoided it because it was a new school. Because there was a big group of people that hated the thought of a new school and didn’t want the old one to go. I think the new school coming affected it because people weren’t sure and they didn’t want to commit until they knew’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘It was a beautiful old building that everybody loved … a lot of these people that were saying this had gone through the school and just didn’t want it [to go]’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘The School building and facilities also have an impact on prospective parents’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Resources

The resources were emphasised by all educational providers as an important aspect of their provision that they would show to parents. This ranged from the different rooms in the setting to the outdoors, the activities provided and the accessibility of resources for children.

In the mainstream setting this included the toilets, soft play, classrooms and the interactive screen.

‘Toilets, we always point them out. The one thing that all parents [say] is “oh they’re so cute”! They can press the taps themselves, they can dry their hands themselves, they can lock the doors but can’t get locked in because we can go in and undo them. Everything is just made for their size’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘Everything else really is just about equipment. The stuff that we’ve got. We’ve got the indoor soft play which not everyone has … and they love that so that’s one thing that we always point out to parents’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘We wouldn’t go into the classrooms necessarily but we would walk past and say “there’s the year one”. Directly opposite us is the sensory room, and then upstairs is the library which is massive and lovely, and then there is … there’s two spare classrooms up there at the moment so parents see that there is space for children to go to, quiet spaces. There is a separate music room, there’s a thrive room, and there’s an after-school club and breakfast club room all purpose-built rooms’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘We do IT with that screen, we do use it. But I don’t ever want it to become a massive part of their curriculum. Some parents hate it, some parents see that and think oh you are staring at a screen all day. That’s not true’. (Tara, Mainstream school)
For the Montessori setting the types of activities on offer appeared to be of significant importance. This may be to do with the uniqueness of the Montessori approach and how activities are designed for specific areas of learning and development.

As well as giving them the general tour of the environment and showing them that we have several different rooms that the children can use for different activities and we do go outside and see the different areas as well. (Sam, Montessori)

‘So I do point out the different areas of learning and development and I talk about the Montessori benefits behind certain activities, so I normally try and point out specific activities within the environment to show them how they are unique’ (Sam, Montessori)

The focus of the Steiner provision was on their use of natural or ‘unformed’ materials and although the Steiner setting did not send any photographs this is evident within their online presence on the school’s website as shown in the images below.

‘I saw a fantastic game which they’d made themselves. You know inventing games for catching and different things like that based on ‘Mahjong’, one of them was, which was brilliant. It was so clever. Very child accessible, with beads and things they’d made themselves. So yes, they are having to be more inventive, and it’s been tricky’. (Kirsten, Steiner)
‘They do only use natural materials, and unformed, and toys that really can be anything the child wants it to be if at all possible’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

(Steiner Academy, 2019)

The family that are home educating following an unschooling philosophy (an approach to learning and teaching that does not resemble school) also emphasised the importance of facilitating the children’s interests and making available resources such as books and the internet for the children to discover for themselves. They took some photographs of the things that were important to them as part of their unschooling philosophy including creativity, and this is further reflected in online representations of unschooling.

(Olivia - Unschooling, 2019)

(EHE [Local Area], 2019)

The independent school did not take part in the provider’s interview process but an analysis of the publically available materials online revealed a focus on the curriculum and the children rather than the school environment or resources.

Décor
The Montessori setting raised the importance of the décor in the setting with an emphasis on having photos on the walls and plants or flowers in vases.
‘We have flowers in vases… at the moment we have a little pot of cyclamen that is flowering’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘Our Montessori has got … some lovely pictures on the walls, some lovely Egyptian hieroglyphics and pieces of art work in the corridor, there are little sculptures around. I haven’t seen that before in the places that I have been’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘When you go into … you do get that lovely personal feeling of ‘somebody has actually cared for this place and tried to create a beautiful space for the children to go in to’ (Sam, Montessori)

Access to the Outdoors

All educational approaches emphasised how being able to access the outdoors was an important feature of their provision and this was also reflected in both the photographs sent to me and the publically available images on the settings websites.

‘Some parents have probably chosen here is because of our outside space … when parents used to come to visit they would say “I want to come here because of your great outdoor space”’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I know a lot of people around in this community want their children to have outdoor learning basically, and that’s what we are going to go back to offering them. So that maybe a reason why they choose here’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

[One parent stated that] she choose here because it was a big decision for her. She chose here I believe because it had outdoor space’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

(Tara - Mainstream School, 2019)

The Montessori setting also highlighted their outdoors space as well as the presence of rabbits in their area

‘Natural … understanding about the natural world. I think that is quite a big concern of parents in this part of [the country]. You know, that’s often why
parents live here themselves because they love the outdoors, because they want their children to grow up in natural surroundings and have that appreciation of nature and the environment. So I think educating the children as well in nursery about environmental issues on a very basic level to their understanding, and just that appreciation of being able to play outside and using natural resources and the outside environment.’ (Sam, Montessori)

As well as giving them the general tour of the environment and showing them that we have several different rooms that the children can use for different activities and we do go outside and see the different areas as well. They are normally quite pleased about the rabbits! (Sam, Montessori)

(Sam - Montessori, 2019)

The Steiner setting emphasised the importance of the outdoors as part of their philosophy of learning.

“They’re outdoors a lot and the outdoor classroom is part of the curriculum really … And the risk taking, the strengthening, the physical, it’s very important, building resilience’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘Yes, they like the idea of going outdoors a lot (Kirsten, Steiner)

(The Independent School 2019).

The Independent school emphasised outdoor learning as part of their curriculum with a Forest School on site and access into an outdoors area from the classrooms.

‘We hold regular outdoor learning sessions, enabling our pupils to understand and embrace nature and the outdoors in a world that is increasingly consumed by digital technology’ (The [Independent] School 2019).
The department is home to beautiful bright and airy classrooms leading directly out to a secure and canopied play area’ (The [Independent] School 2019).

Class size

Class size was a recurring theme emerging from interviews with settings and the documentary analysis with a desire for small class sizes. The mainstream setting and local authority recognised that the possibility of large classes in the school may lead parents to choose alternative settings, whilst the Montessori and Steiner settings emphasised how their small class sizes and high adult to child ratio was something that was important for parents.

‘They (Montessori nursery parents) seem to then want to go to a smaller school. ‘It had a high ratio of staff to children’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I think one of the things I actually [like is the] class size and teacher to child ratios … It’s small. Parents like that. The fact [is] that it’s great for young children because it is not overwhelmingly big’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘They would prefer their young child to have a higher teacher ratio then they would possibly get in a school situation. Also that we as a setting have fewer children and that is very specific to [us], because obviously there are [settings] that are much bigger, but we take up to a maximum of twenty. So already that is going to be quite a bit smaller perhaps than your average reception class’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘They’re imagining the Steiner curriculum as it is, slow, smaller classes which is what they would have got in the independent schools … they won’t have class sizes bigger than eighteen, so to have the right amount of children to be able to progress’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘We offer … very small groups, meaning that each pupil receives the individual attention that is right for them’ (The [Independent] School, 2017, p.7)

‘Class sizes are always of concern, 30 is the limit but there is no qualifying measure applied to schools who do not comply. We offer up to 32 under Fair Access arrangements in some schools (usually where there are no alternative places available within reasonable distance)’. (Louise, Local Authority)

‘Some parents prefer straight teaching and mixed age classes are not desirable. In small schools this of course is unavoidable but most will endeavour to ensure reception aged children are taught in discrete groups if resources allow’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Staff

The staff were seen by the mainstream and Steiner setting leaders as being influential in parents’ decisions to send their child to a particular setting, and parents would be aware of the staff through their previous experiences perhaps themselves or from older siblings, but also through reputation, and the qualifications that staff held.
'I think also that the teaching team throughout the school is good … I think that the reputation of the teachers has helped and I think it's made people decide to stay … [one parent recently said that] the staff were all a big influence on their children and why they are here' (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘The Independent [Steiner] schools seem to have a lot of well qualified Steiner practitioners. They've all got a minimum level five which is what we expect them to have to go into a Steiner school … They just say it's a vocation, done for love not for money’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

Curriculum
The setting’s curriculum was also seen as important with references to this made in terms of the setting’s philosophy of practice, routine, and their approach to learning and assessment.

*Educational Philosophy*

In this context I view an educational philosophy as a specific vision of education, an interpretation of what education is, its goals and practices. In effect all providers of education follow a philosophy but this may not always be explicit.

The setting leaders that were following more explicit educational philosophies such as those developed from Rudolf Steiner or Maria Montessori’s ideas, referred to their philosophy as an important aspect of their provision and something that they valued in a number of ways. As a method of working with children and families, as something to be proud of as an identity or mark of quality, and as a way of differentiating their setting from others within the education marketplace.

On the other hand some settings also highlighted how parents may wish to avoid specific educational philosophies because of the connotations this may bring, or that parents were not always aware of their educational philosophy but choose the setting despite this, and that some parents are drawn to different educational philosophies.

I was also interested to note that setting leaders did not bring up different approaches to home education as an option parents had when choosing pre-compulsory education for their child, despite there being a home education group located within the local community.

‘They do seem to be a different kind of parent that goes to [an alternative] school rather than a mainstream preschool … They are looking for something slightly different to mainstream which may influence why they don’t come here … and they do go into different places’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I am not sure how much parents are really aware of the accreditation … nurseries can choose to be accredited and that accreditation will be like a quality stamp for parents to ascertain how much this nursery is a Montessori nursery even if it has it in the title’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘If we weren’t Montessori then we would have to have something else to differentiate us from the school settings’ (Sam, Montessori)
‘I think some people might say “oh it’s Montessori I’m definitely not going there” … the name Montessori has got associations with them that they just don’t want to investigate. Well because they have perceptions about … I know that there are lots of people here that haven’t come and looked probably because of the name Montessori’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘{Parents that choose Steiner are] usually disaffected by mainstream education, or by a previous school that they had sent their child to. Often choosing Steiner not because of the philosophy but because of the individual attention they think their child might be getting which is very different’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘Because they like the idea of Steiner education, what they know about it, and they are imagining even in academies, it’s interesting … they’re imagining the Steiner curriculum as it is, slow, smaller classes … and also a holistic approach to the education so they’re really, you know, children should find a way of being educated no matter what their particular skills are. It’s just fully holistic’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

Syllabus

The syllabus was mentioned by all setting leaders interviewed as an aspect of their provision which may have an influence on parental choice. However it was also highlighted by some that parents may not know there was an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework or what that meant in terms of their child’s educational experiences. It may also be that a certain aspect of the syllabus appeals to parents such as creativity or outdoor education rather than a holistic, purposeful, systematic and deliberate plan of instruction.

‘I don’t think parents know too much about the early years curriculum’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘We do say that we have our own curriculum because we have regular meetings with parents … and that we use the early years guidance, and it’s only guidance. That there are some things that we do, some things we do our own version of’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I might mention it in passing so I might say that the Montessori Areas of Learning meet all of the requirements of the EYFS. But I would talk about it more from a Montessori point of view’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘I think it’s this idea of them not wanting their children … to lose their creativity, their curiosity and love of learning’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘They don’t want formal teaching too early, they want them to be able to develop all-round skills, particularly social. They want them to be involved in play’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘There is something about the warmth, the cooking food, the nice smells around, the not too much equipment or things on the walls. You know, it is calm on the outside. And the risk taking, the strengthening, the physical, it’s very important, building resilience’. (Kirsten, Steiner)
Creativity

Creativity was one aspect of learning highlighted in particular by the Montessori setting as important to parents. The Independent School also promoted creativity as an opportunity for children and this was made clear within their parent prospectus as well as their emphasis on drama and music within their website.

‘I have also gathered that people think we do quite a lot of creative activities and have said that they quite like the creative side of it’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘So I don’t know whether it is to do with the Montessori materials themselves. That they are seen as being quite creative … the sensorial equipment which is, you know, it is quite aesthetically pleasing … the emphasis on natural materials – wood, and quite a simple design of materials. Maybe that’s why people think it is quite creative because the children are able to physically manipulate the materials and do things with them … So I don’t know whether they look at that or they look at the aspects such as the freedom to be able to paint or manipulate clay’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘I think we do try to do activities where the children will be using materials to create things themselves rather than just providing templates to colour in or to do sticking or whatever’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘I think it’s this idea of them not wanting their children to be … to lose their creativity, their curiosity and love of learning’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘You will see this in our curriculum, which includes time for creativity and expression … Everyone enjoys the fun of dressing up, performing, making and decorating, taking part in competitions and sponsored events’ (The [Independent] School, 2017, p.9)

Individual Learning

The wish for more focused individualised learning was emphasised as particularly important to parents of children attending Steiner or Montessori settings, but this was not mentioned by the mainstream setting. However the local authority did raise the importance of provision for children’s specific needs as either a positive or negative influence on choice with concern over the availability of support for their own child or the number of children with specific needs in the class.

‘I think it is also about children perhaps being able to develop at their own rate and that may be more to do with the Montessori environment. It is seen that we have got facility for children to learn to read, to learn mathematics, however they are not going to be necessarily pushed to do it to anybody else’s timescale. It’s very much following their own child’s interests so that’s another factor’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘The children can freely choose as well but that they would have a key person that would guide them to certain activities that she felt may be suitable for them, that they hadn’t tried before. So yes, that would be incorporated’. (Sam, Montessori)
Sometimes parents are worried and frightened or have had experienced their children getting turned off by certain aspects of schooling because its often that schools have to teach to the middle or to the whole group or a certain expectation of what that age-group of child should be doing. Rather than following the child’s interests and what interests them and igniting that spark of curiosity within the child and developing that. (Sam, Montessori)

‘Usually disaffected by mainstream education, or by a previous school that they had sent their child to. Often choosing Steiner not because of the philosophy but because of the individual attention they think their child might be getting which is very different’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘Yes independent thinkers but also they had a different kind of attitude to learning, they were still stimulated by learning, they were really excited by it, and they were very socially aware. And that makes such a big difference in a classroom where you have the confidence to be out there a little bit more’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘Quality of SEN provision can be a factor for some. The level of SEN children on roll can be a factor against admission for some parents too’. (Louise, Local Authority)

Assessment

Interestingly the assessment of children was not raised as a reason why a parent may choose, or not choose, a particular educational approach. Perhaps this is due to the focus of this research on four-year olds. However concerns of assessment was raised as an issue for the settings either because they don’t agree with them or due to the difficulties in assessing children across different curriculums. Both the Steiner and Montessori settings raised the issue of compatibility between their own curriculums and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. Whilst the Montessori approach to education have been able to link their own curriculum to the EYFS there remain incompatibilities with the Steiner approach with particular reference to literacy and mathematics.

‘I was never a fan of the baseline assessments, I disagree with it completely and the fact that they are trying to bring it back in September makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I just think it is completely unnecessary’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘Because of all the government initiatives like looking at children’s tracking and making sure that groups of children are not being left behind, and the focus on that, we have had to update our record keeping to enable us to find out all that information. So we have specifically looked for something that would help us have everything that we need to do in one system and that way is computer generated software programme that would meet all those different requirements without us having to do loads more paperwork’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘Although they can follow the Steiner curriculum, they are still being inspected against the Framework. OK, the Ofsted Maintained and Academy Framework, which is State School. And until that changes, if it is going to change, and there is acceptance that they can follow their own curriculum, and that they will be
inspected against that, they are going to have to make some compromises’.
(Kirsten, Steiner)

Rational Aspects of Choice

Broadly parents and settings identified key areas of importance to them when considering educational choice. For all participants this included rational, or the more measurable factors such as the Ofsted inspection outcome, distance to school and practicalities such as transport, childcare and cost.

The concept of ‘rational’ when considering choice and decision making in this case is linked to objective, measurable aspects based on the information made available to parents such as cost, transport and Ofsted inspection outcome. In addition, the practical needs of parents in terms of childcare has been considered as a rational aspect of choice, again because of its measurability.

The rational factors highlighted by settings within this research project as an influence on parental choice included hours of attendance, funding, the Ofsted rating and the schools that the setting would feed into.

Hours of attendance

The hours that a setting was open for was something cited by the settings as important to parents needing childcare

‘The hours you know, if they’ve got older siblings at the school it’s just easier to drop them both off in the same place and pick them up from one place’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘It is maybe that we offer longer hours maybe for some parents as well. As soon as they get to three years old they can go to the breakfast club and the after school club. So we have that option as well which extends the day. Some parents completely choose it for that reason’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I know that when parents have come here to look around and they’ve said “oh we hear you’ve got breakfast club and after school club” and I say “yes, so there is a potential you can leave your reception-age child, and slightly younger, you could leave them from eight til six”. And for some parents that is all they need to know, and that’s why they come here’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘Parents are having to go to work now, they need education or some sort of childcare for their children and they are just putting them into schools because they can’t do anything else’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘It should be said that education is free child care. Working parents today have very high child care bills, although many seek grandparent/family support others have to fund full time care and it is a considerable relief when those bills change to wraparound care only and not full time. This is despite the support offered by the Government which only covers 15 hours for working parents. Full time working parents, need full time childcare provision’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Interestingly there was also a recognition from some settings that there were parents who choose a setting which offered flexibility in terms of attendance
because they did not want their child to start school full-time from four years of age.

‘So we have a group of some parents who know this very well and [are] very ‘I know my rights’ … very clearly. We have this conversation at the beginning of the academic year … “I want my child to only come three or four days a week”. Ok so, we know we have to say “that’s your right, you can do that, not a problem”. I do always say to them “I think you’ll find the further into the term we get your child will probably say to you can I go to school five days a week”. So more often than not by this time of the year … unless the child was five within the academic year, they will be here five days a week’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘The children that start here in our preschool at two, as soon as they get to four and reception age they are in five days a week, that’s generally how it goes’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘Quite often the parents that go to Montessori want their children to start fewer days and the children that start with us at two years old as soon as they are reception-age they are in five days a week’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I think sometimes it’s to do with school’s inflexibility around the hours of attendance. So that can be their choice when they stay at nursery, they can still choose how much time they come, whereas if they feel pressurised into attending five days a week’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘Most parents believe their children are ready for more structured education at 4 years old’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Funding

Funding was an influence on parental choice raised by some settings in terms of when the early years funding stops, the cost of the chosen education at age four, and the future costs of their continuing education.

‘I think it is partly to do with the funding. You know, the funding stops when they turn five anyway, the term after they turn five, so I think a lot of parents think “well they are going to go to that primary school anyway so I want them to get ready and settle in and be happy and know the majority of their peer group who are going to go through school with them”.’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘I was very excited about the opportunity that [the academy] gave people to be accessing Steiner education because a lot of people can’t afford to send their children to an independent school. Children are all individuals and … the mainstream schooling system doesn’t work for every child’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘There are a few parents, I would say probably a third, who would have moved to the academies from Independent Steiner schools so they can access free education for their children’ (Kirsten, Steiner)
Inspection Reports

Inspection reports, such as Ofsted or the Independent School Inspectorate, on parental choice was not generally seen as particularly influential by settings, although there was the recognition that for some parents it was important. However the reports did have an effect on the settings themselves in terms of their practice.

‘We have had a ‘Good’ Ofsted report … and ‘Good’ is good enough for us you know. ‘Outstanding’ is hard to maintain. I know some people read them, go through them with a magnifying glass and pick out all the little ‘goods’ and the ‘bads’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

I don’t think [the Ofsted outcome] really plays a huge part. Because when we didn’t do so well a few years back we were at our busiest … I think parents really take it with a pinch of salt in our area. I mean there might be some parents it is important to, but I think many that would choose an alternative setting for their older child, that’s not a concern for them. (Sam, Montessori)

In the independent schools because we now have agreement from the DfE, we’ve got it formally in writing that we can apply our own curriculum and actually in the new Independent Inspection Framework, it says quite clearly there that you can follow your own curriculum so that’s not a particular issue. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘The [Independent] School is riding the crest of a wave and the ISI report findings are testament to everything that we are so successfully achieving in the classroom, on the sporting field and in all areas of extra-curricular activity’ (The [Independent] School, 2019)

Relational Aspects of Choice

Whereas rational aspects of choice such as the Ofsted rating, funding and convenience, are quantifiable and identifiable, they are also relational in that it is the parents and settings interpretation of the inspection report, childcare and funding that is important. These relational considerations are harder to identify and articulate. From this analysis of data it would appear that the different educational approaches recognise the importance of the more relational considerations of choice involving friendship, happiness and confidence or well-being.

Friendship

The importance of friendships was highlighted both on transition to the setting, in the setting after they had started, and outside the setting within the community.

‘[Parents and children] need to get to know the school, they need to get to know their classmates, they need to get to know the routines’ (Tara, Mainstream school)
'They might know more friends in a group. Over the years there have been various parents that have wanted to stay [at Montessori] but because the majority went to the school at age four they just decided to go with the majority. So there are parents who felt that that peer group was actually in the end more important than the other aspects so they’ve chosen to go with the peer group’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘Delaying admission until a year later means they are separated from their peers with whom they may have formed strong connections over their early years education’ (Louise, Local Authority)

‘In [our local authority] we offer foundation learning so the transition from nursery to reception is very smooth for most children. They attend rising-5 sessions during their final term in nursery, meet teachers and support staff and parents are invited in to see the classrooms, mealtime arrangements, even sample dinners with their children, so it is a hugely positive experience’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Happiness and well-being

Although only stated by two setting leaders, happiness, or equally their unhappiness, was highlighted as an important factor in parental choice of educational approach for their young children. This could also be linked to a child’s confidence and well-being with the size of setting and class, the adult to child ratio, and a need for the child to see themselves as more confident and capable as they get older.

‘They can see that the children are happy and engaged and having a nice time, because I think obviously the parents need to check that the children are actually OK as well as viewing the building’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘I think parents are seeing the stress their children are under. And we are getting children coming to us endlessly at five, having started in reception and just find it too much’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘So it can be that they are looking at the age range being more various and they quite like the fact that their child will be one of the older in the group and so will gain more confidence by seeing themselves as slightly more capable than the younger children. So it is very much a confidence thing. I think that is a big factor in parents’ decision making. I think that they feel that it would give their children more confidence if they stay because they won’t then be the little ones in the big fish tank … they’re the big ones’. (Sam, Montessori)

Community

Interestingly only the mainstream setting and the local authority highlighted community as a factor for parental choice making links between the locality and attendance at the ‘local’ school.
‘It’s a nice village I think. It’s a nice community and I think that’s why people may … it’s a big community and like I say I think a lot of children just naturally come here because it is their local school’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘Their family has grown up in the village and they just naturally would have come here, and they have never thought about going anywhere else. They’d come to the preschool here and that’s why they ended up here. And I think that’s probably, maybe 75% of the school have done that. They just live in the area’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘They were local. They knew what the local community was. Knew the culture of it. And [this community] is a really, it’s a melting pot of people … in terms of people’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘Location is a strong factor particularly if a child is attending the designated pre-school setting already’ (Louise, Local Authority)

‘The lack of transport provision from the local authority to any school other than the designated is also a reason for consideration, particularly in rural areas’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Religion

The mainstream school participating in this research is a Church of England (CofE) school and this was raised by the mainstream school setting leader as having the potential to either positively or negatively influence parental choice

‘I can’t be sure, how many parents choose this because it is a CofE school, because there is no obligation to go to church every Sunday. Whereas I know that some inner-city schools, particularly in London, if you don’t go to church then you wouldn’t get into the school, a CofE school. That doesn’t work here because if I think we did that we’d probably close down, because you wouldn’t get a good catchment. You wouldn’t get a good intake purely because not enough people go to church. So, we as a school work on the ethos, the Christian ethos rather than everything we do being based around the church basically’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

Siblings

Another interesting aspect on choice raised by settings was the role siblings may have to play. This was considered in terms of parental convenience and giving younger children confidence.

‘As a [Foundation Stage Unit] FSU we have had a really good reputation with children coming in at an early age and it not ever really being a problem with them settling, because their siblings have been here possibly and they’ve know the setting very well’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘For a particular child that we have got staying on this year it is to do with siblings. So a younger sibling who the child is very close to is just starting at Montessori and I think the parent felt that it would be really nice for them to have that time together so increase both of the children’s confidence. The little
one by having his older sibling at nursery, and the big one by being able to help him and feeling like she can show him the ropes. So that is another factor.

(Sam, Montessori)

‘So that definitely, and the hours you know, if they’ve got older siblings at the school it’s just easier to drop them both off in the same place and pick them up from one place’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘Siblings [effect choice] obviously if one attends already’ (Louise, Local Authority)

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement was highlighted by the Steiner setting as a reason for children starting in the setting at a young age. This was in terms of settling the child into the setting but also in terms of supporting the parent in getting involved in the setting and becoming part of the setting community.

The parents are part of that embedded culture. (Kirsten, Steiner)

I think a lot of the parents find it easier to meet other parents … when the children are very young. They really get more contact with other families and feel supported in the education their children are going to go on into. So I think parents like to be around a Steiner setting quite early. So there’s a lot going on there that supports the parents, that supports the family, and that support gets the educational approach into the home if you like. Because they feel supported by the other families. (Kirsten, Steiner)

Feeling

The notion of parents having a ‘feeling’ about a setting was raised by both the mainstream and Steiner settings as an influence on choice.

‘He just had that feeling about it I think’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘But generally they come in here and they get a feeling for us and then the room’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I think the ones locally who are coming to the academies who happen to just be in the vicinity and choosing to come there, are coming because it feels good’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘And that’s a parents feeling which is really interesting isn’t it. And we’ve always said that there is something about a Steiner kindergarten that feeds the heart of the parents. They can just let go when they come in there. It’s a very big difference’ (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘Yes, but there is something about the warmth, the cooking food, the nice smells around, the not too much equipment or things on the walls. You know, it is calm on the outside. Parents who are looking for a nice quiet, warm, bubbly, Steiner kindergarten’ (Kirsten, Steiner)
Promotion
The other area of importance relating to influences on parental choice that was raised by settings and the local authority was how their provision is promoted to parents. Interestingly the use of social media was important for all settings and for the local authority.

‘If you Google it I think we do come up on that’. (Tara, Mainstream school)
‘I try to do lots of promotion, putting it into newspapers, posters when we have open days, Facebook, … lovely Facebook, it works though! It does work getting people in. ‘Word of mouth. We have a really good PTFA that promote everything about the school’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘I think if you look on the [Local Authority] website we come up’. (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘It’s all online, we just say to them that it’s all online. We used to have these lovely brochures and registration forms but it’s all online. And you can get a much better picture of the whole school online from the blogs and the newsletters and the information that gets given out to parents – it’s all online, and it’s just easier. They can look at it then and … it saves us printing everything off’ (Tara, Mainstream school)

‘They all have a prospectus, they should all have their prospectus on their website, they should also have a curriculum plan on their website’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘All of this should be easily available. They certainly get it as a pack when they visit the school for their initial meeting’. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘It is mostly word-of-mouth, but also Facebook. We are attracting a huge amount of parents to our schools through Facebook. So all the schools have got a Facebook page which is very active. And that’s how the local parents are finding it. It’s very interesting actually. Facebook seems to be the way that parents, modern parents are looking for schools as well. (Kirsten, Steiner)

‘Social Media plays a large part today, word of mouth, local GP surgeries, libraries, Children Centres, local authority websites and Early Years Departments who engage in active promotion, as well as the Primary Schools themselves’ (Louise, Local Authority)

In addition, the importance applying for a school place and how this is promoted to parents was raised.

‘We get sent the leaflets from the local authority and ‘please display this on your notice board to get parents to apply for their school place online’. So we put those up as we are asked to and then we just wait and see really’ (Sam, Montessori)

‘I think it is very much a formality … it’s like ‘this is the date, you’ve got to decide, make sure you get your application in on time’ and it’s all like an administrative process rather than information. Like really, ‘this is an
educational choice for you, make sure you get it right’ sort of thing’. (Sam, Montessori)

‘The Admissions Team promotes the application timescale on Facebook, twitter, our own webpage, through posters and flyers to early years settings and our Admissions Officers attend Early Years network meetings to ensure their staff are fully apprised’ (Louise, Local Authority)

‘We have always supported a national advertising campaign but this has not come to fruition, presumably due to Government budget constraints’ (Louise, Local Authority)

‘We send all known parents of rising 5’s a letter advising them of the online facility and the deadlines’ (Louise, Local Authority)

‘Our website offers links to schools information and our literature advises parents to choose wisely and always consider their local school as one of their preferences’. (Louise, Local Authority)

Summary of findings

This process of interviewing setting leaders and the local authority, reviewing photographs, and completing a documentary analysis for a variety of pre-compulsory educational approaches has highlighted the complexity of choice.

At the start of the interviews participants were asked why they think parents might choose to send their four-year-old child to them. Both rational and relational factors were highlighted from the start but the overall focus was on the setting itself, the environment and resources. In addition the settings educational philosophy and curriculum were emphasised as influential with particular regard to the EYFS, Montessori and Steiner approaches.

Within this analysis I have addressed separately several different factors which have been highlighted as potentially influential on parental choice of pre-compulsory education, including how school choice is advertised and how the individual settings are promoted. However, I also recognise that these factors are complex and interlinked with the philosophy of education impacting on the environment and resources, curriculum, staffing, assessment practices, and even the hours of attendance. In addition I argue that even an inspection outcome would be interlinked with the setting’s philosophy and this is markedly clear for the Steiner settings where their curriculum approach does not entirely fit the Ofsted inspection expectations.

A principal finding from setting participants and the documentary analysis is this apparent relationship between setting practice and parental choice. The more rational aspects of choice such as the convenience and inspection outcome whilst not to be dismissed are not highlighted as much as the setting’s educational philosophy whether that be the approach of the local mainstream primary school, the Montessori, Steiner, independent school or home education.

I also recognise that the setting leaders that participated within this research will have their own view of both their setting, their educational philosophy, and of why parents may choose to send their child to them. This view may not be the same view as other staff within each setting, nor between different settings that align themselves with the same educational philosophies. This recognition highlights
that parental choice may not even be about type of education but about the individual settings themselves.

Next Steps
Following this analysis of the interviews, photographs and documentary analysis the next stage in this research project examines whether the settings’ view of choice mirrors that of the parents, or if it differs, and if so in what aspects.
Preliminary findings from setting interviews to date have highlighted a focus by the settings on their environment, teaching, and resources as opposed to the focus on the relational aspects of choice highlighted by parents. This is interesting when considered in light of the marketized system of school choice promoted by the current government as a rational choice based on inspection outcome and examination performance.
The process of writing up my research is expected to take place over 2020 and into 2021 and a short summary of findings will be made available to research participants on completion. In the meantime if there is anything you would like to discuss regarding my research please contact me by emailing victoria.bamsey@plymouth.ac.uk.
If there is anything further you would like to discuss my Director of Studies is Jan Georgeson who can be contacted by emailing janet.georgeson@plymouth.ac.uk.

Reference List


Appendix Eight – Educational Choices

At the start of this thesis I referred to the use of a theoretical framework built upon Vygotsky’s writings, positioning activity as a process toward a target of thought or ‘predmet’ (Leontiev, 1981). By following the choice process of six parents (using the pseudonyms of David, Morag, Maisie, Orla, Zara, Frankie, Nathan and Olivia) I have been able to gain insight into the educational choice process, whether that be the local mainstream primary school, creativity in education, Montessori, Steiner, a selective all-girls independent school, or unschooling.

Not only did the parents participating in this research hold their own views on education and what was important to them; so did the setting leaders taking part. Educational choice became individualised as one local mainstream school looked, felt and practised differently to another. There was difference between an Independent Steiner school and a Steiner Academy, philosophies of education developed in the early nineteenth century were adapted for modern day expectations, and home education was practised in different ways according to the beliefs, needs and culture of each family. Each parent’s own experiences of education coloured their perception of a particular educational approach for their own child, but today’s provision is different from their own experiences.

Whichever philosophy of education a setting practised, in England today all Ofst registered early years settings must follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2017) for children aged under five years of age. This includes supporting children’s learning and development across seven areas of learning towards the Early Learning Goals (ELG’s). The EYFS also stipulates a requirement for ongoing individual formative assessment as well as summative assessments when children are two years of age and the completion of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) document at the end of reception class when they are five. Safeguarding and welfare requirements must be followed and this includes a Key Person system for each child, in a maintained school reception class the teacher must hold qualified teacher status (QTS).

Each of the educational approaches outlined below are those chosen by the parents participating in this research. They are not all described in the same way as some are schools and others are philosophies of education that are individual to the parent. The Montessori and Steiner schools are founded upon principles of education developed over one hundred years ago and others are a more modern invention. What is important to note is the effects of difference between the past and the present through an interpretation of these legislative requirements, and original philosophy of education where relevant.

**Church of England primary academy school**

*Chosen by David and Morag*

This is an academy primary school funded by the government but managed by an academy trust. It will be inspected by Ofsted and must follow the same process for admissions, exclusions, examinations, and special educational needs as other state schools. Academy schools do not have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times (Gov.UK, 2020a). For children under the age of five the EYFS must be followed (Department for Education, 2017). Class sizes are
limited to 30 pupils per teacher for children aged under seven (Department for Education, 2018).

Situated within the parish boundaries of a rural town, this primary school has a single form entry of up to 30 children and includes a Foundation Stage Unit which takes children from the age of two to five. There were 140 children on the school roll at the time of writing (Local County Council, 2019).

This is a Church of England school which follows a Christian ethos. It is also part of a larger Multi Academy Trust (MAT) which operates as a cooperative made up of 16 primary and secondary schools within south west England ([Local] Multi-Academy Trust, 2018). Underpinned by this Christian ethos the school aims to provide a strong foundation for children’s lives and high quality education for local children from all backgrounds ([Local] Multi-Academy Trust, 2018).

In academy schools such as the one within this community the EYFS requirements (Department for Education, 2017) must be followed unless an exemption has been granted. How the school then implements the EYFS requirements is where differentiated practice can occur. This reception class follows the EYFS Statutory Framework with a focus on the ELG’s and is led by a qualified teacher. There is free-flow between the reception class and the preschool rooms as well as to the outdoor play area. There is also an outdoor classroom available for more structured outdoor teaching. At the time of the setting interview there were nine children on roll in reception and a play based curriculum was followed supplemented with focused group learning activities to prepare children for Key Stage One (KS1). The class teacher uses IT in the form of a large interactive screen for the register in the morning and specific teaching including writing skills but does not see this as forming a significant part of the curriculum (Tara - Mainstream School, 2019).

Whilst the children’s education is structured through a focus on the ELG’s, their individual personal social and emotional development are seen as key. This is nurtured through an individualised approach to education, knowledge of the child their family, and their interests. Outdoor learning is encouraged and a Forest School programme of learning is in place. The transition into reception class from the preschool is uninterrupted due to the nature of the Foundation Stage Unit operating in a free-flowing space as part of the whole school.

Creativity in education

Chosen by Maisie

This is not a separate setting but a philosophy of learning that centres around creativity. The setting chosen by Maisie is the local Church of England primary academy school described above but her focus is on how creativity supports children’s learning. She is keen to ensure that the setting she sends her child(ren) to offer the opportunity for creativity in terms of both practical and performing arts.

In the early years the areas of learning within the EYFS (Department for Education, 2017) include ‘expressive arts and design’ which involves enabling children to explore and play with a wide range of media and materials, as well as providing opportunities and encouragement for sharing their thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of activities
in art, music, movement, dance, role-play, and design and technology (Department for Education, 2017, p.8-9).

The national curriculum starts in year one when children turn five years of age. It applies to maintained schools and includes as foundation subjects art and design, technology and music (Department for Education, 2013).

Maisie’s vision of a creative education would include the arts, design, dance, music, and drama. It forms a further choice within this research as Maisie is concerned that creativity is being squeezed out of the curriculum, stating that ‘if they’re not getting that kind of creative education then … it’s not going to really benefit them that well’ (Maisie).

The local school chosen by Maisie is an academy school and so does not have to follow the national curriculum; it does still need to meet the requirements of the EYFS in reception. ‘Creative arts’ are included in the school’s curriculum for years one to six including art, music, dance, drama, and creative writing. The arts are seen as essential to the development of the whole child as a form of communication and personal expression ([Local] Academy Primary School, 2014).

Maisie and her partner have been influenced by their own experiences of education and that of their social network. They are concerned that the school will not offer enough creative opportunities within the curriculum and as a consequence were considering flexi-schooling or home-educating in order to meet this need. In order to flexi-school the parents must put in a request to the Head-teacher of the school they wish to attend. This must then be agreed by the Head-teacher and the school governors as the child will be registered on the school roll ([Local] County Council, 2018).

Whilst the local funded primary school has been chosen because of its connections with the community Maisie remains concerned that the setting may not facilitate enough creative opportunities such as art, dance, drama and music in the future.

Montessori school

Chosen by Orla

The principles of Montessori teaching encompass firstly liberty and then observation without preconceptions. Immobility hinders the child from learning and liberty is seen in activity. Activity is for work and for a purpose and must be facilitated with a clear behavioural expectations for the benefit of the community. With liberty comes independence, the teachers role is to guide children towards independence through activity including self-care (Montessori, 1912). A Montessori school in England does not have to be registered with Montessori Education UK or the Montessori Society; any setting could call themselves a Montessori setting without accreditation.

The setting taking part within this research operates from a converted bungalow within the parish boundary, it takes up to 20 children at any one time from 2 ½ to 6 years of age ([Local] Montessori Nursery, 2019).

Accredited with the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board (Montessori St Nicholas, 2019) this setting follows the requirements of their accreditation process. The underlying ethos of the Montessori Method (Montessori, 1912) is
evident with the observation of children forming the basis for activity planning. The setting balances the requirements of the EYFS with the Montessori Method utilising Montessori inspired activities to support progression through the developmental statements. Skilled musicians are invited into the setting and links are made to children’s own experiences and to objects without a reliance on abstract thinking. Positive relationships are established with parents and communications are supported through a diary, which travels home with children supporting partnership working.

Understandably influences from the modern day, practicalities, Ofsted expectations and modern-day practice have brought some deviation from the original 1912 ‘Montessori Method’. These include time-tabled access to the outdoors, and free-access to snacks rather than an established mealtime routine as advocated by Montessori. The influence of the EYFS is seen through a book corner and topic themes may be abstract to those children who have not experienced the topic in question. Equally, Junk Modelling does not generally result in purposeful work and the modern-day inclusion of an outdoor climbing frame and slide does not reflect Montessori’s gymnasium equipment. However there is a planned and purposeful, calm atmosphere in the setting, with children’s individualised learning seen as key.

Children generally transfer to the local mainstream school to join the reception class at four years-of-age although there is usually at least one child who remains at the nursery until they are five or even six years of age. At the time of writing there is a move to start a Montessori primary school for children to transition into at six years-of-age.

**Steiner academy**

*Chosen by Zara*

Rudolph Steiner was an Austrian philosopher and he saw education as an art encompassing the whole being - body, soul and spirit, seeing childhood as a process of incarnation with physical processes being the result of spiritual powers (Steiner, 1924). Steiner’s first school was established for the children of workers at the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory. As a ‘method-school’ (Steiner, 1924, p.171) key principles include; the importance of observation as a foundation for teaching, the need for concrete and pictorial teaching before the age of six and before the more abstract work from age seven, the education of the soul (internal mental abilities linked to reason, character, feeling, consciousness, memory, perception, thinking), and the need for practical activity in connection to the world around them.

In order for a setting in England to use ‘Steiner’ within their name they must be a member of the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship and have met the criteria to become an accredited member (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2019). Recently there have been some breaches of this fellowship requirement as schools can apply to the Department for Education to become academy Steiner schools (and thus have Steiner in their academy name) without gaining membership of the fellowship first.

The Steiner school chosen by parents in this research operates from a dedicated building on the outskirts of a nearby city. It is an all-through school with a roll of 420 from the age of four to sixteen, and an intake of 50 into reception with classes
of up to 20 children. At the time of writing it operates as a Steiner Academy meaning that it is funded by the state and free for families to access. It is also a member of the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship and follows the requirements of their accreditation process (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2015). The underlying ethos of Steiner education (Steiner, 1924) is evident with child observation forming the basis of teaching activity and a recognition of the holistic needs of the child. The child’s developmental stage is considered with the need to work with ‘head, heart and hand, thinking, feeling and willing: the creative, active and academic in balance’ ([Local] Steiner Academy, 2017, p.3).

Children start in the kindergarten class at four and stay until they are six (the end of year one in a maintained primary school), The EYFS (Department for Education, 2017) is followed with exemptions and modifications to the learning and development requirements (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2013). These exemptions and modifications include removing the need to be able to follow instructions or answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions as children of this age learn by example rather than being told what to do. The ability to use a pencil for writing is exchanged with a crayon for mark-making. The need to read simple sentences and write common words is completely removed from the Steiner early years curriculum with a focus instead on the development of spoken language. Counting to twenty and simple sums are modified to focus on mathematics within every-day activities, the selection and use of a range of technology is also modified to focus on simple and mechanical technology (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2013).

Steiner’s (1924) concept of teaching through the rhythm of ‘breathing in’ and ‘breathing out’ is embedded within the kindergarten philosophy and daily routine. Imitation of the adults present is key to children’s learning, as is creative and imaginative play through the provision of unfinished resources. There is an ethos of community and care for each other and the setting, older children support the younger ones and lunch times are a social and community activity.

Where practice differs from that articulated within Seiner’s (1924) lectures this may be due to the influence of modern day life and the requirements placed upon the setting in its academy form. This setting is non-selective and its academy status means that it must work towards Key Stage 2 SATS and GCSE’s, the EYFSP is also completed when the child is five. These are graded examinations that are not part of Steiner’s philosophy which prefers an individualised approach to assessment rather than the giving of marks. In addition it appears from the documentary analysis that the class teacher does not travel through the school with their class but that different teachers teach set year-groups. This means that the depth of knowledge about each child and the relationship with parents is broken down as children transition through the school.

The influence of the academy status is seen through the earlier introduction of the more abstract concepts such as grammar in language and handwriting then Steiner (1924) advocated. The tension between the Ofsted expectations of teaching phonics in Key Stage One and the Steiner belief in not introducing literacy until seven, and then only through experiences, is apparent during a recent inspection. In addition, the academy’s non-selective nature means that children with specific educational needs are included in the kindergarten classes whereas Steiner advocated separate teaching to support the needs of these children (Steiner, 1924, p.154).
A Steiner kindergarten should be a calm and peaceful place to be, with children engaged in imaginative play or imitating the work of the adult. However, a number of children attend this setting because it is their local school and not because of its Steiner philosophy (Kirsten - Steiner Setting, 2019). This means that they have not necessarily ‘bought in’ to the Steiner philosophy of education and that the culture of expectations between the home and the setting may be different. As a consequence the management of children’s behaviour has proved challenging and has resulted in more adult directed tasks and less communal processes such as kindergarten meals (Kirsten - Steiner Setting, 2019).

**Independent all girls selective school**

*Chosen by Frankie*

Private or independent schools are not funded by the government and charge fees to attend, they do not have to follow the national curriculum. They must be registered as a school with the government and they are inspected regularly by either Ofsted, the Independent School Inspectorate (for members of the Independent Schools Council) or the School Inspection Service (Gov.UK, 2020b). Independent schools must meet the requirements of their inspecting body and they must also follow the requirements of the EYFS for children under the age of five.

The independent school chosen by the parent participating in this research is a fee-paying, all-girls selective school, based in a nearby city-centre location. The school takes children from the age of three to eighteen with 415 pupils on roll. It follows the requirements of the EYFS in reception through the use of topics and core texts each term, and then the National Curriculum in key stage one. Further to this, PE, swimming, tennis, yoga, art, music, French and computing are part of the curriculum on offer and are taught by subject specialists across the pre-prep (The [Independent] School, 2017).

The school promotes itself as being ‘a top academic school’ and one of the ‘highest performing schools in the South West’ (The [Independent] School, 2019a). A school’s academic performance may be judged on numerous outcomes from GCSE and / or A-level results to pupil progress or key stage test results. Selective schools will undoubtedly perform better academically than non-selective schools as will schools that draw their pupils from more affluent areas. In 2019 this school was in the top 100 independent schools in the country for their A-Level results but not for their GCSE results (Education Advisors Ltd, 2019). School performance was important to the parents in this study ‘[the city] is very lucky to have [this independent school] because it is nationally ranked isn’t it’ (Frankie). With school ranking being different according to the data set and comparisons being made it is unclear what a ‘national ranking’ actually means for this school (Goldstein, 2001).

In addition to academic performance the school promoted a focus on the arts, music and sport as well as pastoral care. The school community is seen as a family and the importance of happiness and confidence is seen as key to children’s learning (The [Independent] School, 2017). Children’s independent learning is fostered through small class sizes, experienced teachers and ‘exceptional resources’ (The [Independent] School, 2019b).

Home education following an ‘Unschooling’ philosophy
Chosen by Ethan and Olivia

Home education is about parents educating their child(ren) at home once they reach the age of compulsory education. There is no definition of what ‘efficient education’ or ‘full time education’ means; the national curriculum does not have to be followed. For home education to be seen as ‘suitable’, the Department for Education’s (2019) guidance for elective home education should be aimed at enabling a child to ‘function as an independent citizen in the UK’ (p.7).

The parents participating in this research who had chosen to home-educate their child were following an ‘unschooling philosophy’ (Holt & Farenga, 2003) which advocates child-led, self-directed learning. ‘Unschooling’ is a phrase coined by John Holt in the 1970’s in order to describe an approach to learning and teaching that does not resemble school (Holt & Farenga, 2003). Holt’s ideas form the basis for the unschooling philosophy embodied within the practice of the family participating in my research as ‘interest-driven, child-led, natural, organic, eclectic, or self-directed learning’ (Holt & Farenga, 2003, p.238). Whilst this family did not actively choose Unschooling as an educational approach to follow, the principles of Holt are demonstrated in their practice.

Holt believed that learning comes to children as naturally as breathing (Holt & Farenga, 2003). Key to his beliefs were three ideas – that ‘children are natural learners’, that ‘teaching does not make learning’, and that ‘children learn from anything and everything they see’ (Holt, 2016, p.85-87). The subject should be ‘chosen and engaged in freely by the learner’ (Holt & Farenga, 2003, p.239). It may involve following a work-book, attending a local group, or perhaps researching on the internet or in the local library. Unschooling is about allowing children as much freedom to learn as the parents can bear (Holt & Farenga, 2003). The need for the parent to be comfortable with their unschooling approach is emphasised by Holt indicating that this is not a method of education to apply but a philosophy of learning. The parent and child work together pursuing questions or following an interest in much the same way as children learn before going to school, living is seen as part of learning.

Children in the UK who are following the unschooling philosophy would be considered to be home-educating. They may be registered as home-educating by the local authority or they may be unknown to the local authority and thus unregistered. There is no requirement for any specific curriculum to be followed, just that children of compulsory school age should have access to ‘efficient, full-time education’ (HMGovernment, 1996, p.4). The Children Act does not specify what ‘efficient’ or ‘full-time’ means, but that children ‘are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents’ (p.5). The local authority has a duty to ensure that children are receiving this appropriate and ‘efficient full-time education’ and does so either through a pre-arranged visit to the home or by the parent sending a report in and evidence of work ([Local] County Council, 2018).

In modern-day England Unschooling is interpreted in a variety of ways from a ‘Radical Unschooling’ approach of giving children complete freedom of choice in everything they do from what they eat, whether they wash, what they wear, bedtimes and what they do. Radical Unschooling is developed from John Holt’s learning philosophy to include an approach to parenting. Based upon a theory of attachment parenting which nurtures the bond of parent and child, radical unschooling focuses on respecting and connecting with children, with a belief that children learn best when they are internally motivated (Martin, 2016). The other end of the unschooling approach is seen as separate from parenting to focus on
how children’s learning can be encouraged and supported by following the child’s interests and passions.

Holt believed that children are natural learners and his philosophy is clearly reflected within this family’s educational approach. This family’s approach to home education developed organically after they withdrew their eldest child from primary school at the age of seven when her needs were not being met. During the months after leaving school these parents followed their child’s needs for the removal of pressure and rest. Over time they observed their daughter blossoming as she re-engaged with the world around her, becoming curious to investigate how things worked and why things happened. It was only later and through discussions with other parents who were home educating that they heard of ‘unschooling’ and recognised John Holt’s unschooling philosophy within their own practice.

The younger children in the family have never been to school and each have developed their own interests over time. These include computer programming, electronics, philosophy and art. The oldest daughter has achieved high grade GCSE’s in English and Maths following a three month course of intensive work at home, she is now studying art at college and has been accepted into Oxford University next year. One child at age eleven is programming to a high level and has started his own business. The youngest child who would otherwise be in reception class at school demonstrates an interest in art and books, there was a home-made snakes and ladders game nearby during one of my visits.

Both parents work from home in the arts and have converted attic space for this purpose. This facilitates a balance between work and supporting the children’s needs and interests, attending home-education groups for socialisation and focused courses related to the children’s interests in near-by towns. Wherever possible the parents do not use fee paying courses. The family has a dog which cuddles up to the children when given the opportunity. Art and books feature throughout the home and there is a culture of respect and learning evident.

The parents describe their children as mini PhD students and that their role is to facilitate the children’s research and suggest extensions for their ideas or resources that may be of use. Keen observation ensures that the parents are aware of their children’s interests and are ready to feed these interests as and when they occur (Ethan and Olivia - Home Education, 2018).

This family has engaged with the local authority’s elective home education service and have the advice of a special educational needs assessor from the local authority for advice on supporting dyslexia and Asperger’s. The children are not directed in their learning and are free to engage in whatever they wish within the home. The parents have observed that a child may become obsessed with a computer game such as Minecraft for an extended period of time until they reach a certain developmental stage and then it is like a switch that turns on and they start learning (Ethan and Olivia - Home Education, 2018). None of the children have been taught to read but have developed this skill themselves through their engagement with computers and books and through the culture of learning that pervades the family.
Summary

By casting light onto each educational approach differences appear. One school labelled as, for example a ‘Steiner school’, gives the illusion of being the same as another with the same title, by mapping the effects of difference above a more subtle vision emerges. Each of the educational choices within this study have exemplified the effects of difference each approach has on the education they offer. The legislation that educational settings are operating under, how the educational philosophy has been interpreted and adapted to modern day life, and the experiences of those leading the setting or working with the children all represent points of diffraction. The resultant educational offer is then interpreted by parents when they are making their educational choice based on their own experiences, culture, social network and intra-actions they have with the setting or educational approach.

Reference List


Department for Education (2017) Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. London: Department for Education


Kirsten - Steiner Setting (2019) 'Interview Transcript - Steiner Setting'. [In Bamsey, V. unpublished]


Steiner, R. (1924) The Kingdom of Childhood. Introductory talks on Waldorf Education. Translated by Fox, H., Online: Anthroposophic Press.


Appendix Nine – Doctorate assignments years one and two

The following work was produced during the first two years of the doctorate programme and provides the basis for my thinking about research and my interest in educational choice.

9.1 EdD613: ‘Educational, Excellence, Everywhere’. Improving education for all or segregating society?

Abstract

‘Educational, Excellence, Everywhere’ (Department for Education, 2016a) sets out within it an intended policy of marketization and choice for driving improvement within educational provision. Ball and Bowe (1992) discuss policy process from ‘intended’ to ‘actual’ policy and ‘policy-in-use. Using this concept as a spring-board for deliberating the construction of policy, this paper highlights the messiness of policy formation, exploring the multiplicity of factors impacting on policy intentions sometimes to such an extent that intended policy in its original form can no longer be implemented.

The application of market forces within the social policy arena has been on the government agenda since the 1980’s with a move to increase parental choice and school diversity, driving a move from ‘producer to consumer power’ (Ball, 2013, p.148). It appears that the key to a successful implementation of a marketised education system is the consumer (the parent) taking an informed and pro-active role in choice, and the supplier (the school) being reactive to demand thus driving improvement. A Darwinist model is visualised - survival of the fittest; with schools deemed as failing being closed and schools seen as being more successful flourishing. As highlighted by Bourdieu (1986) and his theory of cultural capital, using choice as a mechanism for driving school improvement is not straight-forward. ‘Thatcher’s dream of free choice for all does not apply to most’ (Ward & Eden, 2013, p.28). This paper examines the complexities of using choice to promote school improvement and highlights a need to work closely with families when they make a choice of school for their child.
Introduction

Education is seen as one of the five core pillars of welfare, along with social security, employment, housing and health (Hudson, Kuhner & Lowe, 2008). It is a key element of England’s ‘knowledge economy’, a way of ‘investing in human capital as a means of improving the nations competitive edge in a growing world economy’ (Boronski & Hassan, 2015, p.187). Education policy; or the process of ensuring equality of opportunity, social mobility, and economic competitiveness in the global economy is said to be key for the future of our nation (Boronski & Hassan, 2015).

The current Conservative Government’s vision is to facilitate ‘world class education and care that allows every child and young person to reach his or her potential, regardless of background’ (Department for Education, 2015a, p.5). This vision is developed through goals, principles and strategic educational priorities for the country in order to achieve ‘Educational Excellence Everywhere’ (Department for Education, 2015a, p.7).

It appears that improvements in education provision are being driven through an overarching policy of public service reform via the implementation of a ‘self-improving system’ (Ball, 2013, p.121). Four ‘policy technologies’ can be seen in the form of top-down performance management, competition and contestability, choice and voice, and capability and capacity (Ball, 2013).

This paper considers the proposed marketization of education through the policies of competition and parental choice (Department for Education, 2016a). The potential tensions arising from marketization within English education are examined through the process of policy implementation and the role of the ‘policy actors’ (Singh, Thomas & Harris, 2013) within the education market place. Will this policy intention be effective in raising educational standards for all or instead lead to an increased stratification of society?

Intended and actual policy to policy-in-use

‘Intended Policy’ (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p.100) can be seen within the Government’s ‘Education Excellence Everywhere’ White Paper (Department for Education, 2016a) which sets out their proposals for future legislation. The delivery priorities highlighted therein indicate a drive for ‘sustainable school improvement’ through
academisation, marketization, and through intervening in under-performing schools. Accountability is said to be met, in part, through facilitating school choice, and enabling parents to hold schools to account (Department for Education, 2016a). Access to ‘quality’ places are to be provided through an increase in new free schools, increased access to funded early education places and through parental choice (Department for Education, 2015a).

Marketization is thus driven by competition; the providers of compulsory education are expected to become responsive to the needs of their pupils and families – their clients, in order to survive. Failing schools are to be turned into academies, parents are said to have choice, and diversity within the sector is being encouraged. At the same time, and sitting in tension with this policy, is how the provision of education is being standardised through Ofsted inspections, pupil assessments and comparative league tables. Education providers are judged on their ability to meet these academic standards, their success or failure is expected to drive demand with parents choosing schools which perform well in league tables and meet their individual child and family needs (Ball, 2013). On the one hand it appears intended policy is to drive diversity within education, on the other providers of education must meet standardised systems of testing and inspection.

If ‘intended policy’ takes the form of the legislation, strategy, and governmental White Papers as described above, then ‘actual policy’ (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p.100) considers the guidance and expectations which lay-out the ‘ground rules’ for implementing this policy. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 promotes a local authority’s duty for increasing opportunities for parental choice (HM Government, 2006, p.2), but the School Admissions Code (HM Government, 2014) intended to support parental choice in a marketised system is in fact limited. This ‘policy-in-use’ (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p.100) restricts choice to a preference with the ultimate decision about a child’s school destination being made by the local authority subject to the availability of places. If this intended policy was set out to support competition and drive quality through marketization, policy-in-use through the school admissions code means that children are generally placed in their nearest school whether or not it is thriving or failing ([Local County Council], 2016).

Sitting along-side this drive for school improvement through competition is the ‘intended policy’ of academising existing schools and the opening of free schools.
In order to open a free school there is a need to demonstrate demand. This can be through a lack of sufficient spaces for the population or due to a need for new spaces to replace an existing failing school (Department for Education, 2015b). It may be that in time and as new schools are opened that competition does drive school improvement both internally in terms of the teaching quality and business accountability, but also externally in terms of the school admissions system and the ability for families to make an informed decision as to their free choice of school.

Here policy intention has been set out, whether these actions aimed at improving educational outcomes are effective or not, whether this policy intention is seen as effective ‘policy-in-use’, are key issues which will be further explored throughout this paper.

**Pedagogising Policy**

Tensions between the policy intention of marketization and policy-in-use have already been highlighted, but how these have come about needs further analysis. This progression from intended policy to policy-in-use highlights the ‘notion of a continuous policy cycle’ (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p.100), and highlights how policy is recontextualised by social groups both internal and external to its structure or policy. The process of implementing policy involves ‘political-administrative layers’ where there are ‘official competencies and there is legitimate politics at work … ‘policy co-formation’ can be observed’ (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p.16); policy is shaped through a process of formation. In this case the government has issued a White Paper (Department for Education, 2016a) stating policy intention to raise educational standards, this is now being shaped by ‘policy actors’; a recent example being the retraction of the policy to change all schools into academies (Morgan, 2016).

It appears that the evaluation of this policy process may be examined through a variety of different lenses. This paper argues that policy process is not a linear top-down approach; moving from government to implementers nor is it a bottom-up approach moving from the concept of street-level bureaucrats to government (Hill & Hupe, 2009). Policy process is instead a messy affair involving multiple
actors at all levels further exacerbated by politics as governmental parties strive to gain populous approval and therefore power at each election cycle.

Elements of Bernstein’s (1996) pedagogic device, despite it being designed as a method of evaluating how knowledge is transferred from its initial production through to the acquirers, can be adapted to explore the concept of recontextualising policy process from ‘intent’ to ‘enactment’. Singh, Thomas and Harris (2013) demonstrate how the concept of recontextualisation within Bernstein’s pedagogic device adds to the ‘understanding of the policy work of reinterpretation and translation’ (p.465).

In 2011 David Cameron highlighted his aim of opening up public services, making them more competitive – ‘from closed markets, to open systems’ (Cameron, 2011, p.nn). This initial intention could be seen as sitting within Bernstein’s ‘field of economy’ with school improvement leading to ‘a well-educated population [to] make our country stronger, fairer, wealthier and more secure’ (Department for Education, 2016a, p.3). A general regulative discourse (GRD), or the dominate principles of this policy, can be seen within government strategy (Department for Education, 2015a), and legislation (HM Government, 2014), and has led to the production of the recent White Paper (Department for Education, 2016a) through what could be seen as Bernstein’s official recontextualising field (ORF). Government concepts and strategy are set out as dominant principles but are officially defined within the White Paper where the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of strategy is set out.

This then leads on to Bernstein’s pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) where intended policy is translated by ‘implementing agencies’ (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p.47) into what could be described as little-p policies ‘that are formed and enacted within localities and institutions’ (Ball, 2013, p.8) such as the local authority or a school’s admissions policy. This ‘translation’ of policy is influenced by ‘policy actors’ (Singh, Thomas & Harris, 2013) who look to ‘make meaning’ of these official texts, to decode and recode, to make sense of policy in order to enact, to form policy-in-use. We have been seeing institutional discourse backlash with threatening teacher union strikes against the process of academisation, of the perceived surreptitious removal of teacher pay and conditions of employment. The official pedagogic discourse (OPD) claims academisation, competition and choice will drive up standards, the policy actors sit in opposition to this claim.
stating that the government’s idea of good teaching practice taking place in academies is not proven by research (Titcombe, 2016). There are power relations at work distributing the unthinkable and the thinkable (Bernstein, 1996), attempting to affect the field of production; the policy intention.

Further adding to the ‘messy affair’ of policy process are differing ideologies at play with the government taking what appears to be a technological pragmatist approach (Ernest, 1991) a ‘tool’ of marketization and competition to be applied in a practical situation through meritocracy. The actors or educational thinkers can be seen as taking a progressive educator or public educator stance (Ernest, 1991) with a focus on social equality. As pointed out by Ernst (1991), this application of ideological positions could be said to be rather simplistic. It is based on a combination of ideological theories taken from other researchers and attempts to assign individuals to a single group or ideology, whereas they may ‘subscribe to composites including components of several ideologies’ (Ernest, 1991, p.140).

The government’s technological pragmatist approach to education holds an emphasis on promoting economic development, where the focus of education is in preparing people for work. The success of education is assessed through Attainment 8 achievement. However, it is also possible to see some of Ernest’s (1991) industrial trainer ideologies at work through a knowledge based curriculum, with a focus on the basics of literacy and numeracy assessed through tests. Those sitting in opposition to this approach as progressive or public educators wish to affect intended policy with a focus on creative educational approaches, nurturing the individual child, promoting a just and fair society with a curriculum centred on the child’s needs.

As well as the institutional discourse it is also possible to identify an influence on policy via what Bernstein (1996) would label as the ‘acquirers’ feeding into the policy discourse. The success of intended policy is dependent on the acquirers (the children and their families) taking on their assigned role – school choice. After all, the intention was that schools would sit within a competitive open system of marketization where success depends on student attainment and student numbers. If families are not exercising their free, unimpeded, choice of school it is possible to see schools that would otherwise be deemed as ‘failing’ actually surviving because they can still maintain a market share.
The ORF in the case of introducing marketization into education has the hallmarks of New Right neo-liberalism from the Thatcher era. The neo-liberal approach was about a move away from the ‘nanny state’, giving people greater control over their lives (Ward & Eden, 2013). Schools ‘are being encouraged and required to become more like and act more like businesses, that is, to compete, to promote themselves and to be enterprising’ (Ball, 2013, p.15).

Supporting this idea and in order to ‘bring the market to education’ was the introduction of the voucher scheme by Keith Joseph when he was Secretary of State. With an aim of expanding ‘parental school choice … to increase competition in the school system’ (Morgan C, Petrosino A & Fronius T, 2013, p.1).

However, the pilot introduction of the voucher scheme in Kent was said to be ‘inconclusive’, in opposition to the introduction of the voucher scheme (with a socialist approach in evidence) it was highlighted that the outcome may be

‘socially divisive, accentuating the differences between the standards of education available to relatively well-off … families, and to children from poor, educationally apathetic and ill-informed families’ (Seldon, 1986, p.82).

“Choice’ was easy to offer politically but more difficult to operationalise in practice’ (Ball, 2013, p.148). The unintended consequence of this policy would have been the promotion of inequality. Economic competitiveness may have potentially been improved but equality of opportunity and social mobility would have been negatively affected.

Current policy intention reflects policy from the 1980s and instead of a single comprehensive schooling system designed to reduce social inequality, we are instead seeing a selection process take place, all-be-it instigated by the parents preference outlined within their ‘local authority common application form’ ([Local County Council], 2015).

One unintended consequence of a market-driven schooling system is that affected by class. As outlined by Burgess et al (2006); working class pupils attend their local school or feeder school; the one which the school bus service links into. Pupils from middle class families look at their options, reviewing the school provision and what school best suits their needs. The ‘middle class can use their social and cultural skills and capital advantages to good effect’ (Ball, 2013, p.153). The social outcome of choice has led to children from less affluent families
attending poorer quality schools. The more affluent families move their children elsewhere and the result is self-perpetuating. A ‘pupil eligible for free school meals is 30% more likely to attend their low-scoring local school than an otherwise-identical pupil from a better-off family’ (Burgess et al., 2006, p.14).

So on the one hand education ‘is now seen by government as a key way of investing in human capital’ (Boronski & Hassan, 2015, p.187). Pupil premium, free school meals for infant children, have been put into place to support children from less affluent families to access education and promote equality of opportunity for all; this we now find, sits in tension with the policy of market competitiveness which, it appears, is a driver of social inequality.

**Sociological perspective**

An alternative approach to examining the policy of marketization and its impact on educational improvement is to unpick the factors or drivers behind the parental choice of school for their children, how this may impact on policy formation from the ‘bottom-up’, examining the sociological perspectives influencing school choice decisions.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1992) discuss the theory of ‘habitus’, highlighted as an ‘unconscious driving force’ (Gewirtz S & Cribb A, 2009, p.47) behind a person’s actions. For the purposes of this paper; what is driving parents to make their choice of school for their children? This ‘unconscious driving force’ is linked to the social group an individual, or in this case parent, belongs to; how that social group is structured, and how it functions (Bourdieu, 1986). Such structure and function coming from both immaterial (symbolic), and material, forms of economic, cultural and social capital.

The influence of economic capital on school choice appears obvious in that the material ability to pay for education or to physically access education may limit choice. If there is no funded transport to the school this may impact on whether it is possible to attend that school. If one cannot afford school fees for an independent school this presents an immediate barrier. The ability to pay for a personal tutor in order to pass 11+ examinations may inhibit access to a local grammar school, the ability to move house in order to be within a desired catchment area (Burgess et al., 2006).
Added to this, Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory takes the form of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. The embodiment of cultural capital is symbolic, held within the individual, their mannerisms, their attitudes and way of being. Bourdieu is criticised for not being precise enough in his definition of cultural capital (Sullivan, 2002), although it seems that these would include aspects of self that are developed from birth, passed on from parent to child through language, expectations, and behaviour. The link here to school choice would be the attitude a parent has to education and school, in addition; whether the parent and also the child would fit in with the behaviour and attitudes of others attending that school, feeling part of that social group.

Objectified capital refers to the material objects a person or family has, although Bourdieu goes on to point out that the possession of such objects requires only economic capital whereas the use of them requires embodied cultural capital. A family could own a car but how they use this car is impacted on by their embodied capital such as whether this car is used to transport children to another school in place of the area’s school bus.

Institutionalized states refers to the qualifications a person holds and how the holding of this potentially gives access to ‘a certificate of cultural competence’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p.9), thereby offering a potential impact on embodied capital. With current higher levels of achievement in secondary education in England and the increase in take up of degrees (OECD, 2013) one could question whether a qualification has the impact now as it did in 1965, in France, when Bourdieu first researched social construction in the classroom (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992). Perhaps a different way of looking at the impact of qualifications on parental choice of school is instead how the institutionalised state enables the parent to make an informed choice. Levels of literacy and knowledge of accessing information will impact on the embodied state and in turn will impact on the parents ability to make an informed choice (Allen, Burgess & McKenna, 2014).

The cultural and economic capital a person holds links to the social group they are part of. Access to, or attendance at, certain educational establishments may rely on parents and their children being able to become part of the social group that school is derived of. The criteria for entry, or the ‘conditions of access’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p.13), into such social groups is ‘at stake for each new entry’ and must be upheld in order to maintain the value of its social capital (Bourdieu,
Parents may make a choice of school because they wish their child to become part of that social group and have the economic and cultural capital to access it. A bursary is an example of overcoming a lack of economic capital but a person’s embodied state must still meet real or perceived conditions of access. Bourdieu’s theory as applied here considers the parent’s economic, social and cultural capital and how this may impact on school choice. However social capital theory also raises the question of a child’s embodied state. A parent may make a choice of school but their child will then be the one attending that school and working within that social group. When one considers school choice as a driver for school improvement are the needs and wants of the child considered?

It appears that school choice is not as simplistic as comparing ‘Attainment 8’ (Department for Education, 2016b) scores, both the parent’s and child’s embodied culture and the social group they are part of, and wish to be a part of, are also factors to consider.

‘The possibilities of choice available to parents and to schools are taken advantage of differently by different social groups, who are able to bring different resources and skills to bear’ (Ball, 2013, p.153).

The current Conservative government has stated its intended policy of improving school quality through competition and marketization which by its very nature depends on the consumer (the parent) making a choice thus supporting a school to thrive or removing support from a failing school. This more sociological perspective highlights the potential drivers behind school choice. It creates an opportunity to examine in more detail the tensions between policy-in-use, actual, and intended policy. The potential ‘systemic impact in that poorly performing state schools may be insufficiently pressurised into improvement if their admissions stay ‘undeservedly’ high, and parental choice will be blunted as an accountability mechanism’ (Allen, Burgess & McKenna, 2014, p.5).

It is questionable as to whether a competitive market place within education can be successful in its policy intention because parents do not always make their choice of school simply based on a schools performance. The educational market place is a complex one with independent schools, state education, and alternative educational provision (Carnie, 2003) all ‘competing’ for market share.
Pedagogical and sociological approaches have so far been used in order to examine the drivers behind policy implementation. The complexities of implementing policy change within education are further explored through considering different views of policy implementation below.

A ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ approach?
Policy implementation is not as simple as setting out an intention and then carrying it out in order to achieve an end point (Hill & Hupe, 2009). The interpretation of the policy and the actors (implementers) along the way shape, refine, and redefine the policy sometimes to such an extent that the end point or goal can no longer be achieved. ‘Public policy development is a level of complexity never attempted before’ (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p.41). Perhaps we should not be surprised that intended policy mutates and morphs along the road towards implementation.

In order for intended policy to be successful in its goals policy actors from government level, through to Lispky’s (Hill, 2009; Hill & Hupe, 2009) ‘street-level bureaucrats’, and parents, need to support the ideas set out. As Van Meter and Van Horn’s model of the policy-implementation process highlights (cited in Hill and Hupe, 2009, p.45-47), there is an inter-relationship between consensus and level of change. Applied here to this educational policy a high level of change is envisaged with a move from schools run by the local authority with protected rights, to academies run by trusts similar to independent schools – seen by many as an ideological privatisation of the education system (Abbott, Rathbone & Whitebread, 2013; Ball, 2013; Ward & Eden, 2013; Whitty, 2002). Consequently, and with a socialist ideology at work, the level of consensus for this policy is low with seemingly constant media reports against academisation and the testing of children in particular. Van Meter and Van Horn’s model indicates that the implementation of this policy will be difficult; high consensus is needed to make high change possible.

The process from intended policy through to actual policy is not linear, policy actors shape the policy process both from the ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’. This paper has been examining a policy of school marketization in order to achieve an end goal of school improvement – ‘Educational Excellence, Everywhere’. The steps to accomplish this has been set out within government strategy
(Department for Education, 2015a) and recent White Paper (Department for Education, 2016a) but policy-in-use is yet to be seen. Policy actors have presented substantial resistance and as a consequence it is already possible to see the intended policy being changed such as the forced academisation of all schools being dropped from the agenda (Morgan, 2016).

Perhaps instead of looking at the policy process as linear from intended to policy-in-use, as either top-down or bottom-up, it could instead be seen as cyclical, with the policy actors challenging the implementation of policy, as demonstrated in the figure below:

![Policy cycle diagram]

**Figure 1: Policy cycle**

Portraying policy process in this way highlights the important role the policy actors have on policy implementation. The recent focus on academisation and lack of consensus amongst policy actors has led to the reversal of the plan to academise
all schools. However academisation is only one element of introducing competition into the education market place. One could argue that the overarching intended policy has not changed with the aim of facilitating more choice for parents, providing information on which to base that choice, facilitating innovation and competition. There still remains a focus on marketization and therefore competition in order to drive school improvement (Morgan, 2016).

The intended policy examined within this paper was to raise standards of education through a more open and competitive market place. However, ‘educational policies are also exacerbating social segregation, divisions and problems’ (Ball, 2010, p.163). Ball may have been referring to generic educational policies rather than the specifics of competition and marketization but as already highlighted it appears that this statement also applies here.

By offering more choice to parents in order to drive a competitive market-place those unable to make informed decisions, unable to be proactive in this aspect of their children’s education are disadvantaged. Those more able through finance, culture or knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986), are able to make decisions whether that is based on a school’s educational achievements, character, philosophy, or specialism. Choices are not always based on the comparison of statistical data, other considerations include distance, the child’s wishes, and school characteristics and qualities; ‘some families value schools for reasons other than performance’ (Allen, Burgess & McKenna, 2014, p.43).

The availability of, and access to, information about schools supports the choices made by parents. Cameron’s (2011) open market approach to education is facilitating a range of educational options for those families who have the wherewithal to make a choice. However, if this model of an open market is applied to education by allowing competition and free choice of school one can see the potential for increased social division. Those families most disadvantaged are least able to affect policy (from the bottom-up) and are reliant on others to identify this potential social stratification and to act upon it.

Conditions of Marketization
Cameron spoke about a move ‘from closed markets, to open systems’ (2011, p.nn), making public services such as education more competitive. In reality open
market systems are not possible within public services such as education; instead a quasi-market is seen with ‘conditions’ in place providing an element of control and preserving greater social equality and opportunity. Marketization can be seen as a metaphor for the development of ‘quasi-markets’ (Whitty & Power, 2003, p.46), with conditions or controls in place including restricted entry into the market through free schools, the quality of provision as assessed by school performance tables and Ofsted inspections, and the cost to families which remains free at the point of use.

The aspects of marketization that the schools and parents are said to have control over are through the consumers (parents) having choice, and through the providers (the schools) being able to define and characterise their offer. Unlike the offer of choice on the high street where one can simply buy a product from an alternative shop, changing schools is not so easy, ‘few children welcome changing schools’ and where parents make the decision to move their child once ‘they are very reluctant to repeat the experience’ (Mortimore, 2014, p.156).

In effect these conditions and controls or elements of the education system can be seen as representing Bernstein’s concepts of time, text, and space and their effect on regulative discourse (RD). In England the government is elected every five years, thus any intended policy needs to have been enacted and to have made a difference to the economy, and investment in human capital (Boronski & Hassan, 2015) if the party is to capture public share and be re-elected. In reality it takes eighteen years for today’s children entering education to leave school, to enter adult society, and to contribute to the country’s economy. It is not possible therefore to see an impact of educational policy within this timeframe. Indeed Bernstein (1996) holds that the time dimension of pedagogic practice is only revealed in the present tense; it is the here and now that is important; what the teacher is doing and ‘what each acquirer is revealing at a particular moment’ (p.59).

‘Text’ is concerned with content, and ‘space’ with context (Bernstein, 1996) and it is perhaps these elements which hold more relevance when applied to policy enactment. What elements of the market can be manipulated to better affect the ‘final state’ with an eye on ensuring equality of opportunity and social mobility?

The policy-in-use as set out earlier in this paper signifies a restriction on parental choice in terms of parental preference; new free schools can only be set up in
areas where there is a need for more school places. There is a limitation placed on the funding available per child and this is increased for those deemed to be disadvantaged. These appear to be constants in the form of the population to be served and the number of schools available in a given area. The variables are found within the schools themselves in terms of their identity, the curriculum, teaching style and business management. These are the only elements that can be manipulated to affect output and hence may represent the governmental drive within intended policy to focus on academisation. By moving away from state control and handing over the ‘business of education’ to academies there is room to manipulate what is being taught, how, where and when – the reproduction of pedagogical discourse; its transmission.

Recommendations

This paper has mapped the current government’s policy of marketization from policy intention through to policy-in-use and explored the competing ideologies, policy actors, and market theory impacting upon and recontextualising this approach to raising educational standards. It problematizes the concept of education operating in an open market as this will lead to a widening of social inequality, to disorder and entropy.

As ‘far as social equality is concerned, education policy is not working or not working very well’ (Ball, 2010, p.155). Without supporting choice within a competitive market place we again see the marginalisation of disadvantaged classes increasing social inequality. There is a

‘significant body of evidence that, rather than benefitting the disadvantaged, this has the potential to exacerbate the disadvantage of those least able to compete in the market’ (Whitty, 2002, p.12).

It appears that choice is a key driver of quality improvement within a quasi-market, but in order to ensure that the most disadvantaged are not further marginalised then support is needed in order for families to make such choice (Allen & Burgess, 2010; Leroux, 2015). Indeed, Choice Advisors were introduced within the Education Act 2006 although funding for this was then abolished in 2011 (Ball, 2013).
The proposed provision of the parent portal as the primary source of information for parents when making a choice of school is not enough. ‘Resources’ for policy implementation in terms of choice take the form of ‘school performance tables’ (Department for Education, 2015c), ‘Parent View’ (Ofsted, 2016a), and Ofsted inspection reports (Ofsted, 2016b). Information on the school characteristics, philosophy of education, or the ‘hidden curriculum’ are not brought together as an easily accessible source, and there remains a requirement for a certain level of cultural capital in order to access and interpret such information.

If Bourdieu’s view of embodied culture and social group as purported above are considered then even if the information is available, different social groups make their school choice based on ‘unconscious driving forces’ (Gewirtz S & Cribb A, 2009, p.47). This paper recommends that these forces are further investigated in order to bring the unconscious, conscious; in order to empower parental choice and create a self-improving school system.

**Conclusion**

The messiness of policy process explored in this paper highlights the multiplicity of factors impacting on the success or failure of intended policy. Although this has been simplified through the portrayal of a policy cycle with the policy actors driving process, in reality the process of implementing policy will differ with every policy intention.

Different ideologies, levels of consensus, administrative layers, policy actors, and acquirers will all shape and recontextualise policy construction. Even after a policy has been implemented and enshrined in legislation its interpretation, construction and enactment will differ from region to region, from school to school, from teacher to teacher, and between families. Access to education is a fundamental human right (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), and as such it affects all of us, and is a ‘subject close to the hearts of anyone with children or grandchildren going through the education system’ (Ball, 2013, p.xi). The fact that education impacts on so many means that educational policy remains key within party re-election manifestos.

As already stated, it is the here and now that is important, and on this basis the question posed at the start of this paper is answered; current policy intention
without reform cannot raise educational standards for all, the complexities of choice and mechanisms of competition points to an increased stratification of society. This needs to be addressed if we are to achieve ‘Educational, Excellence, Everywhere’, through offering more support, empowering school choice, and ensuring that disadvantaged families are not further marginalised.

Reference List


1 The word ‘Local’ is used to replace local authority area so as to support anonymity.
Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme For Primary Schools 2017-18. [Local]: [Local County Council].


Abstract

This paper focuses on how the activity of early years education positions the child as either deficit; needing to be filled with knowledge, or as strong and capable; an active participant in the process of knowing. Using activity theory as a framework for analysing the object orientation of activity systems, the impact of the macro environment of performativity on the micro environment of the child as an active participant in education becomes clear. A dynamic system of mediated, collective activity, gives rise to ‘expansive transformations’ (Engeström, 2009, p.57), as contradictions in activity reconceptualise learning to move away from an outcome orientated approach to a pragmatist position. Outcomes and goals are formulated as milestones through activity as ‘transactions between subject and worlds’ (Elkjaer, 2009, p.78). The role of the early years practitioner becomes one of balancing these two epistemological positions with meeting regulatory requirements in one hand and meeting the needs of the child in the other. The importance of recognising the voice of the child is evident as is the impact of the environment, community, rules and the balance of power on activity. The significance of the ‘space in between’ subject and object comes to light, refocusing attention on the activity within education rather than a pre-conceived objective which may or may not be achievable.

Introduction

This paper argues for a balanced approach to children’s early years education that acknowledges two epistemological positions of learning as knowledge, and learning as a process of knowing. This argument is structured through the use of activity theory (Engeström, 2009) as a heuristic device which can be used to problematize the potential impact of statutory requirements on practice. At the same time to consider the role of the early years practitioner in balancing a perceived system of performativity with the needs of the individual child as an active participant in education.

Norbert Elias’s (1978) deliberation of the individual and society emphasises this where he explores how they are often seen as separate entities, objectified, with society as a structure external to the individual, how the interrelationship between
the individual in society is not always considered. Applying this concept to education gives rise to the question of whether we consider children to be one entity and education as another or whether there is a complex inter-relationship that takes place with children in education.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2014) sets the standards for children’s learning, development, and care from birth to five. It is mandatory for all registered early years settings to follow this framework and such settings are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) or the Independent School Inspectorate against the stipulations set out therein. This includes the content of ‘educational programmes’ (Department for Education, 2014, p.5), and the role of those providing such education.

The way language is used within this statutory framework highlights the points made by Elias above; the child being seen as a separate entity to the education done onto them. The inter-relationship between children in education and therefore the activity (Engeström, 2009) taking place within the early years setting appears to take a back-seat to the knowledge children need to be filled with.

This brief over-view highlights contradictions and tensions within early years education (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000); it being seen as a solution to a social problem, as getting children ready for school. Learning is viewed on the one hand as an objectified happening with the truth of knowledge (Elias, 1978) in one hand, and the child to be filled with such knowledge in another. An alternative position situates the child within the learning context, the activity, the complex and dynamic inter-relationships between young children and their environment, becomes one of knowing, of ‘knowing how to be a pre-schooler’.

Using a socio-cultural theoretical perspective of ‘Activity Theory’ (Engeström, 2009), this paper explores learning within the early years, how it can be seen as either an acquisitional, or participatory, process (Sfard, 1998). Whether an agreed, shared, view of learning is achievable within the early years sector.

**Theoretical Frame**

A socio-cultural position facilitates a view of learning formed from the premise that we are social beings. Our identity is formed through our interaction with
others, meaning comes from our experiences and engagement with others and the world around us (Wenger, 2009).

‘Activity Theory’ embodies a similar position as a ‘theory of human development that sees human societies and their individual members as mutually constitutive’ (Wells & Claxton, 2002, p.2-3). The theory takes a socio-cultural perspective where ‘practices are viewed as situated within historical and cultural contexts that give them structure and meaning’ (Sundberg et al., 2016, p.568).

As Engeström (2009) points out, ‘any theory of learning must answer four central questions’ - who are the learners, why do they learn, what are they learning, and how do they learn (p.53). The learners in this case are children in the early years (birth to five years of age), it is the why, what, and how, which is explored further through the lens of activity theory.

Key concepts relating to why, what, and how, children learn include Vygotsky’s idea of mediation. A simple stimulus : response is replaced by activity as a ‘complex mediated act’ (Vygotsky, 1978). Such mediation is situated in and influenced by artefacts including signs, tools, culture, and history. The ideas of Leont’ev build on this moving from individual action to collective activity. It is this ‘second generation activity theory’ (Engeström, 2009, p.54-55) that considers the rules, community, and divisions of labour within any human activity system. Thus we begin to see the complex inter-relationships present within any given learning situation, with each element having an effect on the other. The ‘response’ in Vygotsky’s theory becomes seen as an ‘object’ (when translated from Russian), it is no longer depicted as one thing instead it is shown as an oval - open to ambiguity and interpretation (Engeström, 2009). Third Generation Activity Theory then takes the concept a step further to explore the potential for a ‘jointly constructed object’ (Engeström, 2009, p.56) that is a collaboratively agreed and envisaged shared object.

Philosophically, activity theory is formed partly from Marxist roots, with the notion that human activity impacts on what would otherwise be ‘mechanical materialism’ or ‘idealism’, that change is brought about through ‘practical-critical activity’ (Engeström & Miettinen, 2005, p.3). ‘Human nature is not found within the human individual but in the movement between the inside and outside, in the worlds of artefact use and artefact creation’ (Engeström & Miettinen, 2005, p.5). Features of pragmatism are apparent with an emphasis on the part humans have to play
in their world, goals are formulated through activity, as milestones, ‘not its purpose or ultimate motive’ (Engeström & Miettinen, 2005, p.6). It is the activity that is important, not the original object.

As Peim (2009) highlights, any attempt to interpret a subject, in this case learning, is ‘subject to critique if it is examined through the perspective of another, or other, discourses that do not share its fundamental premises’ (p.167). In this case Peim highlights a potential lack of political contextualisation within Engeström’s third generation activity theory. Going on to state that the theory is ‘not content to represent itself merely as a system of description, it also wants to be a thoroughly positivist technology of improvement’ (Peim, 2009, p.167). It is apparent that how the theory is used; as a lens, a metaphor, a heuristic device, a tool to explore the activity between subject and object, or a solution to a problem, will impact on the outcome achieved. Indeed, how the ‘object’ or ‘outcome’ is viewed and the inter-relationship between the two, will affect the use of activity theory.

Assumptions can be dangerous and although politics are not explicit within Engeström’s third generation activity theory this does not mean they are to be ignored. Activity Theory in its diagrammatic form is symbolic, to be used as a tool to analyse activity not as a model of learning. In this case activity theory is being used as a lens to bring to light the complex and dynamic inter-relationships between young children and their environment, to explore what learning may look like for participants in the early years and whether it is possible to reach a shared object.

This analysis is focused on the way in which the early years environment; the artefacts, rules, community, division of labour can be seen to impact on children’s learning. Through a consideration of the activity taking place within this environment, potential contradictions in practice are brought to light.

The Cultural, Historical Context
Activity Theory is known in its fullest form as ‘Cultural, Historical, Activity Theory’ or CHAT (Wells & Claxton, 2002), highlighting the importance of culture and history in this educational context.

The human activity that takes place within an early years context is built upon foundations that stretch back generations, each one building on the one before.
It is an area of policy subject to ‘hyperactive policy change’ (Ball, 2013, p.xi), a central pillar of welfare policy along with social security, employment, housing and health (Hudson, Kuhner & Lowe, 2008). ‘Education is seen as a crucial factor in ensuring economic productivity and competitiveness’ (Ball, 2013, p.1) within the context of globalisation.

Historically the requirement for children to be in education can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution and the Elementary Education Act 1870 (Gillard, 2011). With a focus on welfare, schooling was provided as a way of protecting children ‘against the evils of life ‘in the gutter’ (Woodhead, 1989, p.6). Education became a tool which would impact on improved living standards and enhanced social mobility, enabling a readiness to work (Abbott, Rathbone & Whitebread, 2013). Public interest in protecting children from harm soon extended to include progressing children’s learning and development.

The need for local authorities to regulate early years provision came into force with the Children Act 1989 (TACTYC, 2011). Following on from this the ‘National Standards for Day Care and Childminding’ were introduced in 2001, the ‘Desirable Outcomes for Children’s Learning on Entering Compulsory Education’ in 1996, and the EYFS was introduced in 2008 (TACTYC, 2011). This regulation of childcare and educational provision brought with it a need to objectify and rationalise social problems with the ‘approach that a physicist or engineer brings to scientific or technological problems’ (Elias, 1978, p.31). Rather than taking a holistic approach to examine children’s learning within early years settings, a system of performativity is seen.

‘Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation, or even a system of ‘terror’ in Lyotard’s words, that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change’ (Ball, 2004, p.143).

As Ball (2004, p.151) goes on to explore, ‘technologies of accountability’ have ‘organising effects’, adopting particular policies and practices in order to meet perceived performance requirements. The political environment and the history in which it sits thus impacts on the education provision children are in. The EYFS (Department for Education, 2014) stipulates the learning and development, assessment and welfare requirements for early years settings. Settings are judged on their provision in these areas as well as the progress children are seen
to make towards the achievement of Early Learning Goals in the term before they turn five years of age.

The culture of early years provision within England is formed from this history and perceived purpose of education. There is an emphasis on ‘school readiness’ (Department for Education, 2014) and activity in settings is focused accordingly. The developing discourse is ‘intimately connected to institutional and social practices that have a profound effect on how we live our lives what we can do and what can be done to us’ (Burr, 2015, p.87). The environment, resources, language used and staffing are all orientated towards this regime of performativity, with an ‘object’ of ensuring children achieve Early Learning Goals, linked to school readiness, and an ‘outcome’ of meeting statutory requirements.

However if a pragmatist position is taken, in keeping with the theoretical underpinning of activity theory, then we begin to see how goals can be formed through activity as milestones rather than the ultimate purpose or object of the activity taking place (Biesta, 2014; Elkjaer, 2009; Pratt, 2006). No longer can objects be seen as ‘raw material for the formation of logical operations in the subject … objects become cultural entities’ (Engeström, 2009, p.54). Children in the early years are not sitting in isolation but within a community (Wenger, 2009), engaging in activity together with peers, practitioners and others. Each member of such a community is in turn bringing with them their own cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986); their identity, culture and experience which impacts on the activity taking place. Each element of the activity system can be said to embody a culture whether that be the language used, the educational philosophy impacting on the resources provided, the expectations, or the way practitioners interact with children, their parents and others. The activity between one subject and their object may be very different to another’s.

In this brief exploration of the history and culture surrounding children in early years education the complexity of human activity is starting to come to light. It is already apparent that the culture of participants combined with how the EYFS requirements are interpreted, will impact on the artefacts, rules, community, and division of labour within an early years setting. This in turn will influence the activity taking place, moving from the acquisitional position of a simple stimulus : response, to a ‘complex mediated act’ (Vygotsky, 1978).
The macro environment of the early years appears to view learning as acquisitional, and yet at the same time the concept of the child as a participant in education highlights possible tensions in praxis. Through unpicking the activity taking place within each of these positions the potential opportunity of moving towards a shared object is presented.

**Learning as mediated knowledge**

Taking an acquisitional view of young children’s learning, and examining this through the theoretical frame of activity theory, it is possible to examine and problematize the object orientated activity taking place within early years settings. Engeström’s (2009) modelling of second generation activity theory as collective activity, helps to demonstrate how the artefacts, rules, division of labour and even the community and the subjects are influenced by statute and policy.

In the model below the Ofsted Inspector (as the official body that inspects early years settings against the regulatory standards), is positioned as the subject and children as their object, the outcome is seen as ‘school readiness’.

![Diagram](image.png)

(Adapted from Engeström, 2009, p.55)

**Figure 1: The Ofsted Inspector as the subject**

What his modelling brings to light is not only the acquisitional nature of learning (the early learning goals as an object to be achieved), but the object orientated activity taking place. It ‘gives rise to the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of actions’ (Daniels et al., 2007, p.129); the ‘how’ is *the space in between* each element representing
the early years setting and the activity which is ‘tested’ during the inspection process.

Engeström’s (2005, p.31) ‘complex modelling’ of activity supports this idea where he introduces an inherent dynamism to this static portrayal of activity theory above. Instead of simple lines we see arrows between elements of the activity system. Roth (2004) adds to this when he introduces the role of Marx’s (1973) production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Marx (1973) emphasises the complex relationship between these concepts, with the ‘social accident’ of distribution affecting the extent of production. Exchange is standing between production and distribution ‘as formal social movement’ (p.31) and consumption as the terminal point. Although Marx was discussing the approach of political economists, rather than a regulatory body such as Ofsted, the view of production as an end in itself remain apparent.

This application of Marxist theory and arrows representing the dynamism of activity, brings meaning to the space in between, highlighting the inherent dynamic system of activity taking place, and how ‘participation in activity changes the identity of the subject’ (Roth, 2004, p.4). Where the Ofsted Inspector was seen as the subject and children as the object, the activity taking place was the inspection process within the early years setting. The activity of inspection; the social accident of distribution and the social movement taking place is mediated by the elements of the activity system and the collective activity of Ofsted Inspector, children, parents, and setting practitioners. Potential contradictions between elements are seen (Engeström, 2005, p.31) providing for a ‘multitude of relations within the triangular structure of activity’ (Engeström, 2015, p.62); the importance of examining the systematic whole is emphasised.
Figure 2: The contradictions of activity

When considering the outcome of such object orientated activity the relationship between ‘object’ and ‘outcome’ comes into question, whether the outcome is always a result of the object or whether the object is derived from the outcome. The potential contradictions between elements and how collective activity is mediated brings into question whether such activity will in fact ensure school readiness and highlights a need to not only define what we mean by ‘school readiness’ (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012), but also whether an acquisitional model of learning supports this.

The performative (Ball, 2013) nature of the sector means that the role of the early years practitioner becomes one of supporting the acquisition of knowledge in order to achieve the Early Learning Goals (Department for Education, 2014). These goals, or objectives, ‘become end-points, towards which we are driving all the children’ (Pratt, 2006, p.20, italics in original). The outcome of such activity is seen as the result of the object orientation; in the case of the EYFS it represents ‘the potential of any individual setting to deliver the best possible outcomes for children’ (Department for Education, 2014, p.10), promoting teaching and learning as a process to ensure ‘children’s school readiness’ (p.5).

Ernest’s (1991) description of a technical pragmatist ideology further emphasises the context in which early years settings appear to operate in England, with a distinct link between knowledge, and the view of the child; seen as ‘an empty vessel needing to be filled up with facts and skills’ (Ernest, 1991, p.155). Dickens
and Victorian England resonate bringing echoes of history into modern day education.

This concept of learning as acquisitional has come about and is reinforced through a history of educational policy and legislative discourse, there appears to be an agreed and shared object of knowledge acquisition in order to realise an outcome of school readiness. The focus appears to be on learning outcomes and the child is seen as an object to be filled with such knowledge. The emphasis is placed on the achievement of ‘goals’, of being able to perform a certain task by a certain age, of ‘prophetic pedagogy’ (Moss, 2016, p.172). If instead, we start to consider school readiness as something other than an ability to achieve Early Learning Goals, then we start to see a more dynamic view of learning as a process rather than a simple acquisition of knowledge. A socio-cultural position can be taken, positioning the child in education, as I shall go on to explore.

Learning as knowing through collective activity

If the lens of activity theory is refocused in order to examine learning from the child, as a process of knowing rather than the acquisition of knowledge, then the dynamism of activity becomes positive rather than contradictory. The pragmatist position of goals being formed through activity as milestones, rather than as an object to be achieved comes into view, and the relationship between the ‘object’ and ‘outcome’ of their activity are emphasised.

Elias (1978) argues that individuals cannot be separated from society, that the action of individuals in society, the history they bring, their knowledge, culture, identity, balances of power, their dispositions, create a web of interdependency with each element acting upon another. It is this ‘figuration of interdependent individuals’ (Elias, 1978, p.15) that make up society. In education similar webs of interdependence can be seen made up of children, parents, practitioners, and other professionals each bringing their history and culture, directed and linked through balances of power, rules and artefacts interacting on the ‘education’ or activity taking place. The children are in the education rather than separate and disparate, viewed with a participative lens (Sfard, 1998); they are impacting on it, forming it, becoming and knowing. If we are to consider children in education then there is a need to examine activity form a child’s point of view.
The object-orientated aspect of a child’s activity may be difficult to identify (Hakkarainen, 2005), indeed the concept of object-orientation brings an acquisitional position back into view, which is something a participatory metaphor (Sfard, 1998) is moving away from. Instead the object can be viewed as an evolving process of knowing that develops through activity; ‘not something with which thinking sets out, but something with which it ends’ (Dewey, 1916, p.334).

Having said this it is perceivable that a young child may enter an early years setting at the beginning of the day looking forward to making patterns in the sand tray with the cars as this was something they had done the day before and particularly enjoyed. The ‘what and why’ of activity taking place in such a scenario can be explored using collective activity theory as portrayed below:

![Diagram of Early Years Activity with the child as the subject](image)

(Engeström, 2005; Roth, 2004)

**Figure 3: Early Years Activity with the child as the subject**

The modelling of a child’s activity here emphasises the potential impact of the mediating artefacts, rules, community and division of labour on the outcome of activity. The outcome here has not been identified as rather than an entity to be achieved it is a form of knowing that comes about through the child’s activity. The potential impact of contradictions become clear; it may be that there is no sand tray or cars out today, or that the child cannot access the language he or she needs to ask for these resources. The rules would be the statutory requirements, but there may also be setting expectations the child should adhere to; perhaps
the setting does not allow small world resources such as cars to be taken to the sand tray.

A picture starts to develop of not only the individual action of the child and their object mediated by artefacts, but also the effect of the rules, division of labour, and community on the potential of that activity. ‘Contradictions give rise to transformations in the object and motive of the activity’ (Daniels et al., 2007, p.129), the object and the outcome are constructed and redefined through activity. The concept of ‘school readiness’, as portrayed within the EYFS (Department for Education, 2014), may or may not be the outcome.

Learning becomes viewed as a social enterprise, of being, of lived experiences; one full of uncertainty wonder and surprise, one that is constructed by those participating in the experience; the child, teacher, parent and community. Learning and the education surrounding this becomes a ‘psychological growth and maturing of human beings, making possible the growth of a rich, original, socially and individually normal personality’ (Cagliari et al., 2016, p.41).

The theoretical frame of activity theory as used here emphasises the role of the early years practitioner, not only in ensuring that statutory requirements are met but also in valuing the child’s activity in education and the identification of milestones through their learning. The role of early years practitioner moves from being a provider of knowledge to a scaffolder of knowing.

Each system of activity portrays different epistemologies of learning bringing to light some of the tensions apparent within early years discourse, and the central contradictions in practice (Nummijaki & Engeström, 2010). The purpose of early years settings as giving ‘children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life’ (Department for Education, 2014, p.5). Alternatively, the purpose of early years settings as providing environments conducive for children to actively participate in education as a knowledgeable other, strong and capable, a member of that learning community.

The use of third generation activity theory (Engeström, 2009, p.55) supports the analysis of such challenges; contradictions between activity systems result in gaps, overlap and discoordination, the perspective of activity theory brings these contradictions to light, facilitating ‘boundary crossing’ (p.59) in order to acquire a
new way of working which is collaboratively planned and agreed. The following section explores how this modelling may be used to analyse the tensions between learning as ‘knowledge’ or ‘knowing’, and to explore the interrelations between such differing epistemological views of, and therefore approaches to, education.

Co-construction of a shared object
This paper has looked at two subjects in early years education – the Ofsted Inspector as the regulatory body, and the child. Each has been represented through a different system of activity and assumes a different epistemological position of learning – learning as acquisitional with knowledge as an entity, or learning as a participatory process of knowing.

Third Generation Activity Theory presents a conceptual tool for ‘understanding dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems’ (Engeström, 2009, p.55). It allows for the identification of potential barriers to collaboration, facilitating the possibility of expansive transformations with potential to reconceptualise activity and embrace a ‘radically wider horizon of possibilities’ (Engeström, 2009, p.57).

Using the same scenario as in figure 3 interacting activity systems theoretically create a shared object which, when taking a socio-cultural position may facilitate a cross-boundary move from learning as knowing through participation, and learning as the acquisition of knowledge, to learning as a shared construct. The figure below uses Engeström’s modelling and brings the early years practitioner’s activity system into view, portraying how milestones may form the third object.
Figure 4: Interacting activity systems as a lens for viewing children’s learning

What this modelling highlights is a positivist stance at play with a ‘technology of improvement’ (Peim, 2009, p.168) and an expectation that a shared object is achievable. The dynamism of each system is not represented, and although a shared object is portrayed here what is interesting is the lack of outcome. Perhaps this is because the outcome is derived from the shared object as a ‘possibility of expansive transformations’ (Engeström, 2009, p.57). Contradictions between systems are aggravated, participants deviate from established norms, the ‘Object 3’ becomes a moving target and thus the outcome of such activity is derived from the activity itself not as a pre-established expectation.

Each participant within the system of activity brings with them their own history and culture impacting on the collective activity. It would be interesting to explore in more detail the activity of different participants within an early years setting in order to bring to light the ‘contradictions between adults’ and children’s conceptions of the common object’ (Hakkarainen, 2005, p.237).

However as Sfard (1998) argues, viewing learning purely as participatory is ‘neither desirable nor possible’ (p.9). Equally an acquisitional position dehumanises the learning process. A shared object can instead be seen in this light as a process of learning, a move from ‘unknowing’ to ‘knowing’, highlighting that something has been acquired. Learning is ‘only possible thanks to our ability to transfer existing conceptual schemes into new contexts’ (Sfard, 1998, p.10).
What a participatory lens does allow for is a move away from a didactic style of teaching, of filling a child with knowledge, to an appreciation of the learning taking place through being part of a community of practice (Pratt & Back, 2013; Wenger, 2009). Learning is seen as doing, as belonging, and as experience (Wenger, 2009).

This paper has been examining two different epistemological positions, two different views of what learning is considered to be. It highlights the contradictions early years practitioners are faced with in terms of a need to evidence their work within statutory regulations and yet positioning the child as an active participant in their education; not vessels to be filled with facts (Dickens, 1854).

**Bringing to light contradictions in co-construction through voice, mediation, and power**

Using activity theory as a theoretical lens through which to identify the activity of participants in early years education has brought to light contradictions. Such ambiguities have already been set out above and highlight how the inconsistencies in object mean that the ‘outcomes’ may not take the form originally intended (Biesta, 2005).

‘Different frames exist simultaneously in day-care work, and there are tensions between them’ (Hakkarainen, 2005, p.240). Children’s activity is jointly constructed by the child and the early years practitioner. The practitioner creates the environment the child finds themselves in, the child’s activity is then situated within that environment, and their ‘learning’ is mediated by the resources and community around them.

The importance of a multi-voiced system and the consideration of children in education, emphasises the need for the child’s voice to be heard. In the figures above the activity systems have merely portrayed an adult’s view of the child’s object and consequent activity. Children are socially constructed as different to adults, their voice comes from the margins and an attempt to understand the child through an adult’s position means they instead become silenced (Murris, 2013). Children are being viewed as objects needing to be taught ‘rather than rational, collaborative, active participants in knowledge making’ (Haynes, 2009, p.31).

Children may have a different view of the environment then the adult had perceived, and they may not use mediating artefacts in the way in which they
were intended (Vygotsky, 1978). Activity towards an object is mediated by artefacts; the concept that such artefacts may not be used in the way they were intended positions the child as deficit in some way. If we are to consider the view of the child as deficit and unable to use stimuli to good effect then the whole concept of co-constructing shared objects comes into question.

A further contradiction presented through the theorisation of activity theory is that brought about by the triangular modelling approach. Each element of the system is portrayed in the model as having a uniformity of effect on the activity taking place. In a similar vein each activity system within the interacting systems model is of equal size and importance. In reality there will be power differentials at play with elements such as the rules of legislation and the inspection process perhaps having more of an impact on the learning taking place and how this is viewed then perhaps the artefacts that are mediating the activity.

The language that is used and the positioning of participants in learning (the child, Ofsted Inspector, the practitioner, the parent) and the discourses surrounding these produces subjectivity (Burr, 2015). Children are the subject of discourse, being positioned as different, deficit, less able, then adults. The role of early years settings are thus constructed accordingly – to keep children safe from harm, to support the acquisition of knowledge, to make children ready for school. The power children have and their ability to affect and construct their own learning is thus subject to how they are positioned.

Such power and confusion of object characterises and highlights potential for change. Instead of the child achieving their original object related outcome, their activity, their object-orientated actions, may change and a different outcome results. The importance of the environment comes to the fore as does the interaction between the individual and the formation of knowledge. Learning occurs both at an individual and at a social level; a concept that is not confined to the classroom.

Implications for Practice
This paper has looked to use activity theory as a framework for examining learning through the lens of two key participants in early years education; the regulatory body as the subject in one activity system and the child in another. This approach has brought to light a need for early years practitioners to take on
a role of bridging a metaphorical gap between a system of performativity at macro level and the needs of the child in education at micro level.

When viewing the term ‘learning’ through a social constructionist lens it becomes apparent that ‘learning’ and how the term is defined, means different things to different people in different situations (Biesta, 2005). Language, and our use of it ‘constructs the world as we perceive it and has real consequences’ (Burr, 2015, p.52). When considering the facilitation of learning in early years education how ‘learning’ is constructed, understood, and interpreted will inevitably have consequences in terms of the setting facilities, staff, resources, adult and child interaction, and pedagogical approach.

The culture of the setting, the practitioners, the children and their families all impact on the activity of learning; ‘different cultures create different versions of childhood’ (Edwards, 2004, p.87). Instead of asking what outcome we are looking for thus directing our activity at the acquisition of such related knowledge, a pragmatist approach (Biesta, 2014; Elkjaer, 2009) needs to be taken, viewing objects as milestones formulated through activity.

What is clear is the importance of recognising possibilities for a shared construction of knowledge through a process of knowing how to be a pre-schooler, a child in education as an active participant in their learning. Through adopting this position the recognition of the need to listen to the voice of the child and the power differentials at play comes to the fore.

Instead of focusing activity in the early years on the object of meeting Ofsted requirements, the positioning of the child as ‘knowing’ creates opportunity for the role of the early years practitioner to act as a bridge between child and statute. To focus on the space in between generated by activity, to see goals as formulated through activity, as milestones, ‘not its purpose or ultimate motive’ (Engeström & Miettinen, 2005, p.6).

It is this ‘space in between’ explicit learning objectives that becomes important, not the objective itself.

Reference List


369


Woodhead, M. (1989) "School starts at five ... or four years old?" The rationale for changing admission policies in England and Wales'. *Education Policy,* 4 (1). pp 1-23.
This appendix details a potential journal to which I may submit a rewritten version of this paper. Below I have set out a justification of my journal choice with consideration of the content of this paper and intended audience.

**Potential Journal:** European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

**Impact Factor:** 0.612 in 2015

**Ranking:** 160/230 (Education and Educational Research)

**Justification:**

The aim of this journal is to provide a forum for original research in early childhood education with a focus on European practice. Its focus on early childhood fits well with this paper and the implications of *the space in between* to practice within early childhood education and care. The European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ) considers issues within early childhood education policy and practice which impacts all Ofsted registered early years settings, and accepts conceptual issues such as those addressed within this paper. The European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA), of which this journal is part, seeks to sustain and develop tradition of thought based on early pioneers such as Vygotsky at the same time as exploring new paradigms. This paper sits well within these aims through the use of activity theory as a theoretical frame Vygotsky’s concepts and ideas form a thread throughout, as well as the exploration of pragmatism as a relatively new paradigm of thought within the early years sector.

In addition the journal is one of only four early years journals indexed by the Institute for Scientific Information, its peer review process and scholarship raises the status of early years practice and those that work in the sector. I would like the opportunity to be part of this and feel that my role as a Lecturer within Early Childhood Studies would be strengthened through publication in such a journal.
Abstract
This paper examines the implications for researching parental choice of alternative early years education that result from the ontological and epistemological choices of the researcher.

Comparing two prominent paradigms in social research, namely critical realism and social constructionism, the implications for the investigator and the investigated are emphasised. Critical realists hold that there is a truth out there to be found, whilst acknowledging the dualism of social structure and human agency. Social constructionists argue that there is not one truth or reality outside of human construction and that knowledge is relative to history, culture and social interaction.

No claim is made with regards to whether one paradigm is more right than another, instead the implications for methodology and for quality in the research process practice is highlighted.

Whilst each paradigm brings with it differences in terms of how the world is viewed, similarities emerge in terms of a dualism between social structure and human agency. Methodological pluralism is highlighted as a research design appropriate to both paradigms which facilitates the elaboration and expansion of ideas and contradictions

Introduction
This paper seeks to explore different approaches to framing research in the early years (from birth to five), with particular reference to examining why families may seek to access alternatives to mainstream education for their young children.

‘Research’ in this context has been defined as a careful and systematic study and investigation into a phenomenon. How a researcher views the world (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology) is said to form a basis for any enquiry (Crotty, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, the ontological and epistemological choices or assumptions made will mould and direct not only how the research is carried out but also the framing of the research question, and
ultimately the validity and reliability (or trustworthiness and confidence) of the investigation.

‘Without understanding these choices and their implications for research practice, much of our knowledge … may suffer from superficiality and rely on overly descriptive accounts and narratives’ (Peters et al., 2013, p.336).

Such epistemological and ontological choices, and framing of a research question, the positioning of the researcher, and the nature of knowledge can be referred to as a ‘paradigm’, a set of basic beliefs which defines the ‘nature of the “world,” the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.107).

The use of paradigms situates the researcher ontologically as a realist or an idealist, and epistemologically as a objectivist, constructivist or subjectivist (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Crotty, 2015; Smith, 1983). On the one hand there is a search for facts, on the other a belief that one cannot separate the subject from the human mind, emotions and values (Smith, 1983). The paradigm wars of the 1980s (Gage, 2009) brought with it a blurring of the lines and today, rather than viewing paradigms as diametric opposites with positivists (realist / objectivist) at one end of the scale and interpretivists (idealist / constructivist or subjectivist) at the other, I argue that they form a continuous scale of thought one flowing into the next. The level of positivism or interpretivism will depend upon where on the scale the paradigm sits, and the appropriateness of a particular paradigm relative to the research question.

Hammersley (2014) claims that it is not possible to give an exhaustive list of such paradigms, more-over such paradigms are frequently used by different authors in different ways.

‘Instead, they are usually employed by researchers in socially situated ways: to distinguish their own approach from that of others, with the same term being used in somewhat different, and sometimes conflicting, ways on different occasions’ (Hammersley, 2014, p.3).

This confusion of interpretation emphasises the importance of defining the paradigm as I shall go on to explore through the use of ‘Critical Realism’ and ‘Social Constructionism’. Critical realism and social constructionism are examples of two paradigms with different socially situated views of the world. The former holds the view that there is a truth out there to be found, the latter that
knowledge is relative to history, culture and social interaction (Burr, 2015). Both paradigms are compatible to the exploration of why families may seek to access alternatives to mainstream education for their young children, both are socially situated, and both enable the ‘careful and systematic study’ of the topic. However the difference lies in the positioning of the researcher and the relationship between what Smith (1983) describes as the investigator and the investigated, the relationship between the facts and values in the process of investigation, and the goal of the investigation as I shall now go on to explore within the context of why families may seek to access alternatives to mainstream education for their young children.

**Critical Realism**

Critical realism seeks to uncover the implicit assumptions of social policy and ways of thinking. The social world consists of ‘real objects and structures that have causal powers’ (Burr, 2015, p.108). Such ‘causation’ being distinguished by its contribution, or lack of contribution, to the action (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Based on the ideas of Roy Bhaskar (Burr, 2015), critical realism was established as a critique against the conventional positions of positivism and constructionism. Adopting a realist ontology, critical realists acknowledge that social and material realities exist independently of our awareness of it. This combined with a relativist epistemology (knowledge is relative to time, place, culture and history), means that the truth of knowledge is operating within a framework of assumptions that considers how knowledge is transformed by human activity (Archer et al., 2016). The goal within this paradigm is to uncover the causal mechanisms (contributing instrumental factors) which result in a choice to access alternative education, posing the question ‘What factors influence parents to access alternative early education for their children?’

A critical realist approach to examining a choice of alternative education considers not only the objective facts which influence this decision but also the effect of human activity, a reality that is ‘multi-dimensional and stratified and also open and differentiated’ (Bhaskar & Lawson, 1998, p.5). Hence a theory of ‘alternative education choice’ that could be applied in different localities and still achieve the same outcome, or ‘truth’. This area of research is necessarily
situated within the social system and as such considerations of the social world, history and culture come to the fore.

However ‘critical realism is not a homogeneous movement in social science. There are many different perspectives and developments’ (Danermark et al., 2005, p.1). One such perspective is Archer’s (2010) ‘morphogenetic model’ which considers the influences of social structure and human agency, referring to morphogenesis as ‘the complex interchanges that produce change in a system’s given form, structure or state’ (Archer, 2010, p.228). The term ‘morphogenesis’ is derived from biological science and the formation of cells into shapes (Hogan, 1999). It is interesting to note the use of a scientific term within this context and I question whether this is an attempt to bring a notion of validity to social research, as the confidence that science brings with it ‘stems from a conviction that scientific knowledge is both accurate and certain’ (Crotty, 2015, p.27).

This critical realist approach gives quality in the form of structure to the research process. There is a recognition of the complexities of social research. Questions of social structure, human agency, degree of freedom, stringency of constraints, and system stability or instability are raised. Research within this paradigm considers each of these features, setting the framework for the investigation.

Archer argues for dualism between social structure and human agency. One does not come before the other, instead they move together and are formed by each other. Social structure is considered to be ‘real’ existing outside of the human mind, but one that is influenced by human interaction - a human product which in turn ‘shapes individuals and influences their interaction’ (Archer, 2010, p.225). The importance of humans as agents, making their own decisions is emphasised as is the role of history. Within the focus for this piece of research, there is a need to bring to light this dualism between social structure, parents as agents, and how this dualism influences choice of educational provision.

In considering this dualism, Archer (2010) poses the question –

‘When can actors be transformative (which involves specification of degrees of freedom) and when are they trapped into replication (which involves specification of the stringency of constraints)?’ (p.231)

Is there something (a degree of freedom) that enables parents (as actors) to be transformative by making a choice for alternative education, as opposed to being ‘trapped into replication’ thus attending the local mainstream provision? What
stringency of constraints are apparent? This may be in terms of finance, legislation, transport or perhaps culture. The potential for change is highlighted through the conditions under which parents may capitalise on such constraints but also a systems stability or instability (Archer, 2010).

One could argue that the current climate of educational reform has brought with it instability, no longer do all children in a locality attend the local school, instead there is choice driven by a policy of marketization (Ward & Eden, 2013). When considering the ‘stringency of the constraints’, or conversely the ‘degrees of freedom’, points to consider may include legislative requirements for children to attend school, local and national policy, funding, transport links, history, culture and capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Archer’s critical realist approach to research using morphogenesis highlights the importance of examining the relational (the interplay between structure and action). Such an enquiry frames the search for mechanism(s), and ‘the tendencies emanating from them’ (Archer, 1998b, p.196). These tendencies trigger the action of parents (as actors) to be transformative, to pro-actively choose alternative education for their young children. It is this search for causal mechanisms that forms the root of critical realist research, and the framework for the research questions. Quality within the research process is ensured through the use of theoretical frame, the role of the investigator remains distinct and separate from the investigated, their task is to draw out from the research process how a participant’s culture and history impacts on their choice. It may be that such decisions have been based on intrinsic (embodied and potentially unconsidered) thoughts and feelings although this raises the question as to whether intrinsic ideas can be considered as fact.

It is this need for fact, (as opposed to values), that raises the principle limitation of a critical realist approach to research and that is individualism. ‘Explanations of social phenomena require being subject to critique’ (Danermark et al., 2005, p.195), causal mechanisms for choice of alternatives to mainstream education are concept-dependent. The role of the researcher, their positioning of the research question, and selection of participants will impact on any claims made. In attempting to identify causal mechanisms research data will be interrogated, coding systems may be applied in order to identify trends similarities or
differences, and in so doing the complexities of social interaction are simplified and potentially unacknowledged.

Critical realism was formed as an attempt to span the bridge between positivism and constructionism seeking to address the problem of scientific positivism within social research through the recognition of individualism. In attempting to identify mechanisms and causation ‘the fallacy of universal certainty’ (Carter & New, 2004, p.184) is brought into view. As social constructionists would claim, universal certainty is not possible when we are considering human values and practices (Burr, 2015).

Critiques of critical realism may well take a more radical social constructionist view of the world with a relativist ontology where constructions of the world are alterable and ‘apprehended in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experimentally based, local and specific in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.110). According to Gergen (2005) ‘constructionist resistance continues: such terms as ‘real’, ‘true’, ‘rational’ and ‘objective’ possess deadly potentials’ (p.12). It is this alternative paradigm which I shall now go on to explore through a social constructionist approach to researching parental choice of alternative education.

Social Constructionism
Social constructionism posits that knowledge is not discovered but constructed from an interaction between human beings and the world they are interpreting. ‘Meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them’ (Crotty, 2015, p.43). In positioning myself as a social constructionist I am asking whether parent’s interpretations of education influence their decisions. That their own experiences, and interpretations of the purpose of education, may construct their view of education for their child(ren).

In this paradigm there is no truth that exists outside of the human construct, each participant in the research process will bring with them different values, experiences, and interpretations which will construct education for them in different ways. As the researcher I also bring with me my own history, culture and beliefs which will in turn impact on my relationship with those participating in the research process.
Unlike a critical realist approach of searching for causal mechanisms this social constructionist paradigm seeks to construct meaning through engaging with parents that choose alternatives to mainstream early years education. There is no truth (or fact) that I am seeking to uncover, education is not seen as an object to interrogate but as constructed by participants. With a constructionist ontology and constructionist epistemology the question is phrased in order to tease out the unconscious, to bring to light interpretations that render it more likely a parent would choose an alternative early years education provision. The goal of the research and the research question thus considers ‘How do parents’ experiences and interpretations of education construct choice of educational provision for their children?’

Burr (2015) posits that a social constructionist may approach research taking a critical stance for taken-for-granted knowledge. Observations of the world will not necessarily reveal a truth, we must ‘be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be’ (Burr, 2015, p.3). Today’s educational provision (objectified here in order to construct and deliberate meaning), is a construction of culture and history, dependent on social and economic arrangements, on politics and social action. Through daily interaction within society ‘shared versions of knowledge are constructed’ (Burr, 2015, p.5). ‘Education’, what it looks like, its purpose and place, has formed over time, as a construct for policy as a system to meet the needs of children in British society, as a measure of performance within a global market (Ball, 2013). The question arises as to whether such an objectified (real and true), single system of provision can possibly meet the needs of all families when human beings are themselves socially constructed.

Social constructionism was developed as a critique to positivism, opening the doors to ‘broadscale political and moral critique’ (Gergen, 2005, p.8). Emerging from a variety of influences the rejection of ultimate truth and structuralism (a hidden structure or rule underlying behaviour) is epitomised, emphasising ‘the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation-dependent ways of life’ (Burr, 2015, p.14). As truth claims were traced to relationship, there was not one way of understanding, instead understanding was a construction formed from social relationships, values, history, culture and language.

We as individuals operate within a society that is relational, brought into being through human interaction (Elias, 1978, p.15), and it is through this inhabitation
in society that we form our interpretations and beliefs in order to construct meaning. There is a dualism between social structure and human agency, each impacting on the other as humans construct their world through their interactions (Burr, 2015). In the case of parents choosing alternatives to mainstream education they are making a choice rather than following a prescribed societal pattern. Such choice is informed by experiences, culture and knowledge facilitating a construction of education and what this means for them and their children.

The researcher becomes part of the research process, from their initial identification of participants to the setting of the scene and the formulation of questions posed. ‘The researcher must view the research as a co-production between themselves and the people they are researching’ (Burr, 2015, p.172). This in itself brings with it issues of power, the power of the researcher in how participants are researched and the use of language both during the research and in the construction of participant accounts. Rather than interpreting participant contributions and offering a truth, collaboration between researcher and participant is needed. Participants could have the opportunity to comment on the data recorded and the researcher’s interpretations before it is published thus adding quality through strength and confidence in the research findings.

This examination of a social constructionist approach to researching educational choice brings with it a certain messiness, as ‘every construction is subject to deconstruction and reconstruction’ (Garrison, 2003, p.358). Such ‘deconstruction’ is a philosophy connected with Jacques Derrida (Irwin, 2013) as a perspective for searching and re-evaluating concepts and praxis, particularly for interpreting text. This concept of deconstruction seems particularly relevant when considering educational choice, as unlike realist approaches to research which search for causal mechanism, social constructionism, and with it deconstruction, highlights an interest in the ‘complicit practices and excessive differences rather than unveiling structures and illuminating the forces and relations of production’ (Lather, 2003, p.260).

If we can avoid impulses toward elimination, the rage to order, and the desire for unity and singularity, we can anticipate the continued flourishing of qualitative inquiry, full of serendipitous incidents and generative expansions (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p.604).
Instability of meaning comes to the fore and with it a question over quality and the rigour of research in this context. Rather than a search for truth or validity, social constructionist research instead seeks trustworthiness, confidence and transparency. I am seeking to deconstruct parent’s interpretations, to re-evaluate pathways towards a parent’s construction of education for their children. I am not seeking a single path but a network of tracks each leading to their final choice but along different routes, looking at ‘complexity and contingency, ‘without predictability” (Lather, 2003, p.261).

Reflecting on Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ as a perspective for social constructionist research; I wish to deconstruct the words and actions of parents and assumed routes to school choice, to dismantle the construct of structures, forces and relationships which may influence school choice. As such it would appear appropriate to investigate parental choice across a range of alternative early years provision, to consider time, space and person (Denzin, 1989), selecting different settings, involving different participants and also to consider different times for the research to take place.

An alternative view is to consider Derrida’s theory of deconstruction as a methodology in itself, as an engagement with a way of thinking (Rolfe, 2004). Derrida himself would argue with this stating that deconstruction is not an analysis or a critique, a method, an act, or an operation. Derrida argued that the word deconstruction was not a good word as it brought with it an idea and with this idea a construction of thought (Derrida, 1985). But perhaps this does fit with a social constructionist approach, I am interpreting Derrida’s work I review his writings and interpret his deconstructive ideas in order to think differently about education and educational choice. In doing so I follow in Winter’s (2013) footsteps, apologising to Derrida as I interpret his writings for my own purpose, not to deconstruct texts but to deconstruct participant ideas, thoughts, and interpretations of education and their own educational history.

It is easy to critique this approach, as Derrida himself no doubt would, in the very act of deconstruction there is potential to bring about a certain construction. Critical realists would argue that this approach holds no validity, truth or reliability. Instead I argue for trustworthiness, bringing the participant into the research process, involving them in their deconstruction of idea and my interpretation of such. Being transparent in the research process and holding myself to account in
my role and my potential impact on the research process. Within this paradigm I do not search for a truth or single causal mechanism, instead I seek to bring to light interpretations and experiences of education which may render it more likely that alternatives to mainstream education are chosen.

Methodological Pluralism
The research paradigms of critical realism and social constructionism position the researcher and the researched ontologically and epistemologically as already outlined above. Methodology sits between paradigm and research method, it is the research design that shapes our choice, use of particular method, and links to the desired outcomes (Crotty, 2015). However, as Hammersley (2014) highlights, the production of typologies where ontology, epistemology, and methodology all neatly slot into ‘relative boxes’ produce just one view of paradigms and their relationship to research.

I am seeking to investigate approaches to educational choice, to highlight difference and instability. As such I would argue against Crotty’s inclination to neatly link specific ontology and epistemology to methodology and method. The messiness of social research, whether this is within a critical realist or a social constructionist paradigm, brings with it complexity. Such complexity is highlighted by the multitude of texts available on the subject each advocating different approaches to social research. Language is used in different ways with different meaning, power (of researcher and the researched) impacts on the language used and interpretations made, time, space and person each bring with them different perspectives and views of the world.

Taking a more pragmatic view of research the methodology and method(s) used should be appropriate to the research goal (Brannen, 2005). This is of course framed by epistemological assumptions, but also the nature of the study – whether it is at a macro or micro level, politics, the power of the researcher and the researched, the philosophical and pragmatic issues. The issue arises over what Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) describe as ‘the dictatorship of the research question’. Does the paradigm dictate the enquiry or should the ‘practical and the empirical take precedence over the ontological and the epistemological’ (Danermark et al., 2005, p.152). Creswell (2007) argues that the focus should remain on the outcome of the research and the problem being studied. I contend
that methodological pluralism facilitates this, allowing the researcher to utilise multiple methodologies and methods appropriate to the research goal whilst not narrowing choice simply because it sits neatly in a ‘relative box’.

The research question will bring with it specific considerations with a need to unpick the dualism of structure and agency, power, history and culture with regards to educational choice. Such considerations are then situated within (in this case) the critical realist or social constructionist paradigm thus bringing scaffolding to research which may otherwise be viewed as unreliable.

Methodological pluralism is referred to by both critical realists and social constructionists as a research design that links paradigm and method (Archer et al., 1999; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Danermark et al., 2005; Olsen, 2004). This enables ‘meanings in data to be probed, corroboration and triangulation to be practised, rich(er) data to be gathered, and new modes of thinking to emerge’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p.23).

Methodological pluralism is defined in different ways by different writers and theoretical perspectives, the paradigm provides further framework for the research. Here I am defining methodological pluralism as the use of more than one methodology and method for gathering data (Brannen, 2005). What this facilitates is a strengthening of the research process as different views may be sought. Triangulation is used to bring the research findings from each approach together, for social constructionists to better understand ‘a social phenomenon from different vantage points’ or for critical realists, to ‘check, validate or corroborate one another’ (Brannen, 2005, p.12, italics in original).

Different critical realists and social constructionists espouse the virtues of one methodology of another. In critical realist research this includes ethnography, discourse analysis, grounded theory, and dialectics (Edwards & O'Mahoney, 2014). Archer also discusses hermeneutics with its focus on interpretation, seeking to ‘understand situations through the eyes of the participants’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p.32). The problem arises in critical realism with a recognition that the researcher should remain as an objective outsider to the research process. In methodologies such as hermeneutics the interpretation of actions, speech and / or text becomes significant. No longer is the research
objective and true, instead grey areas appear and replication on a macro level becomes unlikely. Indeed, ‘cookbook prescriptions of method’ (Sayer, 2000, p.19) do not consider the messiness of social research and the complexities therein that necessitate careful abstraction of component mechanisms and conceptualisation in an open system (open to the wider environment in terms of society, politics, and economics).

Similarly with social constructionism Burr (2015) views discourse analysis as a key methodology, facilitating the exploration of language, explanations and social actions. Narrative analysis facilitates the ‘tying together of past, present, and future’ to identify ‘hidden meanings’ that the person themselves may not even be aware of’ (Burr, 2015, p.198). Phenomenology explores the world through the participant’s point of view as it considers how the world is perceived by the individual, situated within body, space and time (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). I argue that in ‘just considering’ language, or hidden meaning, or perceptions of the world, only one view or interpretation of the subject will be formed. The investigator and investigated are intertwined, interpretations become questionable and confidence in the research outcome under threat.

So it becomes clear that different methodologies have been used within both the critical realist and social constructionist paradigms; each bringing with them a particular view of research from hermeneutics’ reliance on interpretation, to phenomenology and the emergence of meaning from experience, and symbolic interactionism which considers the nature of the interaction between subjects (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). By confining my research within one ‘methodological box’ I will simply be gathering one view of the research problem. As such questions over validity and reliability (for critical realists) or trustworthiness and confidence (for social constructionists) come to the fore.

It is anticipated that through methodological pluralism, and the associated triangulation of findings, the question posed within either paradigm can be explored. For critical realists combining results from different data sets facilitates a search for causal mechanisms (factors which impede or promote choice), for the tendencies which trigger action for parents to choose alternative education for their young children (Archer, 1998b). Quality in the research process can be assured through this use of methodological pluralism, triangulating methods bring rigour and validity to the data collection process, as causal mechanisms are
identified and verified (Archer et al., 1999). This also facilitates abstract theorisation whilst making links to reality through the data collected. An example of this would be the identification of causal mechanisms in initial participant interviews and then testing this through additional research such as focus groups, case studies or perhaps questionnaires. The danger here is the potential to oversimplify data identifying more trivial causal mechanisms and ignoring the more complex as these are harder to test across a larger group of participants.

Turning to social constructionism, trustworthiness and confidence will be supported through methodological pluralism and triangulation, not as an attempt to bring validity to the research process as that would move us from a constructionist view of the world to one of realism and a search for causal mechanism, but to extend the ‘possibilities of knowledge production’ (Flick, 2014, p.184). As Olsen (2004) explores, triangulation using methodological pluralism facilitates a ‘deepening and widening’ (p.1) of the research problem. Methodological pluralism within a social constructionist paradigm facilitates a search for ‘bafflements’ (Irwin, 2013, p.181). It is exactly this lack of clarity I am searching for, to deconstruct and therefore re-evaluate how different parents’ experiences and interpretations of education construct individual choice of educational provision for their children.

Methodological pluralism in social constructionism allows for elaboration and expansion, the initiation of new hypotheses, complementary insights and contradictions (Brannen, 2005). It is hoped that this in turn will facilitate the start of a dialogue in education, a recognition that different families have different experiences and interpretations of education which in turn constructs their choice of educational provision for their children. There is no one view, no causal mechanism, and it is this very ‘difficult knowledge’ (Lather, 2003, p.267) that highlights the complexities of educational provision for children in the early years.

**Summary**

Whatever paradigm of thought one adopts there will always be others with different and opposing ideas. A critical realist searches for a truth or causal mechanism, a social constructionist argues that there is no truth, only constructions (or deconstructions) of ideas.
Critical realism, using Archer’s (1998a) morphogenetic approach, facilitates structure within the research process. There is a clear pathway to deliberate the dualism of social structure and human agency, with particular recognition of the degree of freedom, stringency of constraints, and system stability or instability. The research sets out to discover the details of each feature and how these influence parental choice of education, to examine the complex interchange between human agents and society, shaping and influencing action. Quality is upheld through rigour, through reliability in the form of triangulating data, through the identification of themes linked to causation.

Social research is not straightforward, I argue that issues of power (of investigator and investigated) are not addressed within such a critical realist approach, neither is the complex relationship between human beings and the world they are interpreting. The act of drawing attention to a parent’s experiences and interpretations of education may in itself reconstitute any understanding. This brings with it a question of validity with regards to any conclusions made.

Social constructionism, on the other hand, does not seek to perform the same role as critical realism, there is no search for a reason (causation). There is instead an opportunity to deconstruct meaning and interpretation, to bring to light how human beings are unique and distinct, to highlight notions of complexity and ‘difficult knowledge’ (Lather, 2003, p.267). It is this uniqueness that social constructionism brings to light, challenging ‘oppressive and discriminatory practices’ (Burr, 2015, p.23), creating an argument for alternatives to mainstream education. The relationship between investigator and investigated is recognised and examined, the researcher becomes part of the research process rather than an outsider.

What has been interesting in this examination of paradigm is the similarity of methodological approach that I arrived at. Both paradigms involve the participants in the research process and qualitative methods of gathering data. The research is socially situated and the relationships between thought and action emphasised. Methodological pluralism is highlighted with a use of triangulation to bring about validity (in critical realist research) or trustworthiness (in social constructionist research).

This identification of critical realism and social constructionism, as holding different socially situated views of the world, brings with it debate in the form of
whether these paradigms are so different after all. Burr (2015) considers critical realists to be ‘moderate constructionists’ as the social world is not ‘independent and separate from people’, there are real things in the form of the natural and social world but that ‘reality’ is constructed by human interaction with it (p.108-109). This brings us back to the concept of paradigms sitting on a sliding scale, not that each are fundamentally different but that each brings with it a different perspective for the research, providing a framework for thinking, for positioning the researcher, and supporting quality in the research process in the form of validity and reliability, or trustworthiness and confidence.

I question whether it is possible to suggest one paradigm is more appropriate to this area of research then the other. The answer will no doubt lie in how the reader positions themselves in terms of their view of the world, the nature of existence and the nature of knowledge. I struggle with the concept of ‘truth claims’ in social research, perhaps this is because I view the world as open to interpretation, as a construct built upon my own experiences, knowledge and relationships within my social group. How then is it possible to identify causal mechanisms through research which can then be held up as a truth, a reason why parents choose alternatives to mainstream provision? As a social constructionist, I believe that it may be possible to identify a ‘tendency of thought’, or a pattern of interpretation which renders it more likely alternative early years education is sought. To highlight potential for marginalisation and oppression, to consider how such tendencies or patterns bring with them ‘difficult knowledge’, to not simplify research through causation but to highlight the complexity of human interaction in society.

What is clear is the importance of identifying the goal of the investigation. How this is framed will depend on the paradigm adopted, and this in turn will impact on the relationship between what Smith (1983) highlights as the investigator and investigated, as well as the relationship between the facts (in terms of critical realism) and values (for social constructionists) within the research process.

Reference List


Abstract

There are an increasing number of four year old children who are not accessing funded education (National Statistics, 2017), at the same time there is an increase in home education and what is described as alternative education (Conroy, Hulme & Menter, 2008; Nicholson, 2017). In this paper I present my research proposal for a Doctoral Thesis examining why some parents choose a different approach to educating their young children as opposed to the mainstream provision available.

The concepts of Activity Theory (Leontiev, 2005; Vygotsky, 1997) combined with a Bourdieusian lens (Bourdieu, 1986; Grenfell, 2012b) will be used as frameworks for analysing the cultural and historical drivers behind parental choice and the educational activity that takes place within different systems of education. It is anticipated that the use of such frameworks will make visible the social, cultural, and political context of the different forms of education accessed, and enable a view of the human activity within the chosen systems of education.

Adopting a social constructionist position, each educational approach identified forms a case study so as to enable comparison, providing insights into differences and similarities of choice drivers and educational activity. Using Mason’s (2011) facet methodology recognises the importance of such insight, bringing value to intuition, imagination, and inventiveness in the research process. ‘Confessional reflexivity’ (Foley, 2002) highlights the impact of my own history and culture on the topic. In recognising the subjectivity of my investigation, and my own construction of meaning during the research process, I am better positioned to take a critical stance within my research.

This examination of the drivers of parental choice for pre-compulsory education challenges the socially agreed (Searle, 1995) norm of starting school at four. The importance of the activity of education is highlighted, which has the potential to reposition education as a verb (an activity) as opposed to a noun (an object to achieve).
Research question / Issue
In this research project I am looking to explore why some parents choose a different approach to educating their young children as opposed to the mainstream provision available.

Focusing on one rural community within South West England the majority of four year olds (UK Census Data, 2011) are seen to attend the local mainstream provision, by which I refer to the nearest primary school funded by the state. However I have observed an element within the community that have proactively chosen to take a different approach to their young children’s education. I am interested in investigating why parents have made this decision, how their own educational history and culture has influenced them, and how the different approaches to education available to the community satisfy their needs through the activity that takes place therein.

Taking a social constructionist stance I wish to cast light on the drivers influencing parental choice but also to examine the system of education they have chosen for their children. How do such systems meet the vision of education parents have for their children? Gergen (1985) highlights the assumptions of social-constructionism as taking a critical stance to taken-for-granted knowledge, as historically and culturally situated, dependent on social processes, and that understanding is negotiated and connected through human activity.

These key assumptions of criticality, historically and culturally situated, through social processes as part of human activity are anchored within the work of Vygotsky and Leontiev. Vygotsky’s ‘mediating activity’ (1997, p.62), further developed by Leontiev (2005) and others, provides a systems framework often referred to as Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Such a framework makes visible the social, cultural, and political context of the different forms of education accessed, and enables a view of the human activity - ‘relational workings of the social arrangement, seeing all social phenomena in relation to their location in a given field and in relation to others in the field’ (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p.117).

Activity Theory is often envisaged as a system whereby activity between subject and object is mediated by artefacts, community, division of labour and rules (Engeström, 2009). Such a portrayal of activity builds upon Vygotsky’s (1997) original concept of how the use of tools and signs (including cultural symbols)
mediates activity. This was developed by Leontiev’s (2005) concept of collective activity in that individuals do not act alone in society, but in relation to each other, with individual action forming part of a collective whole. I argue that the individual brings an ‘unconscious driving force’ (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p.47), a habitus, a way of being and of thinking that is influenced by social, cultural, and economic capital. This Bourdieusian concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) will cast a light on the driving forces that may influence parental choice bringing criticality to how such drivers are embodied in the system or field of education they choose.

Philosophically Vygotsky, Leontiev and Bourdieu have formed their ideas partly from Marxist roots (Cole, 1988; Grenfell, 2012b; Leontiev, 2005), in that human relationships are seen as collective activity, mediated, and historically developed. One could argue that all theory is built on the shoulders of the ones before (Holland et al., 1998), so although Marx could be seen as having a part to play in the formation of activity theory and habitus it is as a part of history. None the less the influence of Marx is important to recognise, not only as part of my own social constructionist view of the world, but also in recognition of the formation of knowledge.

As highlighted by Peim (2009), any attempt to interpret a subject is open ‘to critique if it is examined through the perspective of another’ (p.167). The theories and writings of those whom I invoke within this research, namely Vygotsky, Leontiev and Bourdieu, have been translated, interpreted, reinterpreted, developed and utilised over the years since their first inception. ‘There now exists a general mix of concepts and theories that draw their inspiration from Vygotsky, but where the integrity of the original theory may have been lost’ (Fleer, 2016, p.2). I need to make clear how I am using theories to inform my ideas, not as ‘solutions’ to a problem but as a way of casting light on school choice. Grenfell (2012a) highlights Bourdieu’s approach to methodology as a reflexive interplay between theory and theorising. Using Bourdieu’s terminology when considering the complex social field of education, I do not wish to confine my research to pre-conceived theoretical frameworks. Instead I plan to start with a construction of ideas as already indicated above and then to study it as a form of field analysis through the interplay between habitus and activity.

Critiques of Activity Theory, particularly Engeström’s third generation (Bakhurst, 2009; Peim, 2009), highlight how its use in the West has become that of a ‘unit
of analysis’ (Minnis & John-Steiner, 2001, p.298), as empirical, as a transformational tool. It is for this reason that I move not to ‘apply activity theory’ in Engeström’s third generational form, but to utilise the concepts of mediated and collective activity as a way of casting light on the different forms of education parents may choose for their children, to consider the activity of education influenced by history, culture, and community.

A further critique focusses on an insensitivity toward cultural diversity (Cole, 1988; Engeström, 2009) which seems odd when we consider Vygotsky’s original consideration of cultural-historical activity. This critique is focused on Luria’s research in Central Asia and the use of Western psychological tests for collecting data – hence the concern over the cultural context of the results he reported (Cole, 1988). Culture and history are not explicit within Engeström’s (2009) graphical representation of activity theory although they form a key part of Vygotsky’s ideas. It is for this reason that I wish to examine the subject's motive, what stimulates the activity toward the object (Leontiev, 2005). Following in the footsteps of Connolly (2004), the bringing of a Bourdieusian lens to activity theory fills this gap. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus -

incorporates a more holistic understanding of the broader dispositions that individuals come to embody and which unconsciously shape and guide not only the way they think and behave but also the particular investments they have in certain forms of knowledge and ways of acting (Connolly, 2004, p.87).

I argue that parents bring with them an identity, a habitus, a way of being formed through their own history and culture. Their motivation towards a different approach to educating their child(ren), as opposed to the mainstream schooling offer, may be linked to the activity of education, and how this may position their child(ren) as part of an identity making process (Holland et al., 1998). Such activity, when viewed from the perspective of Vygotsky and Leontiev is mediated by tools, language, and community of practice. The use of activity theory with a Bourdieusian lens allows for an examination and articulation of the sociocultural and historical influences at work when parents choose a system of education for their young children.

It is anticipated that this investigation will cast a light on potential contradictions and systemic tensions between the mainstream schooling offer and the different
approaches to education (systems of activity). I hope to challenge current discourse and practice that assumes families will access their local mainstream provision. To highlight that educational choice is not just about choice between mainstream providers but about educational choice as a cultural and social identity making process for today’s children as future adults in society (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Holland et al., 1998). In so doing education is repositioned as an activity (a verb), as opposed to an object to be achieved (a noun).

Setting the scene
In line with the initial construction of ideas with reference to activity and habitus the historical nature of the research needs to be set out. Local, situated practice is influenced by not only the parents’ social, cultural, and economic capital, but also the relationship between the individual and the society in which they interact. Local culture and practice is informed by history and politics, and thus the political context for this research can be considered in a number of ways as indicated below and which will be explored in detail as part of the project’s literature review.

Starting School at Four
The need for children to be in full-time education’ is set out within the Education Act 1996 (HMGovernment, 1996) with a ‘compulsory school age’ starting at age five.

‘The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable—

(a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and

(b) to any special educational needs he may have,

either by regular attendance at school or otherwise’ (HMGovernment, 1996, p.4).

The Act goes on to set out how ‘pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents’ (HMGovernment, 1996, p.5), and thus does not stipulate a requirement for children to be in a mainstream school. In addition the need for children to follow the National Curriculum is only applicable to Maintained Schools – schools ‘where funding and oversight is through the local authority’ (Gee, Worth & Sims, 2015, p.2).
So it would appear that legislation does not require children to be in mainstream schools, nor for them to follow the National Curriculum. In addition children under the age of five do not have to be in compulsory education at all. Despite this, 96% of all four year olds in England are in some form of funded education (National Statistics, 2017).

One of the drivers for school selection at aged four appears to come through the local authority school admissions process. A local authority must ‘provide for the admission [to school] of all children in the September following their fourth birthday’ (Department for Education, 2014b, p.24). As such the local authority publishes their admissions procedure and sets a deadline for parents to apply for a school place. The ‘normal round for admissions’ ([Local] County Council, 2017) is for the September following a child’s fourth birthday and whilst parents are able to defer admission, a place will not be reserved for them for entry into year one. Part of the application process includes expressing a preference of school ranked one to three. Different approaches to education are not publicised nor is the fact that children are not required to be in education until the term after they turn five. School preference is therefore expressed as a choice of school, not a choice of educational approach.

*Education as a driver for the knowledge economy*

This encouragement for parents to choose a school for their four year old child can be explored as part of the government agenda for ‘investing in human capital as a means of improving the nations competitive edge in a growing world economy’ (Boronski & Hassan, 2015, p.187). The Department for Education 2015-2020 Strategy has a focus on ‘outcomes, not methods’ (Department for Education, 2015, p.12), with an expectation that children should achieve at least five good GCSE’s. In order to achieve this, the focus on teaching outcomes (or product) starts in the early years. There is a link made between attending preschool and GCSE outcomes, ensuring children are ‘school ready’, and ensuring that there are sufficient early years places to enable parents to go back to work (Department for Education, 2015).

*The School Choice Agenda*

The school choice discourse in England is not new, indeed the neoliberal principles of choice and competition through a marketised schooling system has
been a topic of debate since the 1980’s (Ball, 2013). This move to increase parental choice was brought into being by the Conservative party in the 1980s and endorsed by New Labour. Legislation such as the 1988 Education Reform Act (HMGovernment, 1988) supported the principle of parents expressing a school preference, and The Education and Inspections Act 2006 (HMGovernment, 2006) set out a duty on Local Authorities to support the parental choice agenda. The Coalition government then introduced the Academies Act 2010 (HMGovernment, 2010) and with it, the opening of additional schools in the form of Free Schools, thus increasing the choice available to parents.

Such legislation and government policy has created a quasi-market system (market-like mechanisms) with competition and market forces requiring schools and registered early years settings to become more responsive to the ‘interests, needs and concerns of clients’ (Ball, 2013, p.139). The choice agenda positions parents ‘as consumers rather than citizens’ (Ward & Eden, 2013, p.28), schools are judged on their performance in league tables, ‘as a commodity to be bought and sold’ (p.28). I question whether this school choice agenda and marketization of education has opened the door for parents to look at the wider choice of education available for their young children.

The process of school selection and the success or otherwise of such a system of choice and marketization in England has been examined by many (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Burgess et al., 2006; Jarvis & Alvanides, 2008; Whitty, 2002). These are primarily focused on choice within the mainstream provision, particularly secondary schools, rather than the wider choice across all educational options available in an area. When the focus is redirected to consider children entering mainstream schooling at age four, before they reach compulsory school age, there is little research available.

A review of published papers on choice of early years education in England (both within the online library database and through an internet search) reveals a focus on childcare as opposed to education (Duncan et al., 2004; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012; Vincent & Ball, 2001). In addition, the examination of choice within a rural community is limited with the exception of Walker and Clark’s (2010) discussion on the geography of school choice, however the focus here is on those parents who have selected from the mainstream schooling available, not those who have made a different decision.
As already cited, 96% of all four year olds in England are in some form of funded education, however this represents a decrease of 2% since 2013 (National Statistics, 2017). Statistically there has been a year-on-year decrease in the percentage of young children accessing funded education over the past four years (National Statistics, 2017). This raises the question as to where the remaining 4% of children are going, and why have their parents chosen a different education to the mainstream provision available.

One explanation for this decrease could be the corresponding increase in home education and what is described as ‘alternative’ education (Conroy, Hulme & Menter, 2008; Nicholson, 2017). ‘Alternative’ education in this consideration includes schools that offer a child-centred pedagogical approach, with a focus on process rather than product. Examples cited include Steiner, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and democratic schools (Conroy, Hulme & Menter, 2008). During the academic year 2013-14 there was a 48% increase in children registered as accessing home education in one rural county (Nicholson, 2017). Of the registered alternative education provisions there was a 20% increase in enrolled students during the year 2015-16 (Department for Education, 2014a).

Although these percentage increases represent only a few hundred children across the county, statistically it is possible to summarise that an increasing number of children are accessing a different form of education to mainstream schooling. What this does not show is why parents are making this pro-active choice, thus providing a basis for this research.

**Methodology**

Adopting a social constructionist stance, this research will use multiple case studies, gathering information ‘from a variety of sources and using different methods’ (Robinson & Seale, 2018, p.103), within which a ‘facet methodology’ (Mason, 2011) will be adopted as I explore further below.

I wish to take a critical stance about ‘taken-for-granted knowledge’ (Burr, 2015). There is a government policy that children start school at four and as such parents are asked to make their school selection during the winter prior to starting school (when their children are only three or just four). There appears to be, what I shall describe as a ‘social agreement’, that this is right and appropriate for our very
young children. I argue that this social or ‘human agreement’ (Searle, 1995, p.1) is being reconstructed, evidenced by a steady decline in children accessing funded education at aged four (National Statistics, 2017) and an increase in home education and ‘alternative’ (Carnie, 2003) education (Department for Education, 2014a).

As a social constructionist I believe that knowledge is constructed from an interaction between human beings and the world they are interpreting. ‘Meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them’ (Crotty, 2015, p.43). Here Crotty is referring to phenomenology and how the world and the objects in it have meaning attributed to them. I am looking to construct meaning from an engagement with parents and the different approaches to education within one rural community, not to construct a meaningful ‘thing’ in itself, but to identify a ‘set of relations’ (Grenfell, 2012a, p.220). Each approach to education will form a ‘case’, as by studying several cases this can help in ‘generating and testing emerging theories’, and ‘opens up the possibility of making comparisons’ (Robinson & Seale, 2018, p.105).

This ‘set of relations’ (Grenfell, 2012a, p.220) between parents and school choice emerges through my interaction with parents and the different systems of education accessed by the community. I recognise that by taking a social constructionist standpoint, any sense-making I develop will reflect my own construction of meaning. I become part of the research process from the selection of participants and settings to the questions I pose. As Burr (2015) posits ‘the researcher must view the research as a co-production between themselves and the people they are researching’ (p.172). However I question whether it is ever possible to truly co-construct research with participants. Issues of power are at stake through the use of language and the interpretation of data and construction of meaning. In order to bring some strength and confidence to the research findings I aim to give participants the opportunity to review transcripts and the interpretations I make before the work is published.

Taking a constructionist ontology and constructionist epistemology I am looking to tease out the unconscious. Phenomenological and hermeneutic methodologies facilitate this exploration of the unconscious and the interrogation of language and text, ‘to break with inherited understandings’ (Crotty, 2015, p.80). In looking to explore habitus and activity I need to be open to ideas, to analyse
dispositions and relationships, to consider what has come before and how choice is embodied in practice, in lived experience.

Mason (2011) adopts the term 'Facet Methodology' in order to research the 'multi-dimensionality of lived experience' (Mason, 2011, p.75), to produce insights, to 'cast a light' as opposed to shining a light. Facet methodology allows for the creation of 'a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions' (Mason, 2011, p.77). It allows for a creative approach to research, to bring value to intuition, imagination, and inventiveness in the research process. Not to create a final picture, or answer as a mixed methods approach would, nor to assemble elements from a bricolage methodology, but to produce insights and to problematize. The need to challenge the socially agreed norm of starting school at four, to bring forth a new construction of why parents may choose to educate their children differently, brings with it a need to explore the unconscious, to 'value the significance of insight' (Mason, 2011, p.87).

Using Mason’s (2011) visual metaphor of the cut gemstone, the gemstone itself represents the overall research question of why some parents choose a different approach to educating their young children as opposed to the mainstream provision available. The facets represented by each cut surface of the gemstone involve different lines of enquiry such as: the options for education available to parents in the community, the drivers of choice, what each option offers in terms of tools, rules, community and division of labour and how these elements impact on the activity of education taking place. I do not wish to limit myself to interviewing parents as this will only cast light on one element of choice. Instead I wish to 'direct scrutiny towards the rather complex ways' (Mason, 2011, p.79) in which choice might be formed by culture and history, socially constructed, and impacted on by politics and practice.

I intend to initially conduct an internet and local search to identify what educational options there are for the local community, each educational approach thus forming a ‘case’ (Robinson & Seale, 2018). Using this information as a source of potential parent participants I will approach each setting in their role as ‘gatekeeper’ (Flick, Kardorff & Steinke, 2004, p.166) to the parents who send their children to them. Once participants have been identified and have agreed to become part of the research project I seek to initially conduct open interviews
asking why they chose to access this form of education as opposed to accessing the mainstream schooling offer.

There is a multi-layer to this research project looking at the drivers of parental choice and the settings they are accessing, but then also to examine what is happening in those settings (the activity taking place) that relates to the parent’s choice. How does the activity within the setting meet the needs of these parents and what they want for their children? It is at this juncture where the use of a facet methodology comes to the fore as it allows for a blend of scientific and artful thinking, for being ‘imaginative, inventive, creative and intuitive’ (Mason, 2011, p.80).

Bourdieu’s methodology highlights the advantages of breaking with the ‘pre-given’ or ‘pre-constructed’ (Grenfell, 2012a, p.215). Theory is developed after immersion in analysis and as such my initial research may cast light on a set of relationships between parent, choice and setting. It is only at this juncture that I will be in a position to delve deeper into the research process as themes begin to emerge which are theoretically interesting or puzzling, and how different facets may provide ‘telling knowledge’ (Mason, 2011, p.81).

It is likely that further investigation will include a second interview with parents using a more semi-structured approach unpicking emerging themes, but also to focus on the activity within the setting and how this is entwined within the parents’ conceptualisation of the education system.

Bringing this all together the different facets (already outlined and those that evolve through the research process) will generate insight into the nature of parental choice in pre-compulsory education. This is significant as it may shift the assumed understanding of parents as consumers of education (Ward & Eden, 2013) where education is positioned as an object to have, back to parents as citizens within a community of practice within which education is an activity, a part of life, socially and relationally constructed.

**Positioning**

Our ‘life experiences shape what type of research we choose to do, who we choose to work with in our research, and how we analyse that process in the end’ (Louis & Barton, 2002, p.2). How I am positioned will affect the subjectivity of my
research. Using the lens of activity theory to explore positioning - my activity towards the object (my research) is mediated by artefacts in the form of my history, culture, education, use of language, my position in the local community, and each will contribute to the biases and assumptions I make, as well as how I analyse and interpret the research. My subjectivity will play a role in the way that I position the parents I work with and the way that they position me (Louis & Barton, 2002, p.4).

‘Positionality, however, is not only limited to relationships between people. The canon of science, dominated by white, upper class, males, can position people as well’ (Louis & Barton, 2002). – The ‘canon’ of education in the rural south west, as with science, is dominated by white, middle class norms – a ‘good’ education, a ‘norm’, is categorised by white, middle class, Christian, expectations. ‘I have life experiences, spiritual beliefs, and historical contexts that also factor into my positionality’ (Louis & Barton, 2002, p.3). I would describe myself as white, and middle class with Christian principles, I am married and a mother.

I am positioned as a researcher (an outsider) but because of my interest in education outside of the mainstream provision I could also be positioned as one of ‘them’ (an insider). I would argue that there is a need to be accepted as an insider so that parents will open up to me in interviews. At the same time as an outsider because I am researching educational choice, I am not a parent of a young child in the setting.

In identifying my own positionality this sets the scene for my research and how I might interpret the text, speech and unspoken communication of participants. – I am a Doctoral student, Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, Associate Early Years Consultant, and a parent of two children who now attend an Independent School. The fact that my sister is autistic meant that my parents wanted me to succeed, to do better, to perform, to do well academically because my sister could not. On the one hand as a child growing up I rebelled and didn’t perform, on the other hand as a parent now myself I want my children to do well and as such I have sent them to a school where I believe that their personal, social and emotional needs will be met more so than in a mainstream school. I do this because I do want them to succeed – to become ‘educated’ to achieve ‘good’ GCSE’s and A levels, to gain those certificates. Perhaps in so doing I have
neglected the journey of education, forgotten to value the activity and milestones along the way.

It is only when I became closely involved with a friend whose two young children were struggling with mainstream education that I looked to see what options were available that would support the needs of these children. For them education was not about the achievement of GCSE’s but about an activity that supported their social and emotional needs. During this time I became aware of what seemed to be significant numbers of children in the local community who were not attending the mainstream schooling provision. I started to wonder if this was a phenomenon across the country or just within my local community was it because the local provision was not meeting needs or was there a wider issue at play? Why were parents seeking to access alternatives to the mainstream provision? What was driving this?

‘Confessional reflexivity’ (Foley, 2002) highlights the importance of conveying how my subjectivity may affect my interpretations. All of these experiences, my positionality, my beliefs, contribute to my interest in different forms of education to mainstream schooling. In recognising the experiences I have had and how my attitude to education has been formed I am better positioned to take a critical stance within my research.

Directing one’s gaze at one’s own experience makes it possible to regard oneself as ‘other.’ Through a constant mirroring of the self, one eventually becomes reflexive about the situated, socially constructed nature of the self, and by extension, the other’ (Foley, 2002, p.473).

Ethical Considerations
‘Ethical tensions are part of the everyday practice of doing research’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.261). Hammersley and Traianou (2012) set out commonly recognised ethical principles within educational research as including a responsibility for minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, offering reciprocity, and treating people equitably.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) go further to distinguish two dimensions of ethics, procedural ethics and ‘ethics in practice’ (p.262). Procedural Ethics are those
based on a positivist tradition, scientific and quantitative in nature, and focused on the completion of an application form for the Ethics Committee. Here the principles such as those set out by Hammersley and Traianou (2012) come to the fore as the researcher describes how they intend to abide by them.

I will need the permission of each educational setting in their role as gatekeeper but also from the parents I seek to interview. This will take the form of a written statement of ethics for participants to read and sign their agreement. Personal details, settings, and localities will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. I will need to be clear about how responses to interview questions will be interpreted by me. I will seek to get confirmation of the use of the data collected by sending my transcripts to participants for review. They have a right to withdraw their contribution up until the data is used within the writing up of my thesis.

_Ethics in Practice_ are those which arise ‘in the doing of research’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.264). Examples here may be where a parent participant makes a disclosure unrelated to the research itself. Here is a situation that is not often anticipated, and yet is ethically important and needs consideration.

Within my ethics agreement I will make clear the local authority safeguarding protocol which I will follow should I have any concerns. In this way there is a clear procedure for me to follow should a disclosure be made if I were to witness an incident, or have concerns about the welfare of a child. I will have to hand information to share with participants should there be a need to signpost participants for support.

_Relational Ethics_ is a third consideration that ‘recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness’ (Ellis, 2007, p.4) not only between the researcher and researched, but also between the researcher and the community. My relationship with the research participants will adapt and change over time; it will be different in the first interview then in the follow-up interview.

As an interpretative researcher I need to acknowledge my bond to participants which will no doubt develop over time as I seek to interpret words, text and emotions. I will co-construct a shared understanding of the influences on educational choice. I need to be clear about the goals of the research from the start and how the data gathered will be interpreted and utilised (Ellis, 2007).
intend to practice ‘process consent’ (Ellis, 2007, p.23), confirming consent at each stage in the research process i.e. before interviews, and again on transcribing interviews and again before publication to ensure participants still want to be part of the project.

Analysis
Facet methodology allows the researcher to look at the ‘multi-dimensionality of lived experience’ (Mason, 2011, p.75). The analysis of data is constantly taking place as a basis for decisions about which settings to target, which parents as participants, and which facets to explore. Preliminary analysis will consider the themes arising from open interviews as I relate the data gathered to the theoretical foundations on which the research project is based. As Mason (2011) points out ‘the researcher thus needs to use different modes of analysis, sensitive to the different forms of data and the lines of investigation being followed, both within and between facets’ (p.83).

This may relate to the notion of grounded theory but I argue that this would only fragment data through coding. Instead I intend to become immersed in the data (Rivas, 2018), to transcribe interviews myself and store data electronically. In so doing I become part of the research process, I am reflexive as I internalise the emerging themes, allowing for flashes of insight through the ‘processes of writing, representation and argumentation’ (Mason, 2011, p.83).

I am not seeking to summarise my findings with a ‘truth claim’ as the notion of truth sits at odds with a social constructionist stance, instead I seek to cast light on parental choice not as ‘facts’ but as ‘human agreement’ (Searle, 1995) shaped by history, culture and society.

This reflexive approach to analysis will allow me to see both the possibilities and limitations to my research. Both of these provide opportunities for the future in terms of contribution to knowledge but also opportunities for exploring additional facets of parental choice which I have been unable to address in this project.

Contribution to knowledge
I propose that my findings will contribute to the school choice discourse on a number of levels,
To take a different perspective to the majority of published research in England as already outlined, namely:

- To deconstruct drivers of choice for parents who have made a proactive choice to follow a different education to the mainstream provision
- To focus in on parents of four year old children where there is no legal requirement for their children to be in education
- To highlight educational choice as relational between parent, setting, and society, informed by history and culture.

On a personal level I hope to learn from this research process, not only what works in the construction of understanding, but what inhibits such a construction. By casting light on parental choice within the early years I hope that my standing as a Lecturer and Associate Early Years Consultant will be strengthened.

Reference List


Appendices

EdD 624 Appendix One Research Project Timeline
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Feb-Mar '18</th>
<th>Mar-Sep '18</th>
<th>Sep-Oct '18</th>
<th>Nov-Dec '18</th>
<th>Jan-Mar '19</th>
<th>Mar-May '19</th>
<th>May-July '19</th>
<th>Aug-Dec '18</th>
<th>Jan-Aug '20</th>
<th>Sep-Dec '20</th>
<th>Jan-May '21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering data - settings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering data – parent unstructured interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing data – identifying themes / codes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering data – parent semi-structured interviews part 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing up first draft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viva</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Ten – Thematic Maps

As set out in my methodology, I used thematic maps in order to collate my codes into related themes. These can be found below and demonstrate the development of my thinking through each phase of my thematic analysis.

Phase three
Phase four

- Inspection
- Outcome
- Cost
- Priorities
- Examination
- Results
- School
- Ranking
- Health
- Curricular
- Specific
- Educational
- Needs
- Feelings
- Religion
- Materials
- Buildings
- Technology
- Resources
- Environment
- School size
- and facilities
- Type of setting
- Belonging
- Friendships
- Social interaction
- Community
- Societies
- History
- Parents
- Experiences
- Diagnoses
- Experiences
Appendix Eleven – Social Network Maps

A social network analysis (Borgatti et al., 2017) was carried out in order to identify links between parent participants, the preschool or nursery they attended and their educational choice, as demonstrated in the figures below.

Figure 1 shows the links between the early years setting a parent sent their child to and the educational choice they made when their child turned four years of age, as well as the social connections between parents.

Figure 1: Early Years Network Map

The olive green squares show those parents that have chosen to home educate when their child turned four years of age, blue shows those parents sending their child to the local preschool, bright green represents a choice of selective independent school, black is Montessori school and white is a Steiner school.

What is interesting to note is how parents who did not send their child to a preschool have in this instance continued with home education when their child reached four years of age. Equally, those parents who sent their child to the local pre-school remained at the local primary school. The anomaly appears to be those parents who sent their child to a Montessori nursery, here there was a variety of educational choices when their child turned four years of age including remaining in a Montessori school, choosing a selective independent school and a Steiner school.

In addition this diagram also shows the friendship network of parents. Again links are shown between the early years setting a parent sent their child to and their social network. Those parents who have chosen to home educate all know each other, as do those who attend the local primary school. Those who attended the Montessori nursery are shown as forming separate social groups linked to their educational choice.
Parent number 6 has formed a link between parents in from both the Montessori nursery and the preschool. This is also supported in discussions with parents as this being an individual who is well known within the community and involved in different community organisations including two different parent and toddler groups and the church.

Parent number 4 also provides a link between those who are home educating and those sending their child to the local school. This may be due to the interest this parent also has in home education as this is something this parent has been considering and would turn to if the local mainstream school does not provide the creative aspects of education that they would like to see.

Figure 2 below shows how some of links between parents change when their children move onto different settings at four years of age.

Figure 2: Educational Choice at Four Years of Age Network Map

This diagram shows the social network of parents and their educational choice. White squares show parents who did not send their child to any preschool, blue squares show parents whose child attended the local pre-school and black squares a Montessori nursery.

Although parent’s numbered 4 and 6 remain the link between the mainstream school and home education, Montessori and selective education, those parents sending their child to the Steiner school become separate from others within the community. This is supported in discussions with those parents whose child attended the Steiner school as concerns over links within the community were expressed.

Not all of the parents attending either the early years settings of educational choices are included in this social network analysis as they did not choose to participate in this research. As such this analysis cannot be taken as representative of the local population as a whole. However it does raise some potentially interesting links between the social networks of parents and the
educational choices they make for their children. Figure 3 below shows the links between the settings parents were recruited from and their educational choice.

Figure 3: Source Group Network Map

A similar pattern is visible to figure 2 with the home education group remaining separate from other parents linked only by parent number 4, and those parents who chose Steiner education linked only by the Montessori nursery.

Some parents attended more than one of the source groups such as both the Community Parent and Toddler group and the Church group or Montessori nursery as demonstrated by parents 2,3,5 and 6.

As discussed by Mamas (2019) network maps such as this provide a snapshot of the structure of social networks and provide a visual representation of the relational ties between the parents in this instance and their educational choices. In this instance the network maps above can be used to support an understanding of the possible links between parents and the educational choices they make as I shall go on to discuss later in this paper.

Reference List


Appendix Twelve – Photographic elicitation

The photographs taken by setting leaders (Montessori and Mainstream) are found below linked to setting type.

12.1 Montessori
Activities for every day

Sensorial materials

General environment
12.2 Mainstream setting