

# Between a rock and a hard place: parents' attitudes to the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools

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In this paper, Katherine Runswick-Cole, a researcher at the Research Institute for Health and Social Change at Manchester Metropolitan University, engages with parents' attitudes to the placement of their children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools. She sets her review of parents' views within the current policy and legislative context. She then moves on to explore parents' attitudes to inclusion by drawing on the social model of disability as an analytical tool and developing a typology of parental school choices. The study reported in this paper involved 24 parents who were contacted through voluntary organisations and interviewed, either in their own homes or on the telephone. The views of seven professionals were also gathered. The findings reveal that parents' attitudes to mainstream and special schooling are influenced by their engagement with models of disability. The parents' experiences suggest that, despite the shifts in policy we have seen since 1997, the process of inclusive education continues to be fragile.

**Key words:** special educational needs, mainstream, special schools, parents, attitudes, interviews.

## Introduction

This paper explores parents' attitudes to the inclusion of their children with special educational needs in mainstream schools in England. Since 1997, the popular perception has been one of a rapid and unstoppable drive for the inclusion of all children in mainstream schools (Marrin, 2005; Phillips, 2005). Indeed, the fraught issue of the policy of inclusion has recently been re-ignited by Baroness Warnock's revisiting of the debate (Warnock, 2005).

In this paper, parents' attitudes to inclusion are framed within their own narratives about their appeals to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST). Since 1994, there have been more than 25,000 appeals to SENDIST. Appeals about the educational provision received by children make up the vast majority of the Tribunal's work, but parents can also appeal to SENDIST if they feel

that their child has been discriminated against on grounds of disability. There are currently more than 3,400 education-related appeals heard each year, in comparison with around 80 appeals related to disability discrimination (Hughes, 2005).

This article situates the parents' stories in the context of their experiences of SENDIST and the Government's current policies for inclusion (DfES, 2004, 2005). However, the main focus of the article is the analysis of parents' attitudes to school choice, placed in the context of models of disability.

## The policy context

Parents' attitudes to inclusion are set in a policy context in which the general principle, enshrined in law, is that children with special educational needs should – where this is what their parents want – normally be educated at mainstream schools (HMSO, 1996). The legislation and guidance that underpins the Government's policy for inclusion has been in place since 2002 – this includes the Education Act (1996), Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), *The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs* (DfES, 2001a) and the statutory guidance provided by *Inclusive Schooling: children with special educational needs* (DfES, 2001b). Within Government policy, the principles of an inclusive education service are defined as follows:

- Inclusion is a process by which schools, local education authorities and others develop their cultures, policies and practices to include pupils.
- With the right training, strategies and support, nearly all children with special educational needs can be successfully included in mainstream education.
- An inclusive education service offers excellence and choice and incorporates the views of parents and children.
- The interests of all pupils must be safeguarded.
- Schools, local education authorities and others should actively seek to remove barriers to learning and participation.
- All children should have access to an appropriate education that affords them the opportunity to achieve their personal potential.

- Mainstream education will not always be right for every child all of the time. Equally just because mainstream education may not be right at a particular stage it does not prevent the child from being included successfully at a later stage.  
(DfES, 2001b, p. 2)

The principles of inclusion listed above are also reflected in *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004), a key Government policy document that strengthens the drive for inclusion by insisting that:

All teachers should expect to teach children with special educational needs (SEN) and all schools should play their part in educating children from their local community, whatever their background or ability.  
(DfES, 2004, p. 5)

In addition to insisting that all teachers are teachers of children with special educational needs, the Department for Education and Science has recognised that 'Inclusion is far more than just about the location of a child's school placement' (DfES, 2004). However, despite the policy rhetoric, the impact of policies for inclusion has been mixed.

#### *The impact of policies for inclusion*

Policies for inclusion have had a limited impact on both the proportion of children attending mainstream schools and on the teaching and learning of children with special educational needs. OFSTED (2004) suggests that there is a growing awareness in schools of the benefits of inclusion, but, at the same time, this has had limited effect on the proportion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. In 1974, 1.3% of the school population were attending special schools on a full-time basis (DfES, 2006). However, by 2004, the proportion of children with full-time places at special schools had fallen only slightly to 1.1% of the school population.

In 2002, the Audit Commission questioned what is meant by 'inclusive' provision. The Audit Commission found that while children with special educational needs may be on the site of a mainstream school, their opportunities for interaction with their peers were often limited. OFSTED (2004), too, found that pupils at mainstream schools with units attached sometimes had very limited opportunities for interaction with children in the mainstream. OFSTED (2004) suggests that a minority of schools successfully meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs, although others are improving. However, OFSTED (2004) also found that teachers continue to make insufficient adaptations to the mainstream curriculum for pupils with special educational needs, and that teacher expectations remain low and progress is slow.

Children with special educational needs are sometimes supported by teaching assistants in schools. However, OFSTED (2004) and MENCAP (1999) have questioned the role of teaching assistants, suggesting that their presence in the classroom needs to be well managed in order to foster inclu-

sive practice. MENCAP (1999) found that class teachers delegated responsibility for children with special educational needs to the teaching assistant, and often had little interaction with the child, or involvement in planning differentiated work. While the Audit Commission and OFSTED acknowledge that progress towards inclusive practice has been slow, debates in the media also demonstrate that the policy is controversial (Brennan, 2005; Marrin, 2005).

#### **Inclusion in the media**

In the popular press, the hostility towards inclusive schooling is motivated by two factors. On the one hand, the segregation of pupils with special educational needs is seen as an act of beneficence because it is only in this type of 'special' setting that these children's individual 'problems' can be addressed. The aim is to 'save' children with special needs from the 'trauma' of mainstream schooling. On the other hand, the hostility towards inclusion for pupils with special educational needs is also fuelled by less charitable motives, as children with special educational needs are characterised as deviant and a threat to the education of their peers:

'It [the Warnock Report (DES, 1978)] was a policy that created a classroom revolution – one which has caused chaos and misery for countless thousands of children and their teachers and made many schools all but ungovernable.'

(Phillips, 2005, p. 1)

However, there has been a moderate shift in popular attitudes towards inclusion since the Warnock Report (DES, 1978). It is now thought possible to include *some* children with special educational needs in mainstream schools, on the grounds that 'Physical needs are (with the right resources) more easily met than emotional and behavioural needs' (Baker, 2005). The reason given for the distinction between children with physical impairments and others is that children with physical needs need not impact negatively on children not considered to have special educational needs, whereas children with emotional and behavioural needs necessarily do (Baker, 2005). The current 'dogma' is that those who fit into current systems with minimal support will be suitable for inclusion, while those with challenging behaviours will not (Cole, 2004). It is within this context that professional and parental attitudes to inclusion are framed, and within this context that this study took place.

#### **The study**

This research took place as part of the author's PhD (Runswick-Cole, 2007). Parents talked about the inclusion of their children with special educational needs in schools as part of their accounts of using SENDisT.

Twenty-four parents took part in the study (17 mothers, seven fathers). The parents were contacted through three voluntary organisations involved in supporting children with special educational needs. Thirty parents expressed an initial interest in participating in the study, of whom 24 subse-

quently agreed to take part. None of the parents in the study were the partners of other parents in the study. The parents' claims were wide-ranging:

- Two parents went to SENDisT for claims of disability discrimination.
- One parent went to SENDisT because the local education authority (LEA) refused to assess her child for a Statement.
- Ten parents wanted to secure special school placements; two of these parents wanted a special residential school.
- Three parents wanted extra support specified in the Statement at the mainstream school that their child was already attending.
- Three parents were trying to secure a mainstream school placement for their child.
- Three parents were trying to get therapies written into their Statements (speech and language therapy, music therapy and occupational therapy).
- Two parents wanted specialist teaching at mainstream schools for their children with dyslexia.

Seven professionals took part in the study, the majority of whom were contacted by approaching SENDisT itself, although one informant was identified by asking members of a post-doctoral course in educational psychology to take part in the research.

- Two professionals were solicitors and chaired SENDisT panels.
- Three professionals were LEA officers who had worked in special education in schools before moving into administration.
- One professional was a former panel member and serving LEA educational psychologist who had also acted as a witness for his LEA at Tribunal.
- One professional was a serving LEA educational psychologist who had acted as a witness at Tribunal.

In line with ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004), the informants' names and the names of their children have been changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and the informants were aware of their right to withdraw from the process at any time.

Geographical constraints meant that seven parents were interviewed in their homes, and 17 parents were interviewed by telephone; however, the parents interviewed in their homes lived within four different local authorities. All of the interviews were carried out by the author. The interviews used a narrative approach (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) in which the participants were asked to explain why they registered an appeal with SENDisT. The parents talked about the events which led them to appeal, as well as about the experience and outcomes of the hearing. During the interviews, parents were asked to clarify the chronology of events or to give more details of events where necessary. The interviews lasted from about 45 minutes to four hours.

One professional agreed to be interviewed at his workplace, while the other professionals were interviewed by telephone, again for geographical reasons. All but one of the professionals had experience of more than one Tribunal. The professionals were asked to explain why they thought parents appealed to SENDisT, and were also asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the system.

All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The participants were given copies of their transcripts and were asked to comment on them if they wished. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994). This involved identifying themes and patterns within the narratives by condensing the data into analysable units.

### What professionals say about inclusion

Research suggests that there has been limited progress in terms of attitudes towards inclusion among professionals. Croll and Moses (2004) found that very few of those at the 'chalk face' are committed to inclusion for *all* children: 100% of primary school headteachers thought that there is a continuing role for special schools, as did 98% of primary school teachers; while only 8% of primary school headteachers thought that fewer children should attend special schools and only 6% of primary school teachers. Crabtree and Whittaker (1995) found that 91.4% of SENDisT panel members were committed to the continued role of special schools. Although Crabtree and Whittaker's research was carried out before the accelerated policy drive for inclusion began in 1997, the view that it is not possible to include *all* children in mainstream schools was shared by some of the members in the present study. Derek, a panel member and LEA officer, commented:

*'What actually happened was that the parent was asking for a mainstream provision and the LEA was saying, "Well, this kid has got so many problems, so many difficulties that what she's asking for doesn't actually exist in our LEA or any neighbouring LEA . . . it doesn't actually exist." And I was thinking, "Well, I've never come across that level of provision in a mainstream." It's just defying all rational approach to the use of scarce resources.'*

Professionals identified the policy of inclusion as a key reason why parents registered an appeal with SENDisT. Both a SENDisT chairperson and a panel member highlighted this issue as an increasingly common reason for appeal:

*'More recently the Government's press towards inclusion means that parents of children who are acutely vulnerable children find the transfer to secondary education virtually impossible to have organised properly. For them, there isn't a choice. And I don't believe many comprehensive schools have the ability, funding or the drive really to provide an education which is suitable for many vulnerable children.'*

(Thomas, a chairperson of a SENDisT panel)

*'And increasingly I've found since inclusion's become on the agenda, the authorities have gone down the Government road on inclusion and there are a number of parents who are increasingly appealing for their child to go to special schools.'*

(John, a panel member and LEA officer)

In the view of professionals, therefore, the policy of inclusion is a key cause of parental appeals to SENDisT.

### **What parents say about inclusion**

Parents hold complex and conflicting views about the policy and practice of inclusion. While the DfES (2004) makes it clear that inclusion is about more than school placement, in the context of the Tribunal, parents were often focused on securing a mainstream or special school placement for their child. Some parents were wholly committed to mainstream school, whereas others believed special school was the only environment where their children's educational needs could be met. Gina, a mother, went to SENDisT because she wanted a mainstream place for her child:

*'Toby was Statemented at three; it was obvious that he should be. Right from the beginning we chose to have it written clearly on his Statement that Toby should be educated in "a mainstream school". I felt, I still do, that it would not be in anybody's interest for Toby to be educated only with other children with special needs. Toby picks up behaviours, he copies other children, so I knew it wouldn't do him any good. And segregated schooling doesn't do the other kids any good and it doesn't do society any good. It just won't do anyone any good to deny Toby an integrated life.'*

However, Tina, a mother, went to SENDisT to gain a special school place for her son:

*'Alex's place at special school was the most defining thing – it was life or death. School was a chance to start again, to live again. It is significant beyond words. It changed his life.'*

While parents were divided about the merits of mainstream or special schooling, they were united in feeling that the issue of inclusion was one where the stakes were high and the possible gains or losses great.

As part of the debate about the policy of inclusion, parents' motivation for choosing mainstream or special schooling has been the subject of comment within the academic community. Connor (1997) offered an analysis of parental choice of special or mainstream schooling. His analysis is based on a bereavement model of parenting a child with special educational needs. He suggests that parents' demands for a special school place stems from their continuing sense of loss for the 'normal' child they hoped to have. This sense of loss, Connor argues, is translated into a focus on protecting the child by sending them to a special setting, rather than a focus on the child's learning in a mainstream placement. Connor also argues that the wish for

special school protects parents from constant reminders of 'loss suffered' when they compare their children to children not considered to have special educational needs in a mainstream setting. However, parents who choose mainstream schools do not escape Connor's parental pathology. Parents who choose mainstream do so, Connor argues, because they are in 'denial' about their child's level of difficulties. Connor suggests that conflict ensues between parents and professionals in mainstream settings because the parents, who are in denial, make excessive demands for and of mainstream placements.

Within the disabled people's movement, parental attitudes to the inclusion of children in mainstream schools has also been the subject of comment. The British Council of Disabled People (BCODP) (2005) states that parents should not be able to decide on which type of education their child should receive. BCODP considers that *all* children with special needs must be supported to attend a mainstream school. BCODP suggests that many parents base their decision to choose special school on their inability to see that their children can be included in the mainstream; they lack experience of seeing children with special educational needs positively included in mainstream schools and the wider community, and they fear professionals.

However, the parents' stories, in this study, suggest that these analyses are of limited use in understanding why parents choose mainstream or special schools. I suggest that an alternative analysis drawing on the social model of disability may offer a more useful tool for understanding parents' stories.

### **Understanding parents' perspectives on inclusion – a social model analysis**

The social model of disability is a response to dominant models of disability that inform traditional approaches to education, medicine and social care. Medical and individual models locate disability within individual pathology and see disability as a 'personal tragedy' (Oliver, 1996). The medical model of disability constructs disability as the direct result of physical, sensory and/or neurological impairment due to damage or disease. A medical model framework emerges from models used in medicine in which practitioners think in terms of 'conditions', 'treatment', 'cure' and 'rehabilitation'. A medical model assumes that the disabled adult or child is deficient but, it is hoped, alterable; whereas society is fixed, with limited capacity for, or willingness to, change.

The disciplines of psychology and education, influenced by medicalised perspectives, use the language of 'identification', 'deficit', 'rehabilitation' and 'cure', locating the 'problem' within the individual. Medical model approaches have been seen to underpin the concept of 'special educational needs' itself and the practice of segregated education (Skrtec, 1995).

The social model of disability challenges traditional conceptions of disability (Oliver, 1990, 1996; Morris, 1996; Thomas, 1999). The social model defines disability as the

product of specific social and economic structures, and aims to address oppression and discrimination against disabled people which, it suggests, are caused by institutional and cultural forms of exclusion (Thomas, 1999; Reeve, 2002). The social model has been conceptualised with reference to *The Fundamental Principles of Disability* (UPIAS, 1976):

‘Impairment – lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb organism or mechanism of the body.

Disability – the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream social activities.’

(UPIAS, 1976, cited in Oliver, 1990, p. 11)

According to this view, the separation of disability from impairment is key to understanding disability and disablement, as impairment, of itself, is not seen as being part of the problem; rather, disablement is socially created (Oliver, 1996).

The social model has been used to advocate for the removal of disabling barriers that are seen as the product of social and cultural institutions (Terzi, 2004). The social model shifts the ‘problem’ of disability away from the individual and into the collective responsibility of society (Tregaskis, 2002). Social model discourses have influenced education policy and practice (for example, DfES, 2004).

#### *Parents and models*

Habitually, parental attitudes to children with special educational needs have been located in *either* medical *or* social models of disability (BCODP, 2005; Connor, 1997). While Connor and BCODP appear to suggest that parents take either a medical or a social model line which they hold consistently across contexts, Landsman (2005) suggests that mothers’ engagement with models is more complex. Landsman found that mothers may locate disability within society and yet at the same time seek a solution which attempts to normalise their child. The next section will consider how this more complex analysis of parental attitudes to disability may offer an alternative analysis of their attitudes to inclusion.

#### **A typology of parental school choices**

Within this study, parents’ stories about inclusion fall broadly into three categories:

- those parents who accept nothing but mainstream schooling for their children;
- those parents who are committed to mainstream schooling for their children, but later change their minds;
- those who never consider mainstream for their children and always wanted them to go to special school.

However, the analysis is not straightforward, as the parents’ complex and pragmatic engagement with models of disability is revealed.

*‘It won’t do anybody any good to deny Toby an integrated life’ – parents who want a mainstream school*

A social model approach suggests that parents who choose inclusive schooling for their children engage with a model of disability that focuses on the need to remove barriers to children’s learning, and on their acceptance within mainstream settings. These parents describe the organisational and pedagogical barriers to their children’s inclusion. Their stories reveal attitudes to special education which focus on pedagogical barriers, not within-child factors: *‘They [teachers] are responsible for altering the curriculum and the schemes of work to meet the child’s needs’* (Gina, a mother).

In addition, for parents who choose mainstream schooling, education is seen as a key pathway to an inclusive experience of adult life:

*‘We feel very strongly about inclusion in society and when we look at, well, why do children have education in the first place? They have education to prepare them for, you know, adult life. So that’s where we come from.’*  
(Barbara, a mother)

The parents who chose mainstream placements for their children tended not to talk in terms of their children’s impairment labels, and here they differed from other parents in the study. Crucially, these parents were sceptical about professional judgements about their children. Instead, they seemed to place a high value on their own parental knowledge of the child and rejected professional expertise and knowledge (Skrtic, 1995). Ben, a father, expressed his scepticism about professional judgements about his child: *‘He made that judgement after taking Callum into a ten-by-six-foot room and testing him for 40 minutes.’*

These parents did not seem to be ‘in denial’ about their children’s level of difficulty (Connor, 1997); rather they accepted their children’s difficulties, but did not see them as insurmountable barriers to inclusion. Barbara, a mother, said, *‘We are in no doubt at all about where she’s at, we know she won’t be a great academic, but so what?’*

Parents who want mainstream education for their children with special educational needs seem, then, to tend towards a social model understanding of disability. In addition, they seem to reveal their scepticism about professional assessments and knowledge, and seem to have more confidence in their own knowledge of the child. However, this analysis is complicated by parents who choose mainstream school for their children initially and then change their minds.

*‘There’s nowhere for him to have speech therapy in the junior school’ – parents who try mainstream schools but move their children to special schools*

Among the parents who appealed to SENDisT to secure special school places for their children, there was a group of

parents who had initially wanted their children to be included in mainstream schools and then changed their minds:

*'At this stage, we were frightfully keen, realising he was different and so, still trying to include him in the local community . . . but he was being sort of parked in a corridor and he was actually being quite literally excluded because he was at the [local] primary school. So we started looking at special.'*

(Richard, a father)

However, their decision to send their children to special school was not necessarily driven by a change of ideology; rather, as Richard explains, the decision was a response to their children's experience of exclusion in mainstream school. Diane, a mother, echoed Richard's views:

*'I want [my son] to go to his local school and I want him to be part of his community. I have a dream that when he is a teenager, his friends will call round and take him to the pictures. But if I want the best education I might have to move out of the area to be near a special school.'*

Fiona, a mother, cited lack of flexibility as a barrier to her son's learning and a reason for her moving him to special school:

*'[At the junior school] they kept him in to learn spellings and things which he was never ever going to learn and they just wouldn't, they said, "Well, that's our policy and that's what he has to do, even if it won't benefit . . . we admit he won't benefit from it but there's nothing we can do because that is what we do". They just wouldn't change.'*

Tina, a mother, also considered moving her son from mainstream school because of a lack of resources:

*'But he may not stay in mainstream . . . They have started taking him out of the classroom in the afternoons in the reception class, which he is doing and coping quite well. But they can't do that in the juniors. It is a separate school and they don't have a special needs room for one-to-one. If he's distressed occasionally he'll be taken out of the classroom to do one-to-one work, because we've got a special needs room which is excellent. There's nowhere for him to have speech therapy in the junior school.'*

Parents like Diane, Fiona, Tina and Richard found that despite the policy shifts towards inclusion since 1997, the barriers to their children's participation, including lack of resources, hostile school cultures, inflexible teaching styles and attitudes to difference in mainstream schools, have not been removed. It seems that parents have to give up on their initial hopes for a mainstream education for their children because of the effective exclusion that their children experienced within mainstream settings. Derek,

a panel member and LEA officer, supported this view and said, *'I find increasingly that the parents look at mainstream, try mainstream and then want out of mainstream.'*

These parents' stories are reflected in other research. MENCAP (1999) found that for many parents of children with 'moderate learning disabilities' local mainstream provision was their first choice, but parents reported that schools often lacked experience and commitment to these pupils and that often pupils with moderate learning disabilities were taught almost entirely by teaching assistants. Parents' decisions were driven by experience and the need to find environments where their children would not be excluded.

Crucially, parents' stories differ from the dominant narratives in the news media and from the analysis offered by Connor (1997) and BCODP (2005). In this study, parents did not argue that their children could not be in mainstream schools because of their individual deficits or because of the 'damage' that they may cause to the education of other children, nor did they suggest that their choice of special schooling was motivated by a sense of 'loss' or reveal their medicalised views of disability. Rather they focused on the attitudinal barriers and lack of resources which excluded their children and constructed their vulnerability.

A social model analysis (Oliver, 1996) situates parents' experiences within an educational system that continues to construct barriers to inclusion. In a society that focuses on within-child factors and characterises children with special needs as deviant and disruptive, parents can be easily deterred from pursuing a mainstream education for their child (Cole, 2004). Parents and children are aware that their children are not welcome in mainstream schools. Toby (aged seven at the time) told his mother Gina as she picked him up from school: *'they don't want me here, mummy'*. This hostility to including children with special needs is particularly apparent in a system driven by market forces and the drive for ever improving standards (Cole, 2004). When parents find their children are being excluded, they look for a welcoming environment, and for some this means special school. A social model approach might suggest that parents are looking for environments where there are fewer barriers to their children's inclusion. For some children and parents, in the current context, they are stuck between a rock and a hard place, and, ironically perhaps, it is special school which becomes the only place where parents feel their children can be included.

*'His very life was at stake' – parents who want special school*

Clearly, not all parents want a mainstream education for their child, even at the beginning of their child's education. Some parents' stories reveal that they only ever wanted their children to be educated in special schools – mainstream was never an option. These parents were less likely to focus on barriers to their children's learning and were more likely to use medicalised discourses and to focus on within-child factors:

*'If ADHD is unaddressed and untreated and particularly if a person is on the low IQ side . . . the prognosis is horrific and it includes depression, suicide, being in trouble with the law, jail, you name it. The worst things that happen in our society happen to people with ADHD . . . And, therefore, his very life was at stake, and when viewed in that light you can't do anything else if you've got the means to do it.'*

(Mary, a mother)

For some parents, special schools are seen as the best chance of their children living a 'normal life' – Pam, a mother, felt that special school would give her son the chance to go to university. In contrast to parents who want mainstream schooling, it seems that parents who want special school education tend towards medical understandings of disability which put a high value on professional knowledge; this naturally leads to the choice of a school which offers specialist interventions and possibly cure.

However, there are dangers in offering an analysis based on a typology of parents that locates their responses within social or medical model perspectives. This can suggest that parents' responses are unitary and fixed, and that parents sit comfortably within one type. All parents' perspectives are at times fragmented, inconsistent and more complex than a simple typology can suggest (Fisher & Goodley, in press). The choice of a special or mainstream school placement cannot be used as a simple litmus test to establish whether parents hold medical or social model perspectives about their child. In fact, parents actively engage with different models of disability (Landsman, 2005) for different pur-

poses, and, often, parents are driven not by ideology, but pragmatism. It may also be that parents' choice of school is not only influenced by models of disability, but that parents' choice of school, in turn, constructs the model of disability with which they identify.

## Conclusions

Inclusion is cited by parents and professionals as a key cause of appeals to SENDIST. However, parents' perspectives on inclusion differ from the dominant stories in the news media, as many parents focus on barriers to inclusion within individual schools and systems, rather than their children's 'difficulties'. A social model analysis seems to suggest that parents who lean towards individualised or medicalised models of disability are more likely to choose special schools, whereas those who focus more on barriers to learning, rather than within-child factors, will choose mainstream schools, at least at the beginning of their children's education. However, the limitations of a simple typology are acknowledged. The study suggests that parents' attitudes to inclusion are complex and their experiences suggest that, despite the policy shifts since 1997, the process of inclusive education continues to be fragile.

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