The reality of School Place preference – parental views

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Education

by

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For Diana

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Abbreviations

A' Level - Advanced Level Qualification

AWPU - Age-Weighted Pupil Unit

BERA - British Educational Research Association

CME – Children Missing Education

DfE - Department for Education

EHE – Elective Home Education

FEX – Fixed Term Exclusion

FSM - Free School Meals

GCSE - General Certificate in Secondary Education

IOE – Institute of Education

KS – Key Stage

LA - Local Authority

NFER – National Foundation for Educational Research

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFSTED – Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

ONS - Office of National Statistics

PA – Persistent Absence

PEX – Permanent Exclusion

PISA - Programme for International Student Assessment

PP – Pupil Premium

SEND and SEN – Special Education Needs & Disabilities and Special Educational Needs

Abstract

This thesis captures parents lived experiences of engaging with the English School Admissions process and system at Secondary School admission stage. The purpose of seeking parental voice was to analyse whether the systemic right to express preference regarding school place allocation is a myth or a reality for all. New learning is offered to personalise and bring to life the existing literature that already demonstrates how the current school place allocation process disadvantages certain identifiable cohorts of parents.

Parents and Admissions Managers' opinions and experiences are presented against the backdrop of quantitative data acquired from one hundred Local Authorities using Freedom of Information requests and nationally published data sets. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents (from West London and neighbouring counties, representing both genders, a range of ethnicities and faiths or none) and Local Authority Admissions Managers, augmented by parental questionnaires and online anonymous parent surveys demonstrate the mixed methods approach to the design of this research. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Haidt's moral foundations and Bourdieu's theory of capital were drawn upon to inform this work.

Key findings highlight a stressful and emotional experience for parent participants regarding their own School Admissions episode. Also, that despite limited economic and social capital, some parents make significant personal and financial sacrifices to optimise their chances of securing a preferred school place for their children. Another key finding is the expectation from School Admissions Managers that all parents are responsible for researching the schools that are 'realistically' available to them, which is premised on the assumption that all parents have the necessary capital at their disposal in order to conduct such research.

Recommendations are offered based on new knowledge acquired from parents' voices, for policy makers and enactors' consideration to better meet the aspirations of all parents and their children, regardless of economic means. Recommendations also consider the possible benefits of improved home school partnerships to address the

disproportionate rates of absence, exclusion and poorer attainment of children from economically disadvantaged families.

This thesis offers a reflection on the current reality of education as the vehicle for social mobility which several politicians have publicly aspired to over the last fifty years.

Chapter One: The reality of School Place preference – parents views

1.1 Introduction

This thesis considers the experiences of families that are socio-economically disadvantaged with their access to preferred schools, and how they utilise the educational preferences and opportunities that are theoretically available to them to enhance their prospects of social mobility. Much of the existing research in the field of School Admissions, and which is discussed in Chapter Two, is quantitively based and effectively demonstrates that more affluent families are more successful in securing their preferred school for their children. What has not been clear to date is the intention, experience and outcomes of economically disadvantaged families regarding their engagement with and experience of School Admissions. Section 2.2 describes how economic disadvantage is defined for the purposes of this thesis.

This thesis offers direct access to parent voice which is analysed to contribute original knowledge regarding the reality of School Admissions' experiences.

1.2 Context to this research

Capitalist and de-regulatory political approaches in England since 1988 have resulted in parents' increasingly being placed in the role of consumers in an education marketplace. As stated by Wilkins, the "*shift in government rhetoric from a view of service users as passive recipients to active choosers*" (2010: 171) suggests that politicians view parents as consumers of educational services. This approach also assumes that, as consumers, all parents start with the same social and economic capital with which to capitalise on the market opportunities available to them. This stems from the Conservative Party election manifesto of 1979 which offered a parental right of choice regarding their children's education. Cobb and Glass state the potential flaw in the service user concept of the educational marketplace model as, "*it is assumed that all families have the time, information and resources to change school if they wish*" (2009: 264). Wright describes a "*shift in responsibility for social problems from the state to individuals through the logic of the market, responsibilisation and self-esteem*" (2012: 280). He went on to state that:

> *"…parents felt empowered. Not only did this have a legitimising effect on the neoliberal reforms in education, it also had a performative effect on parental subjectivity…parental subjectivities were varied along the lines of class and ethnicity as well as local contexts"* (*ibid* p.282).

This thesis seeks to understand the reality, or *subjectivities* of parents of limited economic means when considering the assumption of equality for all families in their ability to manoeuvre in the educational marketplace. The duty to "*advance equality of opportunity*" (2021:37) is explicitly stated in the DfE School Admissions Code for all schools and Local Authorities in their capacities as Admissions Authorities.

The numerical data which is presented in Chapter Four demonstrates that not all parents receive a preferred school place offer for their children. As stated by Vincent:

> "*So, parental strategies with regard to education are informed by the forms and volumes of capitals they possess and their ability to activate those capitals in the field of schooling. Parents may bring to bear economic capitals (e.g., private education, tutoring, extra-curricular activities, moving house to be near a school perceived as 'good'), social capital (e.g., networks containing teachers and other education professionals who can provide help and advice), and cultural capital (knowledge of the education system, confidence, a sense of entitlement, what Lareau (2003) calls 'generic class resources'* " (2017: 548)

Economic and social capitals of parent research participants for this thesis are analysed in Chapter Five which bring to life the human experiences behind the numerical data shown in Chapter Four.

This thesis tells the stories of six economically disadvantaged parents' School Admissions journeys, capturing the lived experience of those parents who do not have a wealth of economic capital to draw upon when entering the School Admissions process. This thesis seeks to better understand the impact on economically disadvantaged families of their School Admissions experience based on an existing

system that can be critiqued in terms of the equality of opportunity it offers when considering:

> *"Across all pupils eligible for free meals 26% went on to university by the age of 19, but for white pupils on free meals the figure was 16% - and only 13% for boys" (*Department for Education 2020: 3)

The evidence that fewer young people of limited economic means go on to university may arguably be linked to their ability to access their preferred school. This in turn, may detrimentally impact their school attendance, exclusions and attainment. Evidence of this is shown in Figures 1.2 and 1.3.

As discussed in section 3.4, this thesis is informed by a Heideggerian hermeneutical approach and adopts an interpretive phenomenological methodology to explore the voice of parents through semi-structured interviews. As have emerged during the research process, the following considerations arise and are revisited in Chapter 6.

- What are the educational and occupational aspirations of parents of limited social and economic capital for their children?
- What does the School Admissions landscape look like for socio-economically disadvantaged parents?
- What are parents' views of that landscape as they see it?
- What are the barriers to admission to preferred schools for children and parents of limited social and economic capital?
- Are there recommendations to be drawn from the findings to inform policy and practice?

1.3 Political aspirations

In 2011, the then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg stated that:

> "*the true test of fairness is the distribution of opportunities. That is why improving social mobility is the principal goal of the Coalition Government's social policy."* (H.M Government 2011:3).

When Teresa May became Prime Minister in 2016, she spoke of inequalities in society and her intention to create a fairer society for all. Prime Minister May stated, "*the lower*

chances of white working class boys going to university [and]….getting your children into a good school" (The Sunday Telegraph January 2017:4) as worries for many families that politicians in Westminster do not sufficiently understand.

This is some forty-two years after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher spoke of children needing access to good (she used the term grammar) schools in order to compete with the most privileged (Keay 1987: 3).

Michael Gove, when Secretary of State for Education said:

> *"there was no country other than the US where parental circumstances determine your future so decisively…….that it was strange that this was not regarded as "one of the greatest injustices that we've allowed to fester over the last 40 years."…There had been more investment in education, but the gaps continued to grow as children got older, making them seem unbridgeable by A-level… Every other nation recognises that unless it makes use of all its talents, it will be unable to grow, innovate and ensure good things for all citizens"* (2012: 33)

It could be argued that Gove was making the case for investing in education as a lever for economic growth through children being equipped to become tax revenue generating citizens. Equally, comparison with other countries was important to him. Having recognised '*injustice*', the question of '*gaps*' remains unaddressed. In this thesis, Gove's observation about parental circumstances impacting children's educational opportunities will come to life as lived experiences are captured and analysed in Chapter Five.

David Cameron, in his keynote speech entitled 'Life Chances', delivered when he was Prime Minister, stated that "*it's about improving education, so those who've had the toughest starts have every chance of breaking the cycle of poverty*." (2016: 4)

During the several years since Clegg, Gove and May explicitly referenced the gap in success for all pupils in the United Kingdom education system, this "*40 year*" (2012:3)

inequality does not seem much closer to being reversed according to the Equality Trust's findings specifically in relation to distribution of household income.

> "*In 2018, households in the bottom 20% of the population had on average an equivalised disposable income of £12,798, whilst the top 20% had £69,126.*" (2018: 1).

Much remains to be done in light of this data to deliver on economic equality, which politicians state as their ambition through the lever of education.

In light of politicians' public statements in recent years, it is notable that the Social Mobility Commission has reported that:

> *"Cuts to budgets and efforts to improve schools in recent years have had unintended consequences for poorer students. Reforms to the curriculum, although well intentioned, were implemented too quickly for some young people, and disadvantaged students lost out disproportionately during the implementation, at Key Stage 2 in particular."* (2019: VIII)

This seems to be counterintuitive to the political aspiration for enhancing equality for all through access to the best available education.

When David Cameron was the Prime Minister, his own Education Minister noted that he found himself surrounded with a "*preposterous number of old Etonians*" (*ibid*.:21) in the political sphere (Eton College is Cameron's alma mater). It has been stated by politicians that they view education as a positive lever from which all children can positively benefit – yet the experience of the then Minister of State for Education would suggest that the highest political offices in the land were recently occupied by an overrepresentation of privileged people whose parents were able to pay school fees. There appears to be an irony, if politicians are wedded to their ideology of educational marketplaces with parents as consumers to advance the prospects of all children, that the Education debate at the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester England (September 2019) explored the following agenda items in Figure 1.1. The conference considered parental preference and narrowing the attainment gap between the most and the least advantaged children. To have both areas of consideration on the same agenda would have been a good opportunity to consider any causal links. However,

the key point to come from the debate was an ambition stated by the Secretary of State for Education in 2019, Gavin Williamson, to 'beat Germany' on vocational education and a £120 million commitment to develop specialist vocational institutions. This is arguably a missed opportunity to consider the impact of economic disadvantage on access to preferred schools and pupil attainment.

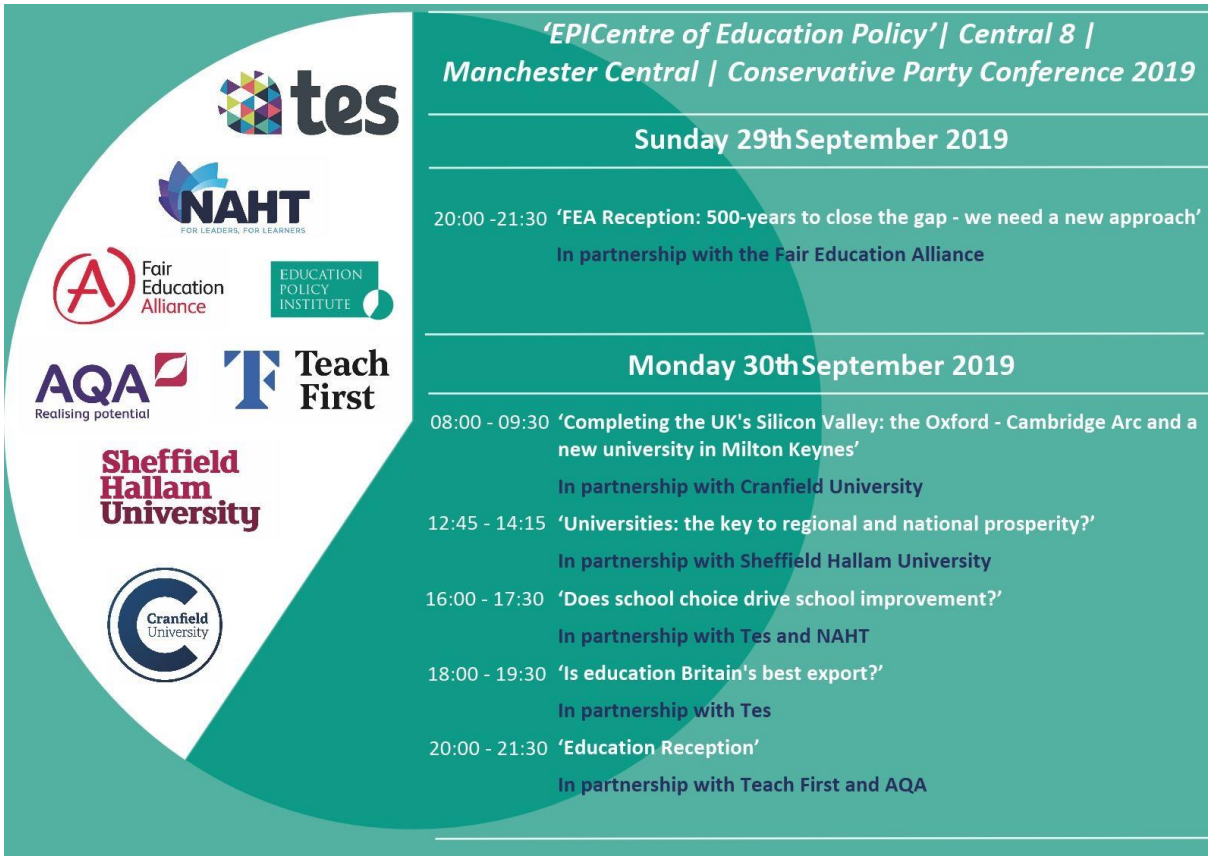

Figure 1.1 Education Debate Agenda Conservative Party Conference 2019

The initial findings from early research into the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic from March 2020 on educational attainment disparity between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children is not a matter for this thesis. However, it suggests that challenges to be laid out in this thesis may become greater during the post-pandemic years. As shown by The Royal Society, "*Children in the richest quintile of families spend over 75 minutes per day more on schoolwork than children in the poorest quintile of households.*" (2020: 3.a.iii). The anticipated consequences are articulated as "*school closures and ongoing educational disruption may widen the disadvantage gap"* (UK Parliament Post 2021: 3). In December 2021 Dame Kate Ethridge (Regional Schools Commissioner for west London and the South East region of England) cited data:

> *"Primary pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) were around an additional 0.5 months further behind their more advantaged peers in Summer term 2021 which is an improvement from around 1 month in Spring term 2021.*
> *Secondary FSM pupils were around an additional 2 months further behind in Summer term 2021 which is worse than in Spring term 2021 when they were around 1 month further behind."* (2021:2)

This pertained to the impact of 'catch-up' tutoring provided to pupils following the periods of schools' partial closures during the pandemic. Ethridge showed that children from economically disadvantaged families have been worst affected in terms of lost learning than their more affluent peers. This suggests an emergent challenge for future research which falls outside the framework for this thesis, although the findings from this thesis may inform further learning to support economically disadvantaged pupils' educational opportunities.

1.4 Emergent challenges

John Goldthorpe stated in 2016:

> "*a situation is emerging that is quite new in modern British history…young people entering the labour market today face far less favourable mobility prospects than their parents or grandparents"*. (in Blandford 2017: 28)

Figures published on 29th July 2019 (pre-pandemic) showed progress to close the gap in GCSE attainment between economically advantaged and disadvantaged pupils has stalled for the first time in nearly eight years, meaning disadvantaged pupils were leaving school more than 18 months behind their economically better-off peers. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) research found that the gap between the most disadvantaged pupils and their more privileged peers narrowed at primary level but widened at secondary school. The EPI's annual report in 2019 on equality of outcome of education for pupils in England showed that the trend to close the gap in GCSE attainment has reversed for the first time since 2011. It increased slightly between 2017 and 2018 by 0.2 months to 18.1 months difference based on disparity

in socio-economic statuses of pupils. The same EPI research shows a similar picture for the early years with the attainment gap for reception-age pupils also widening by 0.1 months to 4.5 months. This means the most disadvantaged young people in the country were almost two years (22.6 months) behind all other pupils by the time they finish their GCSEs. The consequence of not securing a preferred school place may arguably be a contributary factor to the attainment gap shown in Figure 1.2. This will be explored more widely in Chapter Six.

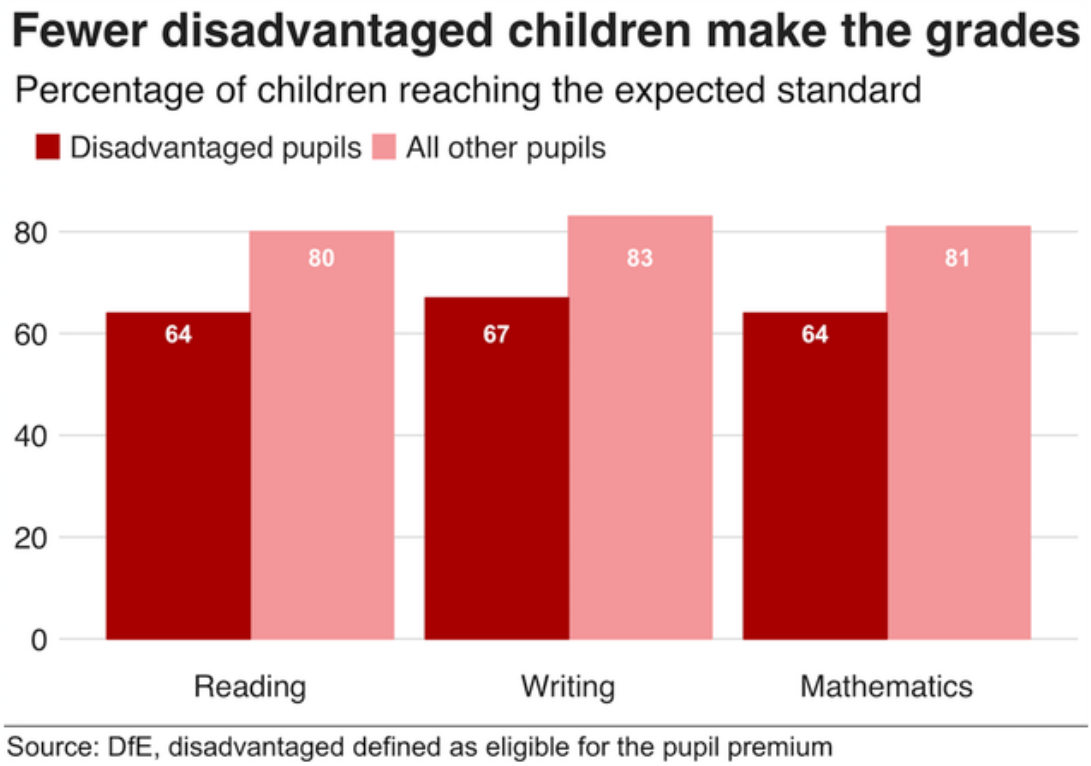

Figure 1.2 BBC 2019 Percentage of children reaching the expected grade

The attainment gap as described above seems to have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic (section 1.7). Better understanding of this, and measures to address it will need to be considered over the forthcoming years.

Gove (Education Reform Summit 2014) referred to the power of education as a positive opportunity for national economic advancement, the aspiration being that all citizens will offer growth and innovation to their nation regardless of their starting point. Consideration of whether education is the most effective and realistic vehicle for this aspiration, within the existing School Admissions framework as a facilitator, is

discussed in this thesis through the lens of economically disadvantaged parents. Whether those parents consider economic advancement when making their applications for an allocated school place will be shown in Chapters Five and Six. To achieve a better understanding of the reality of School Admissions arrangements affording access to preferred (usually the most popular) schools for socio-economically disadvantaged parents, their voices need to be heard. Only then will the words and aspirations of political leaders be assessable as achieved or currently unrealised.

Not directly related to School Admissions, but demonstrating the confidence of parents of more affluent means in influencing their children's educational outcomes, Holt-White and Cullinane reported:

> *"23% of teachers at private schools report that parents had approached or pressured them about their child's grade this year, compared to 17% at more affluent state schools, and 11% at the least affluent"* (2021: 1)

Holt-White and Cullinane suggest that some economically secure parents feel sufficiently empowered to seek to influence Teacher Assessed Grades in greater numbers than parents from deprived areas. This confidence to seek to influence the educational outcomes of their children does not represent all parents equally across the economic spectrum of all families. Whilst the phenomenon of Teacher Assessed Grades for GCSE and A 'Level exams was an exceptional measure of expediency due to the pandemic which started in 2020, the research undertaken by the Sutton Trust (2021) offers a powerful message about parent drive and agency based on confidence, with economic capital as a common denominator.

This thesis considers whether this degree of parental confidence to influence school allocation is demonstrated by parents, drawing on the experiences of the economically disadvantaged specifically.

1.5 Experience at local level

The voices of politicians when stating their aspirational ambitions for the nation's children and the power of education to elevate their prospects, does not necessarily correlate with local reality. As a Local Authority officer, in several varying roles within

education services over twenty plus years, I have observed and been concerned about the apparent differences in pupil engagement in education when considering differing cohorts of pupils. Engagement in this context refers to fixed term exclusions, permanent exclusions, children missing education, attendance and persistent absence. Analysis of pupil characteristics establishes common truisms that children are more likely to be fixed term or permanently excluded from school, persistently absent or children missing education if their economic circumstances entitle them to free school meals (FSM). In Oxfordshire where I work, for example, persistent absenteeism (PA), permanent exclusion (PEX), fixed term exclusion (FEX) and children missing education (CME) are all more likely to be from economically disadvantaged families than not.

		15/16	16/17	17/18
Persistent absence - primary	Non FSM	6.3%	6.0%	6.0%
	FSM	19.1%	20.0%	20.7%
Persistent absence - secondary	Non FSM	12.0%	11.9%	12.5%
	FSM	33.6%	33.4%	36.9%
Permanent exclusions - primary	Non FSM	0.02%	0.03%	0.01%
	FSM	0.04%	0.14%	0.17%
Permanent exclusions - secondary	Non FSM	0.10%	0.14%	0.10%
	FSM	0.90%	0.51%	0.27%
Fixed term exclusions at least one - primary	Non FSM	0.25%	0.42%	0.43%
	FSM	1.35%	2.14%	2.43%
Fixed term exclusions at least one - secondary	Non FSM	2.61%	3.50%	3.30%
	FSM	7.89%	11.88%	11.37%
Children missing education (identified mid-academic year)	Non FSM	0.35%	0.42%	0.28%
	FSM	0.3%	0.32%	0.29%

Figure 1.3 Oxfordshire Learner Engagement Data 2019

This disproportionate non-engagement with schooling for Oxfordshire's most economically disadvantaged children prompted further consideration of the impact of

disadvantage on access to the best educational opportunities. Particularly stark findings include that children of secondary school age are three times less likely to attend school for more than 90% of the available sessions if they are entitled to FSMs and primary school children are five times more likely to be fixed term excluded from school if they are entitled to FSMs (see Figure 1.3 above).

The Office for National Statistics reported in 2021 that the English national average salary was £29,900. For the same year, Salary Explorer reported that the Oxfordshire average salary was £76,200. Oliver, in The New Statesman, considered poverty in Oxford, quoting a community worker from Oxford in his article:

> "*when a seven-year old girl was dropped off at a school holiday scheme with no packed lunch, her mother was called. There was no money for food, she explained, but she promised to do what she could"* (2019: 2).

This suggests that the wealth disparity in Oxfordshire is significant, with average salaries more than double the national average, but individual children not having access to sufficient food. The ability for the children who attend school hungry to achieve comparable educational outcomes to their more economically advantaged peers is a flaw in equal aspiration for advancement of all children and families through the vehicle of education.

Oliver went on to state that there is a fifteen year difference in male life expectancy between the richest and most economically disadvantaged political wards within Oxford. If the nation can tolerate this degree of economic inequality and the consequential impact on people's lives, there is a need to better understand the breadth and depth of the tendrils of inequality. Society ought to continue questioning the effectiveness of political desire for equality. Wasted potential means that some economically disadvantaged citizens might potentially, but are not able in reality, to contribute to the national endeavour for wealth, knowledge and security.

Having drawn on Oxfordshire as an exemplar location, the geographical focus of this thesis is west London and surrounding areas. This is discussed in section 5.2 and is based on pandemic related convenience sampling of accessible research participants.

It is not that Local Authorities are blind to inequalities of access to the best and most popular schools for all families through the existing School Admissions arrangements. In 2007, Brighton and Hove Local Authority trialled a lottery school place allocation system. Allen, Burgess and McKenna published inconclusive findings of its impact in 2010 at about the same time that the trial was abandoned. This is discussed further in section 2.12. A personal insight has been offered from a senior officer at Brighton and Hove Local Authority from 2019. Whilst no longer in an Admissions post, she still works for that Local Authority (requiring her to remain anonymous). She shared that the original intention of the Local Authority was one of seeking equal access to preferred school places for all children regardless of family economic status and home address. Her view of the abandonment of the trial was one of sadness and disappointment. She said that a rapid population increase and lack of one hundred percent buy-in and support of the trial from all schools in the area caused the cessation, not a change in the Local Authority's aspiration for equality of access for all families. She particularly referred to faith schools as declining to participate in the trial. This points to a potential tension between the principles and ethos of individual schools and academy trusts and the needs of the wider community that those institutions serve.

1.6 Impact of economic influence on Schools Admissions processes and equality of access for all children

In 2019 Coughlan considered the family characteristics of those who successfully appealed for their first preference school place when not originally allocated it during the admissions process. He showed that of eighty six thousand children not achieving their first preference school place, thirteen thousand eventually secured their favoured place on appeal. Wealthy and white families were overrepresented as successful appellants by eleven percent. Coughlan states that the School Admissions process is "*not a level playing field*" and "*tends to work in favour of better off families*" (2019: 2). Further discussion on School Place Appeals appears in section 4.2.

Economic capital has been shown to be a key factor in securing parents' school of preference based on financial ability to secure accommodation near to preferred schools. This requires relative wealth in locations where domestic accommodation

(rented or bought) attracts a premium of 12% for access to 'good' primary schools. In a London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) blog Gibbons states:

> *"It is a truth universally acknowledged in the chatter of middle class dinner parties in Britain that good schools push up house prices. Stories of anxious parents buying or renting at inflated prices in the catchment areas of well-regarded schools are commonplace"*. (2012: 3)

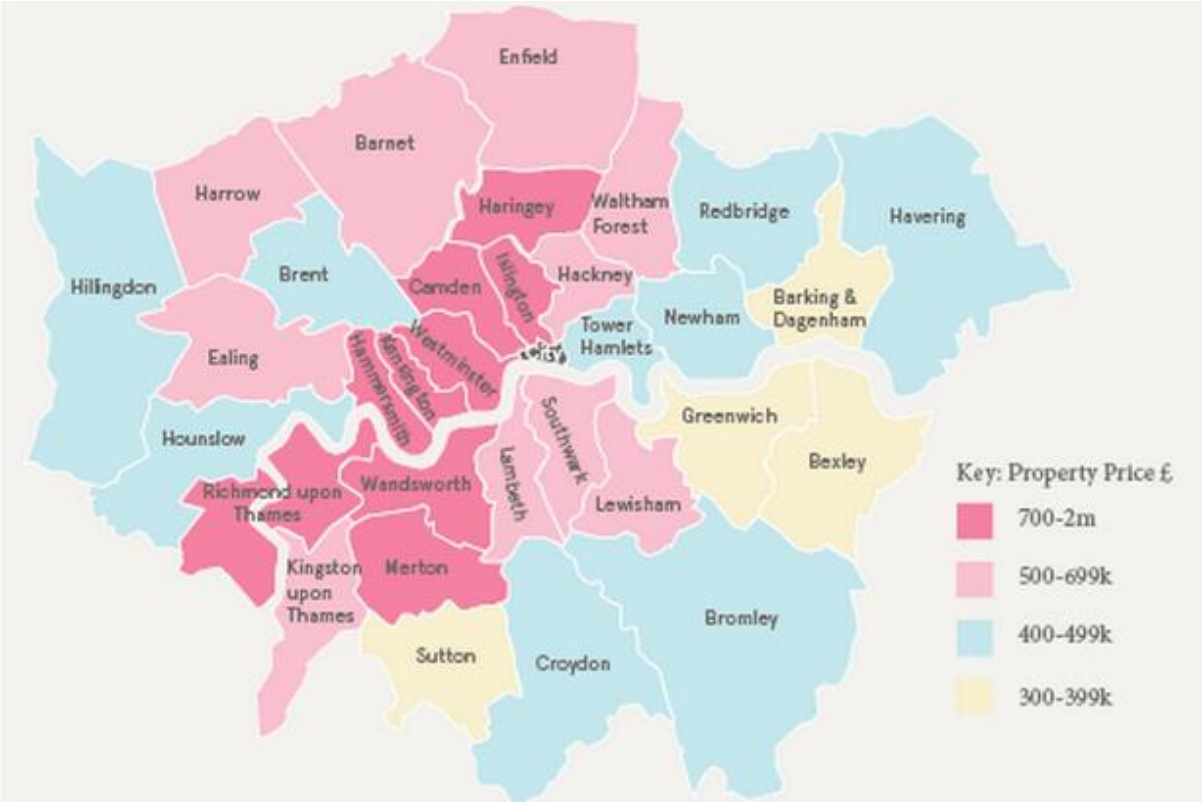

Figure 1.4 Average Property Price Variations in London 2019

Figure 1.4 above demonstrates the wide disparity in property prices across London in 2019. This also has a direct impact on relative rental values.

McConnell stated on 20th October 2019 in 'Get West London':

> *"Schools with the highest OFSTED rating, outstanding, are naturally the ones you want to send your kids to, but it will come at a price - possibly even as much as £150,000. New research by estate agent Portico has revealed the average London property near an outstanding state primary school is £693,849 - that's £75,000 more than the average London house price."* (2019: 2)

Earlier in the same year, Miller stated that:

> *"Those who want to buy a place in the catchment area of an outstanding-rated school in London, should expect to fork out an average £635,949….While homes near inadequate-rated schools cost an average £461,273 to buy - that's 27% cheaper than homes near an outstanding institution."* (2019: 1)

Montacute and Cullinane state that:

> *"parents in higher socio-economic groups were much more likely to report a variety of strategies to gain access to their preferred schools, such as moving to an area with good schools or to a specific catchment, employing private tutors for entrance tests. 14% of professional parents … reported moving to an area with good schools, compared to just 4% of working class ..."* (2018: 3).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on 'Balancing School Choice and Equity' amongst Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) countries states of parental preference:

> *"The reality on the ground may differ from the regulatory environment for a variety of reasons, including the affordability and accessibility of schools."* (2019: 81).

This report indicates that access to the best schools for the most socio-economically disadvantaged children is a less likely prospect for children from countries that engage with PISA, not just in England.

What is clear from all the findings cited above is that access to preferred school places is influenced by home address. This in turn is influenced by economic circumstance. Consequently, the concept of preference regarding School Admissions cannot be an equal reality for all parents.

1.7 Impact of Covid19

This thesis has been researched and written during the world-wide Covid-19 pandemic. As stated in section 1.4, its impact on future pupils, in England and worldwide, is not yet fully understood. However, initial research cannot go unacknowledged in the context of this specific thesis. During the Covid 19 pandemic in England which started in March 2020, schools were closed from 23rd March 2020 until 1st June 2020 (then again from 4th January 2021 until 8th March 2021) for all children except those classed as 'vulnerable' and for the children of Key Worker parents. This disruption is yet to be fully assessed in terms of impact on the least socio-economically advantaged families. The true impact may not be known for many years to come in terms of closing or widening the gap that was considered at the Conservative Party Conference (Figure 1.1) only six months prior to the outbreak. However, The Sutton Trust (2020) polled parents who found themselves home schooling during the first closure period after three weeks at home – see Figure 1.5 below. This indicated initial cause for concern for the least economically advantaged children in the early days of the national and international crisis. For example:

- *"Only 42% of parents feel confident home-schooling their children: 47% of middle class parents feel confident compared to just 37% of working class parents.*
- *Children from better off households are more than twice as likely to have had more than £100 spent on their education since the shutdown, (19% of middle class children v 8% of working class)."* (2020:2)

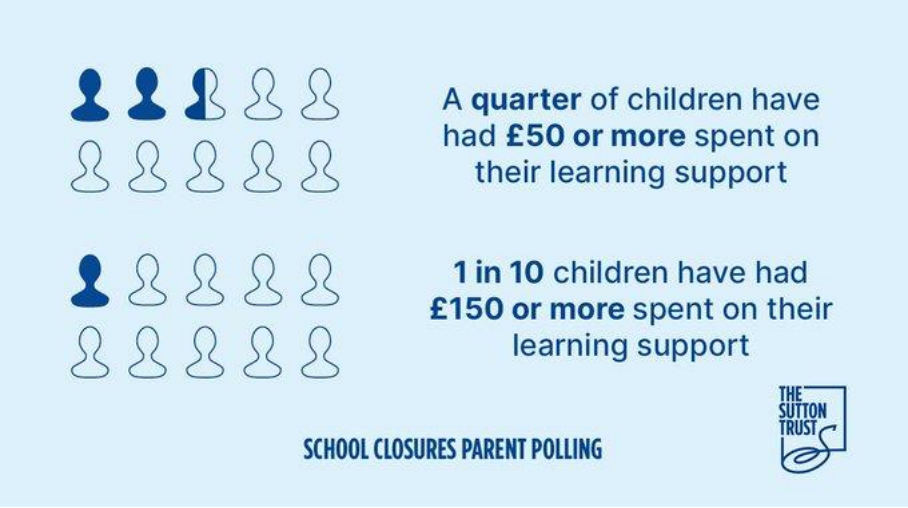

Figure 1.5 Impact of CoVid-19 on socio-economically disadvantaged households to educate from home

In terms of Covid's impact on the School Admissions process, the Department for Education Admissions Appeals statutory regulations were amended on 14th April 2020 to temporarily revise the existing arrangements in light of the pandemic. The amendment allowed for School Admissions Appeals to be heard by virtual means. This assumes that all parents have equal access to virtual means. The amendments were as follows:

- *"disapply the requirement that appeals panels must be held in person and instead give flexibility for panel hearings to take place either in person, by telephone, video conference or through a paper-based appeal where all parties can make representations in writing*
- *relax the rules with regard to what happens if one of the 3 panel members withdraws (temporarily or permanently) to make it permissible for the panel to continue with and conclude the appeal as a panel of 2* (Department for Education 2021: 2)

It has subsequently been proposed that the first amendment is made a permanent change. Arguably, the impacts on families without good access to technology and/or effective literacy skills will have been further exacerbated in addition to the existing disadvantages of low confidence and limited ability to interpret already complex regulations, as discussed in section 5.14.

When considering the barriers for parents of limited economic means and their access to digital tools to apply for or appeal school places, the need to hear from those parents as consumers of education on behalf of their children is required. Enhancing economically disadvantaged children's later prospects by accessing the most successful and popular schools, has never been more important in the endeavour to narrow the gaps described here and in Figure 1.2. In Chapter Five, parents lived experiences are captured and told to give life to numerical data.

1.8 Research Aims

Based on the legislative construct of the School Admissions Code, political aspirations for societal advancement through education, and the principle of parental right of preference, Figure 1.6 shows a mapping of relevant ideas pertinent to this thesis. With the child at the centre of the interaction, there are four influences in the School Admissions process; parents, schools, Government and Local Admissions Authorities. This thesis considers the influence of each, and which holds the greatest control in achieving desired outcomes for the child. It also considers whether desired outcomes of all four influencers (parents, schools, Local Admissions Authorities and Government) are mutually compatible.

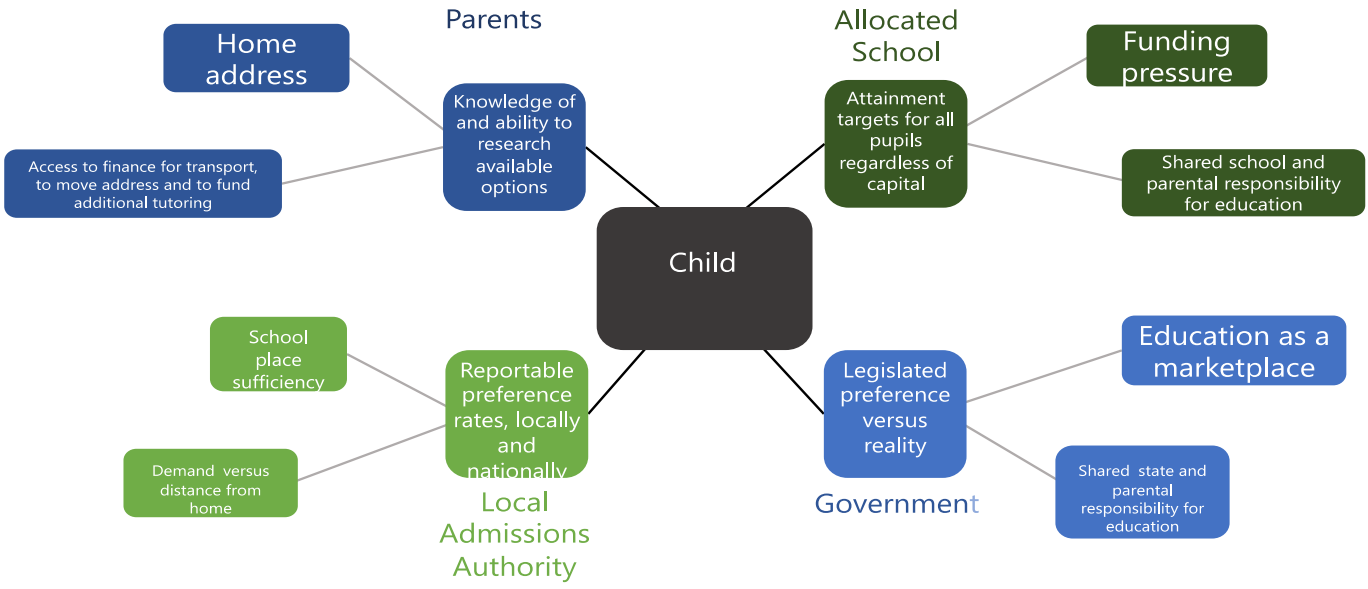

Figure. 1.6 Theoretical framework

By seeking, capturing and analysing parents views on their School Admissions experience, this thesis aims to

- compare the professional opinions and experiences of Admissions Managers with parents lived experiences, all within the legislative framework of the School Admissions Code. As demonstrated in Figure 1.6 above, the interconnectivity between the family, Government legislation, Local Admissions Authorities and schools is pivotal to the child at the centre of this activity.
- consider the impact of the School Admissions process on children of economically limited means. It considers the likelihood of their educational outcomes matching families' aspirations for them, based on securing a preferred school place – and potential consequences of having to settle for a non-preferred school place. Burgess, Greaves et al. refer to parents settling or compromising on a school as "*a resigned choice*" (2011:542)

What is it in the current School Admissions structure, if at all, that excludes least wealthy children from the best schools; a systemic failing that policy makers can resolve, or a phenomenon that remains opaque? What better reason than to seek, listen to and learn from the voices of the parents whose children may be excluded from the best educational opportunities available to others, drawing on the theories of Bourdieu (1984a and b) and Haidt with Joseph (2004) to offer structure. Practical applications of theories relating to human capital and moral foundations informed by Bourdieu and Haidt are explicitly explored in section 5.6. Parent participants are drawn from those of limited economic capital due to receiving unemployment benefit or earning minimum wage and having no further recourse to additional income (as shown in Figures 3.2 and 5.2). In Chapter Five, parent participants' personal circumstances have been analysed against all of Bourdieu's human capitals (not just economic capital) and Haidt's moral foundations to identify commonalities across their personal School Admissions experiences.

The rest of this thesis is structured by considering existing knowledge of School Admissions literature (Chapter Two), a chapter describing the methodological approach to this research (Chapter Three), a chapter on quantitative findings (Chapter Four), one on qualitative findings (Chapter Five) and concludes with

discussions, recommendations, conclusions and contribution to new knowledge (Chapter Six).

Chapter Two Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this thesis is the English School Admissions system according to the latest iteration of the School Admissions Code (2014) at the time of writing and the experience of families of limited economic means who access state funded schools to educate their children. This is intended to ascertain whether state funded education within a marketplace of theoretical preference is the most effective vehicle for meeting parents' hopes and aspirations for their children. Whilst measures of likely future educational successes that parents aspire to are challenging to secure, for this research, attendance, exclusions and attainment are drawn upon as indicators. Directly seeking economically disadvantaged parents' experiences of accessing their preferred schools for their children, is the lens adopted to offer new knowledge to the field. Existing literature reviewed is presented thematically in sections 2.4 to 2.13.

2.2 Context

There is a wealth of literature available on school admissions, yet very little post the 2014 School Admissions Code iteration (subsequently revised in 2021). There is also a wealth of literature that is derived from a positivist perspective, using numerical data as a basis for establishing whether fair access to 'good' schools and consequential positive educational outcomes are equally accessible to pupils who are entitled to FSMs. FSM entitlement is a pupil characteristic that is gathered in routine school census data returns three times a year from each state funded school, returned to Local Authorities and the Department for Education. FSM entitlement is a proxy measure for low income in families associated with limited economic capital. It may be argued that FSM status is a blunt tool with which to gauge economic disadvantage. Entitlement to FSMs requires access to state benefits to qualify. This loses sight of the families working multiple low paid and low skill jobs, on minimum wage and insecure jobs.

The definition of a 'good' school is based on the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) definition. OFSTED inspects and grades all maintained schools and academies (and other settings) in England and Wales.

Their grading system is based on four overall judgements available to inspectors and schools: Outstanding; Good; Requires Improvement; and Inadequate. Inadequate is further subdivided into two categories, serious weaknesses or requiring special measures (OFSTED, January 2019).

All schools are expected to be judged as at least 'good' which is defined as:

> "*The quality of education is at least good. All other key judgements are likely to be good or outstanding. In exceptional circumstances, one of the key judgement areas may require improvement, as long as there is convincing evidence that the school is improving this area sustainably and securely towards good. Safeguarding is effective*." (OFSTED framework May 2019: 197).

Key judgement areas are made in relation to the:

Quality of education
Intent
Implementation
Impact
Behaviour and attitudes
Personal development
Leadership and management (*ibid*)

Parents have the ability to access inspection reports of prospective schools for application purposes based on findings against these key judgement areas.

Based on the literature reviewed in this chapter, direct parent voice is not a common and transparent emergent theme. This thesis, focusing on parents in limited economic circumstances, takes an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore their lived experiences of the School Admissions process. This is intended to address this gap in the literature and give voice to parents' lived experiences of seeking to access places at their preferred schools. The terms social and economic capital feature throughout this review. These are drawn from Bourdieu (1984a and b) and will be fully explored in the context of parent participants in Chapter Five. Social mobility is a term that is used liberally by politicians as discussed in sections 1.3 and 2.8. The United Kingdom Government has created a Social Mobility Tsar and a Social Mobility Commission. Their purpose is to ensure that family cycles of deprivation and

disadvantage are interrupted so children get opportunities to achieve more than their parents in terms of educational success, employment prospects, improved health and personal wealth.

The historical timeline shown in Figure 2.1 sets the scene for the development of the state-funded education landscape of 2022 through which parents navigate their preferred school place for their children.

1114 to date	Free grammar schools established by benefactors to educate bright children from poor families
1541-1604	First cathedral schools established for boy choristers
1604 -1880	Voluntary church and charity schools established by faith leaders and benefactors for their own chosen cohorts of children
1880	First legislation making primary education compulsory for all children up to the age of ten. Elementary Education Act 1880
1906	Free school meals introduced. Education (provision of meals) Act 1906
1940	Secondary education was split between grammar education, secondary modern and secondary technical. Board of Education Spens Report
1944	Education Act making grammar education post age fourteen free to all. Education Act 1944
1965	Three types of secondary education schools began the merger that formed single type comprehensive schools. Circular 10/65
1981	Education Act 1981 established the right to education for children with special educational needs and disabilities
1988	Education Reform Act 1988 introduced the National Curriculum and measures to raise standards. First introduction of concept of parental preference and concept of a marketplace amongst schools
2000	Academies first emerged as independent schools, state funded, outside the control of Local Authorities which had managed all schools in a variety of guises since the advent of School Boards in 1880
2010	Free schools were introduced, an extension of the academy movement, making it possible for parents, teachers, charities and businesses to open state funded schools. Academies Act 2010
2014	Latest iteration of the Schools Admissions Code (followed in 2021)
2015	First legislation making education, training or employment compulsory for young people up to the age of eighteen (no enforcement means currently available). Education and Skills Act 2008
February 2018	72% of secondary schools and 27% of primary schools are academies

Figure 2.1 Historical timeline of English Schools Admissions arrangements

As shown in Figure 2.1, access to education in England for children from the wealthiest families was untroubled by wholesale reform for nearly eight hundred years. Free access to education for all children was required from 1880. It took a mere twenty six years from then for FSMs to be introduced when the impact of compulsory education on economically disadvantaged children was apparent and understood through poor attendance, having to contribute to family caring and work responsibilities, and reduced ability to concentrate in class due to hunger. What is clear is that the pace of change has increased from the late twentieth century to date. In the thirty years since 1988, two thirds of secondary schools have become independent of local oversight and local democratic processes. Becoming academies renders them being directly overseen by central Government and removed from obligatory local leadership and political influences. This recent thirty-year period is the same period that parents have been accorded the right to express a preference as to where their children are educated. This relatively recent development (in historical terms) is key to the purpose of this thesis in understanding the impact on parents on seeking to influence their child's allocated school place. The influence of the Church of England in the formation of English schools cannot be underestimated and will be expanded upon later. This thesis considers whether the most socio-economically disadvantaged in society are amongst those who have benefitted from such rapid changes in the educational landscape in England.

2.3 Admissions Arrangements

The School Admissions Code (2014) is based on parents being entitled to apply for a minimum of three preferred schools, regardless of distance from home. In the event that a school is oversubscribed, the school's individual admissions policy is used to determine who is offered one of a limited number of spaces. Individual admissions policies determine oversubscription based on a number of criteria. The most common criterion is distance between home and school, frequently followed in order by Looked After (meaning children in public care) status, siblings already on roll at the oversubscribed school, social or medical need, evidence of faith, children with an Education, Health and Care plan, or selection based on banded assessments of academic ability for schools or academies (or 11 + entrance exam for Grammar Schools). It is explicitly unlawful to admit pupils to any school based on (not an exhaustive list) giving priority to children on the basis of any practical or financial support parents may give to the school or any associated organisation, including any

religious authority, giving priority to children according to the occupational, marital, financial or educational status of parents applying. Additionally, spaces cannot be allocated based on consideration of

- children of staff at the school
- taking account of reports from previous schools about children's past behaviour, attendance, attitude or achievement, or any other children in the family
- discriminate against or disadvantage disabled children and/or those with Special Educational Needs
- those applying for admission outside their normal age group
- prioritise children on the basis of their own or their parents' past or current hobbies or activities (schools which have been designated as having a religious character may take account of religious activities)
- give priority to siblings of former pupils
- interview children or parents

Those eligible for the early years Pupil Premium, the Pupil Premium and the Service Premium may be prioritised, if stated in the school admissions policy. FSM eligibility is a criterion for access to Pupil Premium. All school policies, including admissions policies are determined individually by Governors or Trustees, within the statutory framework for publicly funded schools in England and Wales (2014). There are no standard policies for all schools.

The Admissions Code, as a statutory framework, indicates in principle that all parents should have equal opportunity of access to all schools. The literature shows that this principle, however, is not a universal truth for all families.

In the face of a rich body of academic work based on analysis of numerical data, there is very little research available that thoroughly scrutinises the experiences of people directly affected by the school admissions process. This raises the question, who are these anonymous children and families failing to secure their preferred school place, what impact does this have on their educational experience and subsequently on their future lives?

2.4 Perceptions

As shown in Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3 The Sutton Trust research into school staff perception of pupil characteristics versus reality arguably reflects inaccurate assumptions about families' personal circumstances. Primary School staff think that their allocated cohort of pupils is more greatly disadvantaged than average across teaching and leadership staff. Secondary school leaders think their pupil population is less disadvantaged than average and secondary teachers overestimate disadvantage in their school. Given that only the most advantaged children were educated historically, there could be a perception by teaching staff that this historical shadow could remain an influence in the twenty first century. This raises the question as to whether children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds remain perceived as less likely to benefit from the opportunities that education present compared to their more advantaged peers. Parental aspirations for their children have been sought to address this question. This is important in the context of parents of limited economic circumstances being able to access the school place of preference for their children.

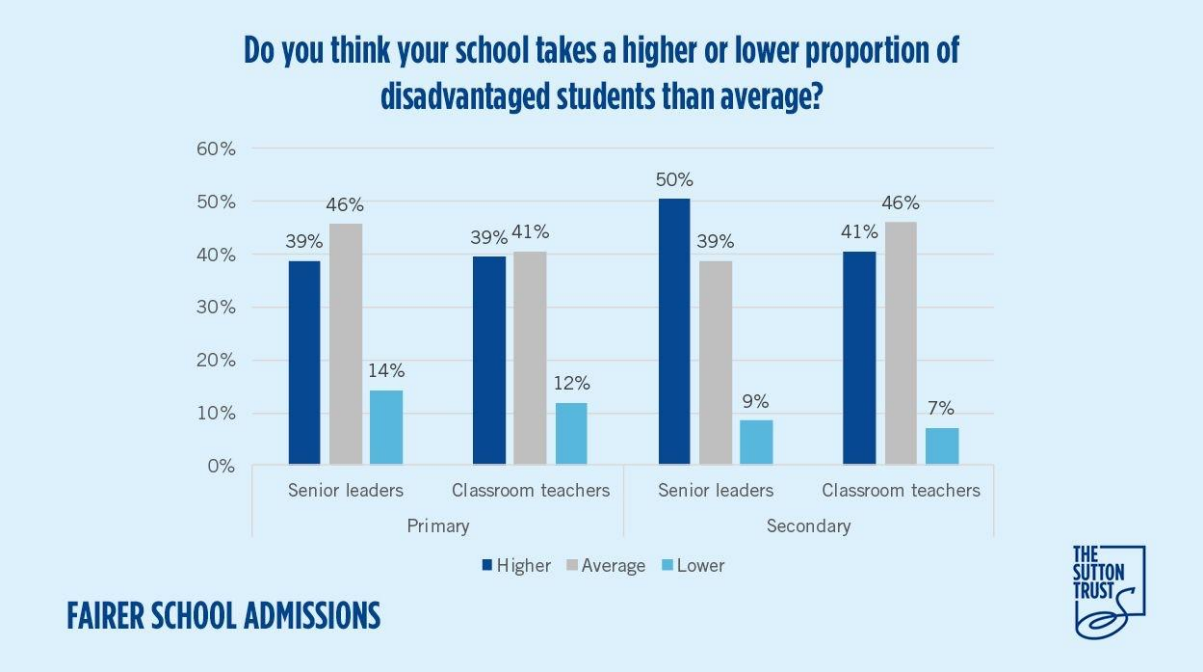

Figure 2.2 The Sutton Trust 2019

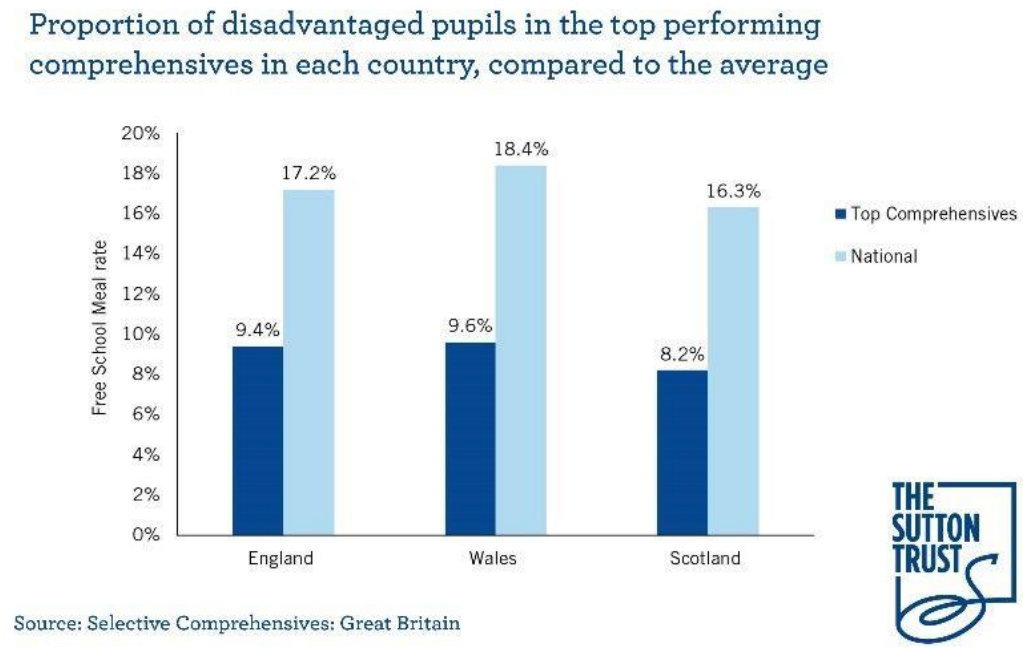

Figure 2.3 The Sutton Trust 2019

2.5 Biographical reflections of the Admissions experience

Whilst biographical reflections of the Admissions experience may not reflect the wider population, they serve as an opportunity to consider the reality of personal experiences and impact on the individual. A biographical approach has not been adopted more widely (more suitable approaches are outlined in Chapter Three) due to their paucity in the existing literature on School Admissions.

Taken from the autobiography of Lott (The Scent of Dried Roses), the question is raised concerning how many other families have shared similar experiences? There will always be statistically insignificant outliers, but those voices might be the powerful representatives of the children and families that Clegg, May and Gove referred to in their aspirations for all citizens in the United Kingdom as cited in section 1.3:

> "*When Rita Cole, Cissy's gifted niece, was admitted to the local grammar school in the 1930's, the other children in the street simply stopped talking to her. Such airs and graces were hated and sanctions were used against them. The peculiarly English phrase 'too clever by half' was hurled at her as a stinging rebuke, as was 'getting above yourself'. To want to join the middle classes was an abandonment of pride and identity. For in this England there was an absolute suspicion of all that was not familiar, plain,*

> *straightforward or common sense. Having witnessed Rita's fate, Jack, when offered a coveted grammar school place, turned it down, to the indifference of his – Tory voting – father. "* (Lott 1996: 39).

Blandford, (in her book Born to Fail? Social Mobility: A Working Class View 2017), writes based on academic research and personal experience, of how access to the wider benefits (such as extra-curricular activities, social opportunities and school trips which often come at a cost to families) of state funded education can be denied to the least economically advantaged children. She argues that schools are perceived as inaccessible to parents who might feel 'looked down on' by educated professional teachers who impose their values and perceptions of what children should aspire to achieve. Vocational skills familiar to economically disadvantaged families, whilst highly useful skills for society, are not perceived to be aspirational enough. When Gove stated his ambition as seeing more school leavers going on to university, he did not answer where all the graduate entry jobs would be created from, nor who would deliver the basic trades that, whilst not necessarily valued, are vital. By way of example, it could be suggested that the next time your boiler mal-functions and you are left without heating and hot water in the middle of the coldest winter month, will you care about the level of the tradesperson's education, or whether they can fix the problem quickly, efficiently and safely? Whilst this skill set requires vocational education and training, to what extent is the full academic curriculum deployed? Burgess, Greaves et al. state that "*academic standards may not necessarily be of prime concern to parents*" (2011: 532). More on this is analysed in Chapters Five and Six.

Lott goes on to retell that:

> "*as Jack emerged into the London air, screaming blue murder, his family*
>
> *could have little doubt about what his future would bring. He would go to school until fourteen, changing into long trousers at the age of eleven. Then he would go to work, probably for the family. Having secured a job which would be manual and at best semi-skilled, he would be considered a man. He would get married in his mid-twenties and have children, who would then have children in their mid-twenties. If they were lucky they would live in a house with a*

> *garden. And that was it, that was life. Everything was mapped out in advance. There was no burden of choice or rage at limits because it was a waste of time. The cake was baked and cut."*. (1996: 47)

Lott's narrative regarding pre-determined expectations of life paths for children of limited economic means illustrates some potential societal expectations and norms that may constrain individuals from pursuing alternative paths. Parental aspirations for their children, and their use of school allocation preference opportunities to facilitate those aspirations, are analysed in Chapter Five.

Clegg, May and Gove all went to Oxford or Cambridge University. They have spoken of social mobility through the vehicle of education as successful products of private and grammar schools. Theirs were not upbringings that imbued them or their parents with a sense of "*knowing their place"* that led to "*fear of schools*" (Blandford 2017: 35). Bagley et al., when researching parents' reasons for dismissing schools as suitable for their children, refer to class based impressions when they state:

> "*working class parents expressed concerns that the staff – and by implication the school – didn't seem interested in them because of their social background"* (2010: 317)

To be serious about education as a lever for positive change for children (regardless of their family circumstances) is to lose the notion of imposed and fixed social class, to offer real choices to all, not to impose middle class values and frameworks without seeking the views of those who Blandford described and that politicians such as Clegg, May and Gove aspired to influence.

Human capital varies from individual to individual based on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus (1984b: 32). This is expanded further in Section 2.10. Goldring and Phillips identify social capital as a lever to achieve school preference as:

> "*the ability to gain access to resources by virtue of the connections between individuals or membership in social networks and other social structure*" (2008: 227)

Further discussion on the application of Bourdieu's human capital theory follows in section 5.6. A one size approach does not fit all. So rather than competition for good school places that the well documented marketisation of education has created, there may be a case for ensuring that all schools are able to share their responsibility to and

understanding of the communities that they serve, to improve access to an education relevant for all. This would meet more children and families' needs than the current model which primarily values exam results and university destinations as the prize and mark of success.

If all the Jacks, as described by Lott above, were able to access the best level of educational experience available to them, overlooking the impact this might have on their place in their social class, arguably those statistical outliers would be significantly fewer in number and the current education system would be significantly more integrated in terms of socio-economic make-up.

The exclusion of the socio-economically disadvantaged from the most highly thought of educational opportunities is not new. Hardy, in his novel 'Jude the Obscure' wrote of Jude's ambitions and efforts to enter England's best respected university of the age. The Master of the fictional college told Jude:

> "*You will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade"* (1895: 99).

The concept of 'knowing one's place', whilst not explicitly articulated in the modern age, emerges as a reality for some parents today, as shown in Chapter Five through parent research participant voices.

Jackson, in his book 'Life in Classrooms', calculated that children spend "*7000 hours spread over 6-7 years of a child's life*" (1968: 5) in class. In England, compulsory school age, minimum number of days required per year and length of full time school day equates to approximately 13,680 hours in class. For children who do not aspire to further or higher education and for families that have made a life for themselves without further or higher education (whether those lives are approved of by the middle classes is another debate), this is an undertaking that is "*difficult to comprehend*" (*ibid).*

Accepting that biographical narratives cannot represent a wider picture of limited access to the best publicly funded education for socio-economically disadvantaged families, Reay and Ball (2006) present a compelling argument for concern, stated as:

> "*…the ambivalence displayed by many working-class parents in the research to the idea of choice of school. School is frequently associated with powerful memories and images of personal*

> *failure...for working-class parents, choice can sometimes involve complex and powerful accommodations to the idea of 'school' and is very different in kind from middle-class choice making.*" (2006: Abstract)

This raises questions about the principles of equality of access compared to the reality which forms the basis for the research findings laid out in Chapters Five and Six, drawing on the conceptual frameworks described in section 2.10 through the lens of School Admissions.

2.6 International comparative perspective

Although this thesis is based on the English education experience, (and the impact on children and families resident in England), a review of School Admissions arrangements internationally offers some insight into alternative approaches adopted.

In April 2019, The Economist published an article demonstrating that internationally, rich and socio-economically disadvantaged parents alike are spending increasing sums of money to bridge the gaps between state funded education and the education that parents perceive is necessary to raise successful adults in a globalised market. Birrell stated:

> "*It is not just the elite that buys tuition. The IpsoMORI survey showed that although richer parents were somewhat more likely to resort to it than poorer ones, parents from ethnic minorities, both black and Asian, were much more likely to use it than white ones."* (2019: 4)

It is clear from Birrell that parents from all backgrounds value the opportunity to enhance their children's educational opportunities. This is also identified through parent research participants as described in Chapter Five. What Birrell does not expand on is the ability of all parents to pay for additional tuition, which raises the question of equitability.

In Chile, the government issues vouchers for education that parents can choose to redeem at state run schools or at independent schools where the voucher can be used to off-set the total cost. State run schools are accessible without cost to parents, whereas independent schools are state funded in part by redeeming the voucher, with

parents making up the shortfall in fees charged. This was introduced in the 1980s and slightly amended in 2013. This automatically precludes admission to all schools of children without parents with the means to make up the total cost of independent education from their own pockets if that is their preference. However, the cost of the voucher scheme offers better value for money to the Chilean Government than building and running sufficient school capacity for the whole population (Morgan, Petrosino and Fronius 2013).

Sweden and Finland are often looked towards as successful models of public education provision based on their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores. PISA is the international comparison organisation that compares fifteen-year olds' academic attainment in reading, science and mathematics across countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). What is not considered is the relative size of those national populations and taxes for public services (including education) which are levied in making those comparisons. Regarding School Admissions arrangements specifically, in 1992, the system of Swedish and Finnish municipalities that managed local School Admissions arrangements was deregulated. Vouchers were made available to parents to use at any number of state funded or private schools with specialisms to best suit the beliefs, aspirations and preferences of those parents. Regardless of parental preference, a place is allocated for each child at their local school as a fail-safe. Since 1992, the creation of private schools has proliferated, with their associated admissions criteria that frequently include entrance exams. This suggests that the breadth of options available to parents is not as it seems. Exam based pupil skimming and residence are still factors that do not lend themselves to equality of access for all (Wilson and Bridge 2019).

Dong and Li considered "School Choice in China: Past, Present and Future" (2019). They showed that the impact of parental pressure for their preferred schools, population growth in urban areas and equalities implications in a Communist country have led to the state regulation of controlled "fees", controlled private tuition and state promotion of equalisation. This has not prevented the wealthiest parents from accessing their preferred schools to the detriment of socio-economically disadvantaged families. The Chinese state government, which for years turned a blind eye to 'Minban' people schools, has now officially authorised them. The principle of

parent led schools is reflected in the English Free School framework, but Dong and Li consider the rise of Minban schools as based on "*choice fear*" (2019: 95) and "*wicked in nature*" (2019: 100). This can be interpreted as parental anxiety about making the 'wrong' choice or being limited in their choice and therefore turning to schools of their own making to avoid failing their children.

Min-Hsiung considered "High School Admissions reforms, equality of educational opportunity and academic performance in Taiwan" (2019). In Taiwan:

> *"socioeconomic status of pupils is measured by the number of books at home, and there are five categories. The number of books at home was reported by the students according to the following question: "About how many books are there in your home? (Do not count magazines, newspapers, or your schoolbooks.)".* (2019:21)

Min-Hsiung found that the Taiwanese government holds great store in the country's PISA rankings but was increasingly concerned about parental pressure to access the best schools. The admissions system to schools in Taiwan is based on entrance exams, with those children scoring highest in mathematics, science and reading accessing the most popular schools. State regulated entrance exams were reformed in the face of parental pressure. By comparing attainment data pre and post the admissions reforms, Min-Hsiung shows that according to PISA scores, mathematics results decreased, with science and reading being less impacted. However, he went on to state "*some senior high schools prefer admitting students independently and designing their own entrance examinations*" (2019:13). The conundrum for the Taiwanese government is how to maintain its international PISA rankings in the face of parental pressure for equality of access to the best schools in Taiwan.

Admission to schools in America has long been the subject of scrutiny based on race. Given the history of racial segregation and integration in America, it was not until 1954 that the Brown v. Board of Education case (1954: 347 U.S 483) ruled that racial segregation in publicly funded schools was unconstitutional and unlawful; this is still a matter of public concern today. De Voto and Wronowski (2019) considered "The re-segregation of public schools? Examining parents involved in practice". They investigated the efficacy of race-neutral student assignment policies following the 2007 American Supreme Court decision that positive racial discrimination in School

Admissions was not sufficiently narrowly crafted. That is, not sufficiently carefully designed to ensure equality of school access based on ethnic non-segregation and nothing else. De Voto and Wronowski showed that racial mixing was reduced following the 2007 ruling that removed positive racial admissions processes. Children from minority racial groups access to favoured and popular schools reduced following the striking down of voluntary race-based admissions practices. They suggest that this may be a result of racially segregated housing, of racial groups preferring to stay more homogenous, or of access based on costs of transport, confidence in being a pupil from a significantly under-represented ethnic group or warmth of welcome by school. These finding are echoed by Goldring and Phillips (2008) drawing on their research in the Nashville school district. Either way, current arrangements are not conducive to a fully racially integrated education system, even sixty-five years after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling. The Federal Government may need to revisit admissions procedures throughout each state to reverse this unwelcome consequential development. As stated in the Plessy vs Ferguson (1896) case, the American educational arrangements were "separate but equal" (1896 163 U.S. 537). Progress since 1896 in addressing this racial inequality could be considered as limited.

Major and Machin state that:

> "*the richest families in the U.S spent 7 times more on out of school cultural enrichment (including for example museum visits) than the poorest families, a much bigger gap than 40 years previously."* (2018: 111)

It is inevitable that wealthier families have more disposable income to spend on cultural enrichment. There is a rich body of research questioning why the attainment gap between the most and least economically privileged children in America has increased over time and what the American government and society are doing to combat the consequential educational disadvantage this poses for the least economically advantaged families. This is not directly relevant to this thesis but is offered by way of context to highlight the influence of family income on pupils' success within state-funded education systems. As stated by Simon "*even before the outbreak* (Covid 19)*, students in vulnerable communities…were already facing inequality in everything from resources (ranging from books to counsellors) to student-teacher ratios and extracurriculars*" (2021: 3). Gewirtz highlights educational disparities within

educational marketplaces in America which have been replicated in England (2003). As marketplaces of schools have been created, so has parental competition for places at the schools considered to be the best in the market. Those parents able to capitalise on market choices through personal agency are more likely to secure their educational preference for their children. The parents with less agency may miss out. Equality of access to preferred schools in the marketplace is not a reality for all American citizens, as shown by De Voto and Wronowski, Major and Machin, Simon and Gewirtz.

Goldring and Phillips researched parental preference and decision making processes within the school district of Nashville Tennessee. They identified that race, socio-economic status and parental educational level informed choices for children's schooling. An important finding, when considering the likely outcome of that schooling experience for children was:

> "*parents tend to be more satisfied with the school their child attends if they are able to choose the school when compared to parents who are assigned to a school…as a result of investing time and energy in the choice process (even when there is no specific justification for increased satisfaction) parents may justify their choice and indicate increased satisfaction by viewing the school through 'rose-coloured glasses"* (2007:212)

Enhanced parental satisfaction with their school of preference may arguably lend itself to enhanced strength in home-school relationships which leads to improved educational outcomes for children. "…*after exercising choice, they may have a desire to prove to themselves that they made a wise decision and therefore, parents may be willing to be more involved in the school" (ibid.* 2008: 213).

Goldring and Phillips cite convenience, academic priorities and school characteristics as priorities for parents when considering their school application. They show that social networks play a key role in influencing that decision making process:

> "*low income and minority parents do not become involved in the choice process because they have little access to information because of unstable social networks…(whereas more advantaged parents) have the necessary cultural and social capital to navigate the often difficult choice process. They also have the economic*

means to provide transportation for their children to and from school" (2007: 214 & 215)

Findings from parents in England are shown in Chapters Four and Five which offer some synergies with findings from parents in Nashville.

Staying with an international perspective, Wilson and Bridge (2019) considered school place allocation systems in terms of social integration from a human geographical perspective. This is in particular reference to segregation in America and post-apartheid South Africa regarding race, deprivation and equality of opportunity. Using a literature review methodology, Wilson and Bridge conclude that all school place allocation systems based on preference, open enrolment, opt out, voucher or lottery, result in social segregation based on parental preference for social sorting. They offer the view that the only realistic social integration option in education is fundamental policy review to withdraw any access to preference and for the state (or local representatives) to allocate based on social characteristics and proportionate representation to each institution in the local area. They suggest "*positive discrimination for high deprivation postcodes in school selection*" (2019: 37).

Wilson and Bridge, this time on behalf of the Nuffield Foundation, sought to scope and map research evidence relating to parental choice, outcomes relating to pupil allocation and consider potential inequality of access. They found through an international cross disciplinary systematic review of literature and government records again that school choice is associated with higher levels of social segregation. Whilst all choice systems show the same outcome, reasons are analysed as local and contextualised. They conclude that school choice is not a policy which enhances mobility and integration. Local contexts matter so allocation should be conducted by Local Authorities and not individual settings. Wilson and Bridge show that "*school choice is associated with increased socio-economic segregation across schools*" (2019:15).

Murphy's report for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on "The Right to Education" (2019) seeks to define a worldwide right to a quality education for all children. The provision of a quality education for all children is an ambition to be achieved by 2030. Given that this

universal right explicitly rebukes the concept of discrimination and ability to pay, the experiences of some children in China, Taiwan, Chile and America cited above suggest that there is some way to go within this decade to achieve this ambition. The Right to Education as defined by UNESCO is equality of opportunity and universal access worldwide for all children. It is UNESCO's aim to for the right to be committed into legislation in all countries of the world. UNESCO states that a right to education is entitlement based and empowering in lifting children out of poverty.

Hermstruwer, through the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods, states:

> "*In the context of school choice, the problem of these mechanisms is that they provide an advantage to sophisticated applicants. These applicants are likely to belong to affluent or privileged households. Providing a strategic advantage to these applicants carries the risk of infringing upon constitutional equal protection rights and hampering efforts to facilitate social inclusion and promote equal opportunities."* (2017: 1)

Hermstruwer's position from a German perspective reflects the difficulties outlined above in seeking equality in the context of parental agency to capitalise on the right to express preference when applying for school place allocation. The mechanisms he refers to include deploying economic resources to seek advantage in terms of proximity to favoured schools, access to transport links and access to additional tuition for success with selective admissions examination.

Although not strictly from an international perspective, the impact of being an immigrant parent can be considered regarding engagement with the English education system here. Antony-Newman stated that immigrant families are considered "*hard to reach*" by English school staff. He states:

> *"I found uneven levels of communication between immigrant parents and teachers. Parents who rarely talked to teachers and had smaller social networks didn't have a clear understanding of the way schools' function...Policy makers, school leadership teams and university departments of education could join forces to provide*

support for teachers to feel confident working with parents in several ways". (2019: 2)

Antony-Newman suggests that immigrant parents bring with them to their new country of residence a view of existing education systems from their countries of origin. If access to the best schools is achieved through awareness of what is available, understanding of how to access the best available schools, and how to decipher a system based on an unfamiliar language - immigrant children and parents may be disadvantaged at the outset regarding their School Admissions experience.

2.7 Policy makers aspirations and realities

Returning to England, as stated in section 1.3, the School Admissions process has been viewed by politicians as a lever for social mobility. When she was Minister for Education in 2017, the Right Honourable Justine Greening M.P said:

"*Social mobility has characterised my own life. And so, this matters to me personally as well as politically. In our country today, where you start still all too often determines where you finish. And while talent is spread evenly across the country, opportunity is not. None of us should accept this. Everyone deserves a fair shot in life and a chance to go as far as their hard work and talent can take them….Nor can education tackle these challenges alone. But it can play a vital role – equality of opportunity starts with education. This plan is about putting social mobility at the heart of education policy. We must raise standards for all. And to do so we are determined to leave no community behind, and we will target our efforts and resources at the people and places that need it most. I believe this is the smart thing to do for our country and our economy…No one should be held back because of who they are or where they are born. This plan provides a framework for action that can empower everyone – whether educators, government, business or civil society – to help transform equality of opportunity in this country."* (2017: 5)

This bold and virtuous ambition, based on a moral philosophy, is difficult to refute. Although the question remains, do all families aspire to be effective independent economic units based on the Thatcherite model of the small state. Thatcher described her view in a Woman's Own interview 1987 as "*there is no such thing as society….it is a duty to look after ourselves*". Even before Clegg, Gove, May and Greening stated their views of education as a primary lever for social mobility, Margaret Thatcher said "*People from my sort of background needed grammar schools to compete with children from privileged homes…".* (Keay 1987: 3)

Margaret Thatcher (first British female Prime Minister and 7th longest serving 1979-1990) is often cited as an example of success when education as a lever for social mobility works well. Born in Grantham, a market town in Lincolnshire, the daughter of a grocer, Margaret Thatcher reached the highest political office in the land via Somerville College University of Oxford. An example of social mobility through education, yet in reality, based on research findings considered in this Literature Review, it may be fair to suggest she was an exception, an out-lier.

As OFSTED launched their revised inspection framework (September 2019) with an emphasis on a well-rounded and rich curriculum for all children, Busby of The Independent newspaper stated from the Social Mobility Commission that:

> *"children aged 10 to 15, from the wealthiest families are nearly 3 times more likely to take part in music activities (32%) compared to those from the poorest families (11%) …meanwhile nearly 2 in 3 (64%) of children from the highest income households take part in sport compared to 46% of young people from families on the lowest incomes." (2019:12).*

Reasons cited include cost, access, travel and *"lack of confidence and fear they will not fit in"* (*ibid*). This suggests that much remains to be done to ensure equality of access to all educational opportunities, including extra-curricular opportunities, for all children regardless of economic background.

In 2018, an analysis of OFSTED data showed that:

> "*in the south east, only 6% of the most disadvantaged pupils attended an outstanding school. But 41% of pupils in the highest quintile, and 29% of pupils in the second wealthiest quintile, were getting a top-class education*." (2018: 3).

It would appear that the ability to express a preference for a school is theoretical as success in being admitted is based on the reality of where the pupil lives. The challenge is making that preference a reality for all. As the ability to move address is restricted to those with the financial means to do so (see section 1.6), the aspiration of politicians for the best educational opportunities for all based on access to the best schooling may be limited at best. This is further highlighted by Burgess, Greaves et al. when they state:

> "*school choice may be a myth if parents can only access schools that they live very close to…evidence suggests that the proximity criteria have increased house prices in desirable catchment areas, which effectively prohibits access for pupils from less advantaged families, who are priced out of the market"* (2011:532)

The work of Gorard, Siddiqui, See, Boliver and Wardle was commended in the 2018 British Educational Research Association Public Engagement and Impact Award. They state:

> "*long term disadvantaged pupils are heavily clustered in particular geographical areas and types of schools, and this clustering has lifelong consequences…Our conclusion, that increasing the use of selection to schools is dangerous for social equality, was topical and relevant to the 2017 election, and made national TV and press headlines.*" (2019: 12).

Sellgren, BBC Journalist, published the findings of a Parentkind research project on parents' concerns about the cost of children's education in the state funded sector within England. Parentkind state "*a large sample size of 1500 parents…independently distributed to a cross-section of parents*" (2019:1) so economically disadvantaged parents' input is captured in their findings:

> *"The charity's annual survey found most (51%) of the 1,500 parents polled were concerned about the cost. The cost of uniform was the most common concern (46%), followed by school trips (44%) and school meals (19%). Almost two-fifths (38%) of the parents had been asked to donate to a school fund this year. 22% had been asked to pay for school clubs that used to be free*

- *20% had been asked to pay for events such as sports day or concerts*
- *16% had been asked to supply teaching equipment*
- *11% had been asked to help with maintenance activities such as redecorating classrooms and cutting grass and hedgerows*

  6% had been asked to supply essentials such as toilet paper" (2019: 2)

Having reviewed some findings that show the cost of housing may preclude economically disadvantaged families from some preferred schools, based on these findings of 'hidden' costs, it follows that the parents described as '*concerned*' may be from families of limited economic means. In turn, it could suggest that socio-economically disadvantaged families' school preferences may be limited to those schools that do not seek a 'voluntary' contribution and have modest and/or publicly funded school trips. This seems to be in direct contradiction to politicians' aspirations for all children, especially the least advantaged, to have equal access to the richest educational experiences possible.

Or as Major and Machin state:

> *"Far from acting as the great social leveller, education has been commandeered by the middle classes to retain their advantage from one generation to the next. Our social elites will go to even greater lengths to ensure their offspring stay ahead…. the range of tactics the privileged deploy to gain the upper hand in the escalating arms race of education."* (2018: 11)

These are strong words from Major and Machin when considering how the then Prime Minister Cameron sent his children to a state Primary School. However, Cameron's children's small state funded Primary School was not open to all – with the cost of a family home in the area often exceeding £10 million, and the need to be an evidenced and active member of a specific faith group to secure admission.

Major & Machin show that:

> *"one in three (32%) professional parents with school-aged children had moved to an area they thought had good schools, while one in*

five (18%) had moved to the catchment area of a specific school." (2018: 90)

Whilst officially catchment areas cannot really exist as fixed entities under the current Admissions Code, for as long as proximity to schools remains by far the most common sifting mechanism for oversubscription, wealthier parents have an advantage over economically disadvantaged parents in securing their preferred schools by using their economic capital to move address. Major and Machin go on to show further examples of parental manipulation of the Admissions systems. These include using financial advantage to secure a private doctor's view that a child needs a specific school or renting a property in the right area on a short-term basis from which to base their application.

The ever-increasing number of tuition centres in the United Kingdom that supplement State education during evenings, weekends and holidays (Kirby 2016), coupled with Wainwright's position that "*Parents have been cast as guardians of children's learning*" (2017: 216) raises the following questions.

If parents, often of limited financial means, are turning to private providers to give their children supplementary educational opportunities over and above what is available through schools, would access to the best schools offer the same opportunities at no cost? Is the cost and availability of supplementary tuition an indication that the availability of places at the best schools is insufficient or inaccessible to all parents? Are parents who cannot access these private opportunities somehow remiss in their parenting? The rise in private tuition centres could be argued to accelerate academic success, and potential social mobility, for those who can afford to access them.

Pertaining to school preference allocation success, Taylor showed that:

> *"the existence of hierarchies of choice and competition suggests there are clear 'winners' and 'losers' in the education market. Supporters of school choice will be relieved to see that the socioeconomic compositions of many school winners are increasingly becoming mixed. However, there is a worrying trend among some of the losers; as a result of many families choosing alternative schools (including those with FSM and non-FSM children), the pupils that remain are more likely to be eligible for*

> *FSM and from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are therefore becoming more ghettoized."* (2009: 565)

Taylor based his research on one case study urban area in the United Kingdom. His work raises the impact of choice and the consequences of this choice on patterns and outcomes in the market that choice inevitably creates.

The ghettoization of pupils, as indicated by Taylor (also Gewirtz, De Voto and Wronowski), has a significant impact on individually affected schools. Gewirtz describes this as "*most vulnerable students are marginalised within post-welfarist contexts by being ghettoised within institutions that lack the resources to adequately serve their needs*" (2003: 149). She expands on this when she states:

> "*children…are…likely to be increasingly ghettoised in undersubscribed, under resourced, under-staffed, low status 'local' schools*" (2003: 127).

Olmedo and Wilkins state "*David Cameron once asserted the 'active citizen' is someone who 'plays the system'* " (2017: 579). If Cameron advocated for playing the system, examples of playing the Admissions system shown above suggest that active citizens, through their economic and social capital, can achieve secure housing tenure and schooling to match. Those without those advantages cannot play the system that is blind to their circumstances. Reay showed that playing the system is a reality:

> *"Blairite promotion of active citizenship…44% of parents would use underhand tactics to secure a place at a school they perceive to be 'good"* (2008: 646).

Reay shows that Prime Minister Blair's education policies to enhance parental power through the advancement of an educational marketplace have resulted in further advantaging privileged parents. Those advantaged parents have the agency and resources to optimise their access to preferred schools. This was initially designed and intended to benefit disadvantaged families. However the policy opportunities have been adopted most effectively by those with greater advantage. This may be said to have resulted in greater educational inequality in terms of access to preferred schools and enhanced provision for all pupils regardless of their economic circumstances.

If political leaders have advocated for, or retained a process that tolerates playing and manipulation, the disempowered have emerged as those without secure economic capital and consequently those for whom the Admissions arrangements do not offer reality of Admissions success regarding school preference.

2.8 State or family responsibility

Ward (2019) considered how to improve families' engagement with their children's education through the lens of closing the gap and human capital. Using interviews and her own experience, Ward concluded that what socio-economically disadvantaged parents want from their children's schools is greater understanding of their habitus, in the form of empathy, understanding and less judgement:

> "*Parents with time and energy and capacity to attend meetings and knock up the odd Victoria Sponge will be seen as supportive. Parents who don't are seen as 'hard to reach'* " (2019*:* 2).

This supports Goldring and Phillips' findings as shown above considering the Nashville context and Newman's findings when he states:

> "*Well…many parents who work full-time cannot always come to school and help in the classroom….as a result, many parents do not think they should help schools through fundraising by "selling muffins"…. As one participant explained: 'That's not what makes learning more high quality and more effective, so I don't wanna be selling muffins, I am sorry' "*(2019: 3).

Unusually in the literature on School Admissions, Bagley, Woods and Glatter sought parent voice directly. They found that some parents feel excluded from some schools when considering application decisions. They cited a mother from Marshampton (pseudonym):

> *"We just didn't like the attitude of the staff. I remember when it came down to us saying we were from (names a working class housing estate)…it was just perceived that we were not going to be likely material and they lost interest in us*" (2010: 317)

For as long as some parents are perceived by schools as harder to reach, opportunities for all children may be missed. For example, Reay showed that privileged children are more likely to access Gifted and Talented programmes (2006: 645). Marandet and Wainwright (2011) consider changes to the roles of schools and parents when it comes to responsibility for not meeting prescribed milestones of development in the current age. They find that the State is increasingly placing responsibility on parents for their children's educational success, or otherwise. The formerly private sphere of parenting is being 'judged' by schools. Consequentially those parents who are struggling to parent in the State's prescribed ways in ensuring milestones and attainment targets are met, are more likely to be targeted for classes on parenting. Put another way, the parents perceived by schools as less involved in school life are being assessed as failing in their parenting duties. Ethnic minorities, women and socio-economically disadvantaged parents are over-represented in this cohort. As shown by Wainwright et al., schools are "*targeting certain 'types' of parents"* (2017: 3). In a truly egalitarian society, these targeted parents would perhaps be better served by being advised and guided through the education system and its expectations of parents – a system which currently may appear to favour the middle classes, those with financial means, eloquence, confidence and tenacity to navigate the system to secure a preferred school place for their children. Advice and guidance for all parents would address assumptions made by schools and education services. These assumptions would address systems that may be unsighted on secure understanding of ethnic minorities, women and socio-economically disadvantaged parents' own educational experiences and perceptions of their roles and duties

Further indication of the State seeking to influence parental decisions made within the family is evident from the DfE commissioned report "School performance and parental choice of school: secondary data analysis' (2014). The aim of the report was to consider whether the market should prevail, or the State should 'nudge' parents in terms of preference for schools applied for. The analysis was modelled on assumptions, with no consideration of seeking qualitative data that may have shown some parental considerations are based on more than just school performance, as seen from Lott's autobiography (1996) and Blandford's childhood experiences (2017) (see section 2.5). "*Academic priorities*" (Goldring and Phillips (2008: 213) have been shown to be priorities for parents who have experienced higher levels of education themselves. Not actively seeking the best school option, measured by academic

records of schools, for one's child is seen as '*irrational*' (2014: 2) by the State. This suggests that values other than educational attainment are not considered by the State as equally valid for consideration by parents. A key finding and conclusion of this DfE report was that the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils remains a concern and that some disadvantaged families do not base school applications on the highest performing schools in terms of formal attainment outputs. The report considered that the State acts with "*benevolent paternalism*", that "*human behaviour deviates in systematic ways from the ideal utility maximiser*". Put another way, there is a risk of "*justify(ing) policies that deliberately seek to manipulate existing parent preference*" (Allen, Burgess and McKenna 2014: 5 and 19).

In 2005, the Blair government committed to fund School Choice Advisers in each Local Authority area in England. Their purpose was to provide advice and support to socio-economically and otherwise disadvantaged families to empower them to exercise choice in accessing 'better' schools. This could be interpreted as a moral imperative to equality of access to the best, or as seeking to influence *"irrational"* (Wilson 2014: 183) preferences. However, this Blairite priority was not sustained as the funding from central government was ceased in 2013.

Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane (2019) set out to consider social representation, entitlement to FSMs, the disadvantage gap and affluence to analyse how the best performing schools in England reflect the communities in their localities. Using statistical analysis of pupil profiles admitted to these best performing schools against the local population profile, they show that the proportion of disadvantaged pupils based on family income at the best schools is about fifty percent of the national average. Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane show that in England, wealth can buy the best state funded education through parental ability to buy into the 'right' postcodes and to fund extra tuition and higher transport costs. They recommend that an equitable distribution of pupils from all economic backgrounds would be through a ballot allocation system – despite the Brighton & Hove experience described later in this chapter and the findings of Wilson & Bridge (2019) on an international stage referenced earlier. As Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane state:

> "*whilst these schools are, by and large, not using forms of overt selection, they are, in effect, exercising covert selection. Often complex admissions criteria, appeals processes and transport*

issues all provide barriers to families in less well-off circumstances." (2019: 4).

Refreshingly during this literature review, Wilson (2014) sought the voice of the disadvantaged parents that other academics have interpreted through statistical data alone. She qualitatively analysed open ended interviews with parent participants. She also interviewed five separate school representatives. Wilson accepted parental descriptions at face value and then sought to drill down to reach outcomes and consider underlying causes for parental decisions and actions in her work. Wilson found that choice is based on family values and not the attainment performance of schools. She concludes that school choice or preference does not offer a solution to social mobility challenges for as long as parents base their decisions to remain within "*irrational"* (2014: 183) social groupings. Wilson queries "*to what extent, if any, should schools be organised around distinctive cultural communities?*" (2014: 182). What she questions by this is, if parents prefer keeping within the social and cultural groupings that they identify with (for example, religious, socio-economic, racial or other affiliations), how effectively will children be prepared for full societal integration in adult life?

As stated by Ball "*most policy analysis work begins with an assumption of or brings to bear a perspective of coherence or rationality or planned order*…" (2018:208). For as long as the education arena in England is made up of academies, free schools, grammar, secondary modern schools, comprehensive schools, community schools, trust schools, special schools, faith schools (voluntary controlled or voluntarily aided, also may be academies or free schools), studio schools and university technical colleges, all with nuanced admissions criteria, it must be inevitable that equal access to all cannot be reasonably achievable. This is stated because such a varied array of differing Admissions processes may be confusing for some parents. Also, not all those differing school types are available equally across England. That renders the concept of parental preference flawed as parents can only prefer schools that are available to them, within the parameters of proximity to home and meeting Admissions criteria. Again, as stated by Ball "*the combination of meddlesomeness and muddle with these 'other' issues has conspired…to reproduce a system that is riven with social divisions of many kinds"* (2018: 209).

Ball goes on to expand:

> "*Despite the articulation of the arrangements for schooling as based on the principle of parental choice… the possibility of choice (or more accurately the expression of a preference) among these different sorts of schools depends on where you live…Two thirds of areas in England are not within a reasonable distance of either a primary or secondary free school….Most non-maintained schools act as their own admissions authorities…Non-LA schools operate with diverse forms of recruitment and restrictions on recruitment…The issue of school admissions is particularly fraught, obscure and messy in relation to church schools…"* (2018: 213)

Ball has described here the complexities of an educational marketplace that parents are expected to understand and manoeuvre within. To positively and realistically secure preference of school place allocation requires understanding of the differences in schools in each location across England, some of which are nuanced. This requires a degree of parental agency to effectively research what may not be available to all.

Perkins describes the current complex educational landscape from which parents are invited to make an informed preference based application for admission as putting '*education in a straight jacket of class'* " (in Ball 2018: 217). Perkins refers here to unequal agency and capital across all parents, regardless of background and circumstance. The ability to optimise their right of preference pertaining to School Admissions may be the preserve of the middle classes with enhanced agency and capital to achieve this.

Returning to The Sutton Trust (2018) findings, 2.5 percent of pupils at grammar schools are entitled to FSMs, the remaining 10.7 percent of children entitled to FSMs in England are not accessing these places (2015). For as long as a third of schools in England are classified as faith schools, this narrows the preferences of 25.7 percent of the population that stated in the 2011 census that they have no religion and 7.2 percent that chose not to respond regarding religion in the 2011 census. That is, 32.9 percent of the population alienated from 33 percent of the schools in England funded by the taxpayer. Although it is fair to state that some faith schools do not consider

faith as an admissions criterion, their designation as a faith school may be off-putting for parents of other faiths or none.

Since 1988 when schools could be removed from Local Authorities' control, there have emerged "*marked disparities between schools in relation to their input and performance*" (Ball 2018: 225). This allows "*agile and well-resourced middle-class parents to seek out and maintain social advantage in educational settings where there are others 'like them'* " (*ibid.* 2018: 226).

Trusting the State to look out for advantage opportunities for children and families from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds may, therefore, not have been supported by diversifying the education landscape. Policy makers and politicians have had since 1880 (see Figure 2.1) to attempt to improve the education choices and attainment of this cohort and, it could be argued, they have not been widely successful in achieving this aspiration to date.

Jerrim and Sims (2019) investigated the strength of the socio-economic gradient in Grammar School entrance rates through quantitative numerical data analysis. Grammar Schools in England admit pupils based on selective entrance following entrance exam success. Jerrim and Sims find that stark differences exist in Grammar School pupils compared to the rest of the school age population based on family income and socio-economic status. The conclusion must be reached that arguing the Grammar School system is a vehicle for social mobility is flawed if many pupils are precluded from admission to Grammar Schools as a preference. This is not overt preclusion, but a reality based on costs of additional uniform, travel costs and private tutoring to facilitate advantage in competitive entrance exams. As Jerrim and Sims state "*entrance to grammar school therefore depends on birth and wealth as well as academic attainment*" (2019: 1 abstract).

An additional reflection on the influence of parents and family background on the school that a child might attend – as stated by Danechi in the House of Commons Briefing Paper on Grammar Schools – is that only 5 percent of children in England attend selective Grammar Schools. However, only 3 percent of that 5 percent of those children are entitled to FSMs (2020: 12). In January 2021 this compares to 20.8 percent of all pupils known to be eligible for FSMs, representing 1.74 million pupils

across all state funded but non-selective schools across England. This has increased from 17.3 percent in January 2020. (DfE June 2021).

As recently as September 2019, The Sutton Trust research outcomes showed that 27 percent of secondary school aged children had been privately tutored outside school at the expense of their parents. 24 percent of secondary school teachers had augmented their earnings by delivering private tutoring outside school hours. On the basis of The Sutton Trust demonstration that there had been a 66 percent increase in private tutoring over fourteen years to 2006, the likelihood of bright children from socio-economically disadvantaged families being able to achieve the best exam results gets slimmer by the year.

More recently, as Major & Machin state:

> *"there are no official estimates of tiger mum numbers in Britain. But we know there has been an explosion in private tutoring outside normal schooling hours. The percentage of children aged between 11-16 in England receiving private or home tuition rose by over a third in a decade, increasing from 18% in 2005 to 25% in 2016. For teenagers in their GCSE years, the percentages are higher, reaching a third in 2016. Within this upward trend London has become the capital of private tuition: 42% of young people in 2016 said they had received some form of tutoring with tutors charging on average £29 per hour."* (2018: 84)

Whilst rejecting the sexist and stereo-typical vocabulary adopted by Major and Machin, on the scale and at cost shown, those children from the most socio-economically disadvantaged families seem to have scant chance of competing with their wealthier classmates in acquiring the highest grades. More will be shown from parent findings on private tuition in section 5.8.

Goldthorpe states that:

> "*parental – and, perhaps grandparental – resources, even if not sufficient to allow for children to be educated in the private sector, are still widely deployed to buy houses in areas served by high-performing state schools, to pay for individual tutoring, to help*

> *manage student debt, to support entry into postgraduate courses for which no loans are available, or, in the case of educational failure, to fund 'second chances*." (2016: 443)

This would suggest that education is not the great leveller then that politicians would have it be. Goldthorpe, The Sutton Trust, Machin and Major's findings suggest that educational competitive advantage may depend on family resources to support this endeavour which will be most available to economically secure families.

The journalist Peter Wilby is cited in Major and Machin as:

> "*nothing causes parents, particularly middle class parents, so much angst as secondary school admissions. Drugs, crime, underage sex, foul language, truancy, rap music, acne and smart answers, plus exam results that don't allow entry to a decent university – all these, it is feared, are the potential results of a bad secondary school*". (2018: 89)

Whilst his tone could be described as somewhat mocking of 'middle class' parents and belittling of 'working class' parents, prior to 1988 when parents had no right to express a preference, less 'angst' may have been experienced. It cannot be easy for less popular schools to receive the children of parents thwarted, 'resigned' and disappointed at having been allocated places there.

The basic cost of school uniform has increased by 7 percent to an average of £340 per child at secondary school from 2015-18. (Children's Society "The Wrong Blazer" update 2018). If basic subsistence costs are a struggle to meet, the cost of school uniform may not be a priority for the most economically disadvantaged families, potentially leading to higher exclusion rates and non-attendance. Children may be absent from school to avoid being singled out for having incorrect uniform. Repeatedly having incorrect uniform may be perceived as defiance of school rules and may lead to fixed term exclusion. Local Authority uniform grants were an early casualty of austerity and were cut in 2010. Local Authority budgets have been reduced by in excess of 50% since 2010. Schools could use the Pupil Premium grant attached to each child entitled to FSMs to supply uniform, but Pupil Premium grants are not

exclusively for the financially disadvantaged and OFSTED inspects its usage against attainment and inclusion predominantly.

2.9 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities as an additional disadvantage

Further evidence of unequal access to the best and most favoured schools comes from Speck in his article entitled "*More schools refusing pupils with SEND as admissions get harder to police"* (2019 Times Educational Supplement from the Office of the Schools Adjudicator). Twenty two percent of the school age population in England is assessed as having additional learning needs or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These are not exclusively but do include the children with most complex needs that hold an Education, Health & Care Plan (2.9 percent of the school age population in January 2018 and rising). Speck showed evidence of increasing anecdotal claims that schools are refusing admission to pupils with additional needs based on the implied negative impact on school level attainment and the additional costs associated with meeting their needs. Speck used the number of parental objections lodged with the Office of the Schools Adjudicator to draw his conclusions. Academy schools within the English admissions system can act as their own admissions authority, operating outside Local Authority oversight as their Funding Agreements with the Education Skills Agency determine. In January 2018, 72 percent of secondary schools in England were academies and rising according to Department for Education data. Speck showed that parental objections to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator about academies refusing to admit pupils with additional needs have risen by one third. His key finding is that there is '*more widespread*' (2019: 2) evidence that academies are increasingly overtly or covertly refusing admission or discouraging applications from the parents of children with additional needs:

> "*Worryingly I was told that this is becoming more and more widespread as the pressures on LAs (Local Authorities) and school budgets increase. More schools are now at the initial consultation refusing to admit for less and less justifiable reasons*" (*ibid*.).

Speck concludes that admissions arrangements need to be reviewed pertaining to children with additional needs, and funding for special educational needs and disabilities needs to be increased.

Sellgren collated data in July 2019 provided by 25 percent of Local Authorities in England that showed there were in excess of 1,500 children with special educational needs without a school place of any sort, with some out of school for as long as two years.

An inclusive ethos is key to families feeling their children are welcome and valued in any state funded school. To feel unwelcome must be a barrier to collaborative home school relationships, trust, support, and ultimately impact on the outcomes for individual pupils. London Councils' research from September 2019 showed:

> "*A significant number of schools across London are engaging in poor admissions practice to informally exclude [SEND] pupils from even starting at their school, which should not be happening*." (2019: 10)

This London Councils snapshot survey in 2019 conducted by researchers into just two months of admissions data from seventeen London Local Authorities found 124 incidents of schools refusing or resisting admission of a child with SEND, and 25 cases where London Local Authorities had to intervene - by using Fair Access Panels, informal negotiation or formal warning letters - to ensure a child was admitted to a local school.

Headteachers were quoted as saying they believe schools with a poorer reputation for exam results:

> "*end up accepting more pupils with special educational needs because they are denied a place at higher-ranked schools*." (The Evening Standard 26th September 2019: 3)

So far, much of the existing literature reviewed has used a quantitative approach. Most of the literature available on school admissions very much favours the positivist philosophy as this review demonstrates. That said, all research approaches share the commonality of Bourdieu's human capital theoretical framework that describes potential constraints on access to institutional resources, such as schools, based on class (and gender and race). As Rose, Tikly and Washbrook state:

> "*we see an individual's habitus as developing from the beginning of life in relation to the social milieu of the home and family*" (2019: 859).

2.10 Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Haidt are adopted throughout this thesis (see sections 3.2 and 5.6) to identify parent participants' personal assets from which they can draw to optimise their chances of securing their preferred allocated school place. In Chapter One, reference was made to Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1984a) and the human capitals that inform people's view of their worlds. These have been described by Bourdieu as economic, symbolic, social and cultural. Bourdieu created the notion of habitus which refers to the mental frames which people construct for themselves based on their lived experiences and personal interpretations through which they manage their social worlds:

> *"…which make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world*". (2010:470)

An analysis of human capital implicitly and explicitly stated in the semi-structured in-depth parent interviews appears in Chapter Five. Bourdieu asserted that parents of rich and secure human capitals transmit to their children skills, attributes and assumptions to effectively negotiate educational opportunities to meet their aspirations. This in turn assures the replication of social, economic, cultural and symbolic advantage through the generations. Equally then, those of more limited human capitals will be likely to replicate disadvantage through the generations. As Wilson and Worsley stated:

> "*Bourdieu argued that the ease with which one operates within the social world is dictated by one's capital and those with more assets (i.e. capital to trade) gain more assets such as qualifications*." (2021: 773)

Bourdieu (1984) rejected received and traditional thinking that social dominance was gained through economic advantage – known as the Rational Choice Theory. Drawing on the Marxist tradition and the work of Max Weber, he propounded his 'theory of practice', whereby humans achieve dominance which is culturally reproduced throughout the generations by identifying four human capitals which advantage and

advance groups of humans with shared commonalities. Human groups (or social networks) can be intersectional and identified by numerous characteristics which may include gender, race, religion, and in the case of the research participant group for this thesis, economic disadvantage.

Through the concept of habitus, Bourdieu and Wacquant describe how humans influence their circumstances and experiences by developing and exerting strategies to influence their place in society as they understand and interpret society. Disposition is described by Bourdieu as humans' lens and interpretation of internal and external influences on their worldly experience, either by inherent intuition or deliberate manipulation of external influences. They refer to them as "*internalised, embodied, social structures*" (2007: 127-128). Bourdieu refers to the notion of 'field' throughout his work. Field can be described as the aspect of society that humans as agents operate within. Examples include the fields of employment, housing, health and, the field for focus in this thesis, access to (preferred) education. Bourdieu's term 'doxa' refers to humans' conscious and unconscious knowledge and beliefs from which they form their understanding of their habitus and methods of maneuvering within fields. In his words, "*practical knowledge of the social world*" (2010: 470).

As stated, Bourdieu's human capital can be described as a network of human relationships with shared values, principles and beliefs. The network or social group shares understanding and cooperation to support, benefit and replicate itself.

Bourdieu's cultural capital can be described as personal assets available for individuals to draw upon for their own benefit. Cultural capital can include education, appearance, eloquence, and intellect. Bourdieu's economic capital can be exemplified as skills assets, financial assets and commodities held, owned and controlled by individuals. Bourdieu's symbolic capital can be exemplified as resources that are perceived to convey prestige such as qualifications, religious recognition, military prowess, civic or political influence. Bourdieu's social capital can be exemplified as secure friendship circles, membership of societies and clubs and access to mentoring, advice and support assets.

Bourdieu's work has been used widely across the social sciences. For example, Bourdieu's theory in action can be found in the work of Lynam et al. (2007) when researching the impact of culture in the field of nursing. Hesmonhalgh (2006) considers Bourdieu's work in research pertaining to the influence of media on culture

and Adkins (2004) draws on his work through her research into feminism and it's evolution. Lynam et al. considered the impact of culture and health through the lens of health inequalities such as diabetes prevalence. They focussed on characteristic intersectionality and produced RICH-ER (Responsive, Intersectoral-Interdisciplinary, Child Health – Education and Research) model for further research and adoption in the field of child health. Hesmonhalgh drew on Bourdieu to examine media's reach with mass and restricted markets, mindful of human autonomy of choice and capitalist influences. He opined that Bourdieu had little to offer regarding media influences on engagement with wide mass markets. Adkins sought to draw on Bourdieu as a lever to re-think current challenges within Feminist paradigms. She found that Bourdieu's theory had much to offer to the development of Feminist theory, albeit Bourdieu has been largely silent on the social impact of gender (save 2001).

The sphere of Bourdieu's work has been widespread throughout research fields that consider human experiences. This is why it is so useful and important to draw upon to make sense of the experiences reported by research participants in this thesis.

This thesis also considers parent voice through the lens of Haidt's (with Joseph 2004) six moral foundations of Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation and Liberty/Oppression captured from their experiences and actions when seeking to achieve their preferred school place. Haidt offers much to consider in terms of moral reasoning factors determining decisions which are reflected in this approach. Haidt has identified the six foundations above that inform human reasoning and decision making, which are expanded on in Figure 5.6 relating to research participants reported experiences. He has propounded his moral reasoning theory as a tool to determine political propensities, but his foundations can be adapted to consider how humans' innate moral reasonings can be shaped by their habitus (Bourdieu) and inherent make-up. Haidt has shown that liberal leaning individuals tend towards moral foundations based on care and fairness whereas those from the conservative end of the political spectrum favour the equality moral foundation. Haidt and Joseph state that:

> "*People have created moralities as divergent as those of the Nazis and Quakers, headhunters and Jains. And yet, when we look closely at the daily lives of people in divergent cultures, we can find elements that arise in nearly all of them – for example, reciprocity,*

> *loyalty, respect for (some) authority, limits on physical harm and regulation of eating and sexuality. What are we to make of this pattern of similarity within profound difference?"* (2004: 55)

This thesis analyses parent interview participants' experiences within the School Admissions realm against Haidt's moral foundations as influences that may be seen to have shaped those experiences. McHugh et al. (2017) drew on Haidt when asserting his moral foundations stood up to rigorous challenge when establishing that '*moral dumbfounding'* (2017: Abstract), the maintenance of a moral stance without supporting rationale, is a reality as demonstrated by some individuals. It could be argued that unconsidered school application could be an exemplar of moral dumbfounding.

Drawing on Haidt and Bourdieu together, as this research does, is also adopted by Dittmer et al. They consider the impact of human decision making processes in the context of science education with its positivist tradition:

> *"Haidt and Bourdieu both highlight the importance of internalized beliefs and embodied personal experiences for human decision-making, Haidt looking from a psychological and Bourdieu looking from a sociological point of view."* (2016: 38)

Dittmer et al. conclude that there is a place for human interpretation in scientific education, which somewhat contradicts received tradition in that academic field.

A further concept that informs this thesis is that of social mobility. Social mobility, from a sociological academic tradition, is the ability of individuals and groups to traverse social strata to their benefit or detriment. It has been shown that more limited opportunities for social mobility create more entrenched, established and secure social layers (Giddens et al. 2003). Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1972) identified closure, buffer-zone and counterbalance phenomena that facilitate or prevent social mobility for those that seek to protect their positions or change their positions within the social hierarchy. This is in contradiction to Glass in his work on "*social selection and differentiation*" (1954: 295) which has more recently being criticised in light of the later findings of Bourdieu and Haidt when determining the influence of innate and subjective knowledge that informs social mobility. Sorokin (1937) first introduced the framework

of social mobility using the terms social differentiation, social stratification and social conflict. He asserted that no social strata are entirely closed or entirely open to any individual not born within that class or strata. Health, education, housing, income, race and gender are widely identified as received indicators of influence pertaining to social mobility. Politicians' views of the place of education as a lever for social mobility is reflected in sections 1.3 and 2.7. This thesis considers how politicians aspirations and influence on social structures may impact parents access or ability to manoeuvre their preferred school allocation. This thesis aims to investigate whether the existing School Admissions structure genuinely affords social mobility opportunities for those parents that seek them. Sections 3.2 and 3.10 reference the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Haidt briefly as a methodological approach adopted and the concept of social mobility is drawn upon throughout this thesis.

These key concepts are developed further through this thesis to seek to add voice and personal narrative to the quantitative findings available. They seek to better understand how School Admissions policy enactment impacts families of limited economic capital and consider how that may impact on the future educational success of children. Ball (2013 and 2018) and Hoskins and Barker (2014) inform this thinking on policy enactment. This links to questions of parental agency in the existing system of School Admissions. As Hopkins and Barker state:

> "*trends in social mobility are decidedly resistant to policy interventions, mainly because those of higher social classes seem to have taken greater advantage of the opportunities created by government action*". (2014: 28)

Chapter Five shows the impact on parents of their engagement with School Admissions arrangements as laid out in Government policy. It demonstrates the reality of policy enactment for those that would not be considered from 'higher social classes'.

2.11 Emerging concerns

From the wealth of research findings available on School Admissions arrangements in England, very little has been produced since the last iteration of the School Admissions Code in 2014 (later updated in 2021). With the focus of this thesis being on capturing economically disadvantaged parents lived experience when seeking a

preferred school place, it is perhaps time now to consider how successful the current arrangements are in facilitating access to the best schools for children from the lowest economic groups. By using the term 'best' schools, this is ordinarily interpreted as meaning OFSTED graded 'good' or 'outstanding' schools (section 2.2). It does not allow for parental interpretation of these terms. Consideration must be given to what parents' value when making decisions regarding preferred schools for their children. Reputation, religious faith and location are of potential value to parents too. As Blandford questions:

> *"how much choice do we give people either to stay and enjoy where they are and what they've got or to explore new areas of work or learning?"* (2017: 28).

Goldring and Phillips state that "*parents typically chose a school de facto, according to where they live"* (2008:209). Bagley et al. reported "*working class …were made to feel unwelcome and unwanted"* (2010: 317).

Longfield, in her former capacity as Children's Commissioner for the United Kingdom, wrote in February 2019 that elective home education rates in England have more than doubled in the last five years. She showed that 10 percent of schools in England are responsible for 80 percent of those children being deleted from a school roll to be educated at home by their parents. She states that:

> "*22,000 who would have sat GCSEs in 2017 left state education during secondary school, up from 20,000 two years earlier. These children have higher rates of special educational needs, English as an additional language and free school meals entitlement. Nobody knows what happens to lots of these pupils' afterwards*" (2019: 9).

This suggests that the current state school arrangements are not working for all, especially the most vulnerable in our society. It also suggests that parents with sufficient social and economic capital are better positioned to make the current preference-based School Admissions process work to their advantage more than the most deprived.

Allen and Burgess (2013) considered a statistical data analysis-based approach to evaluating how parents interpret and use information to make an informed decision about their school of preference for their children. They based their work on reforms of the School Admissions Code up to 2013 as enhancing access to the most popular schools for those from socio-economically disadvantaged families. Their findings show that quality of Primary School provision is key to pupil outcomes at Secondary School. So parental preference has less impact at Secondary stage on their children's educational outcomes. They suggest that parents with sufficient social and economic capital are better placed to interpret Primary Schools' performance to utilise their right of preference most effectively and where that preference will have the greatest impact:

> "*We argue that teaching quality matters a great deal but that averaged over a number of years this is strongly influenced by school composition. This is not a comfortable conclusion. It implies that it is not rational for a middle-class parent to pick a deprived school…. entrenching existing social segregation between schools."* (2013: 26).

Allen went on to conclude in a different research paper that low income families are financially constrained when considering School Admission preferences and that they are less well equipped to engage in the process in a meaningful way:

> "*Higher income families benefit at the expense of the poor because they are advantaged in their ability to exercise choice or because schools that control their admissions 'cream skim' easier to teach pupils*" (Allen R. 2013: 7).

This finding has subsequently held true when considering the mixed economy of school types that has emerged in England since 1988, at greater pace since 2010. Schools maintained by Local Authorities, academies and Free Schools are all funded in full by the State through tax revenue. However, Allen and Higham (2018) found that the opening of Free Schools has shown:

> "*that free schools are located in areas with above-average deprivation but admit intakes that are more affluent than the*

> *average for the neighbourhoods from which they recruit….Significantly we find that all categories of free school providers have opened schools whose populations are more affluent than their neighbours, with the exception of academy chains…..discussing this, we conclude that free schools are socially selective and reproduce socio-economic inequalities*." (Allen and Higham 2018:1).

Free Schools can be opened by non-education professionals, including parent groups with the capacity, knowledge and confidence to do so. These advantages may not be available to less advantaged parents.

Having considered the growth of Free School numbers in the education marketplace in England, Morris (2015) considered to what extent socio-economically disadvantaged children access newly opened Free Schools in comparison to neighbouring schools. She concluded that the Free School programme was still developing but that initial findings showed Free School rolls disproportionately underrepresented socio-economically disadvantaged children:

> "*The Free Schools policy is still very much in its infancy. In some cases this may help to explain the underrepresentation of poorer children. Some families may not have been aware of a new school opening or they may not have felt fully informed about what the school had to offer….'starting gun' effect where those who are most well involved and aware of their 'rights' to choose are more likely to exercise that choice earlier."* (2015: 3).

The concept of 'creaming' that Allen showed is not unique to English schools. Goldring and Phillips state:

> "*This research indicates that social class creaming takes place as parents with wider social networks and more access to information are more likely to participate in the choice process*" (2007:210)

Their finding refers to research undertaken in Nashville Tennessee on parents school place decision making processes. This research is analysed by parental educational

status, race and socio-economic circumstance. In terms of schools recruitment aims and cream skimming strategies, Goldring and Phillips conclude:

> "*active choosers…are precisely the engaged middle-class parent clientele that urban districts are trying to retain in their schools*" (2007:227).

On GCSE results day in August 2019, the charity Teach First (charity reference 1098294) published data that showed a 16 percent pass rate gap in English between the wealthiest and the most socio-economically disadvantaged pupils with an 18 percent pass rate gap in Maths. This pattern is shown with humanities, modern foreign languages and sciences too:

> "*A child's post code should never determine how well they do at school, yet today we've found huge disparities based on just that. Low attainment at GCSE is a real cause for concern, as it can shut doors to future success and holds young people back from meeting their aspirations*." (Hobby, 2019 para. 8)

The Sutton Trust, on A 'Level results day a week earlier than the GCSEs results day in 2019, made comment on the same pattern playing out with 18 year olds:

> "*Those from low-income families are among the most likely to want to shun university, with 83 per cent of those from affluent families saying they were likely to go to university compared with just 67 per cent among those from poor backgrounds*." (2019 para. 3).

When he was Prime Minister, Cameron's parliamentary constituency in Witney Oxfordshire ranked 475th out of 533 in terms of attainment scores by parliamentary constituency. 15 percent of Oxfordshire's resident children attend independent fee paying schools compared to the English national average of 6.3% (ONS 2021). Witney's relatively low placing in what is a relatively wealthy county (25th out of 46 English counties) (ONS 2013) suggests that the state funded offer is not meeting the needs of the children from more modest economic backgrounds in that town.

The impact of the pandemic on the attainment gap between pupils of secure economic backgrounds, and those more greatly disadvantaged is yet to be fully assessed. Early indications suggest that the gap has widened further, as shown in section 1.7.

The Office of the Schools Adjudicator Annual Report (2017-18) was published in December 2018. The role of the Schools Adjudicator, established in 1998, is to rule on complaints and objections regarding Schools Admissions arrangements and outcomes. Using statistical data and qualitative questionnaire findings, the Schools Adjudicator offers the following commentary:

> "*A few grammar schools use the pupil premium (indicator of low family income) as an admissions criterion but as a low priority or even as a tie-breaker…also reported as being used in some primary schools. I note that such limited use is unlikely to alter the intake of a school significantly*." (2018:17)

> *"Local authorities emphasise that it is the least advantaged families that tend to fail to apply for places for their children* (*ibid*: 19)

> *"Another local authority said, 'some academies may be using informal means to dissuade some of these children'. I was told that this could include making families visiting the school feel that their child is not wanted or will not be supported there with the aim of encouraging the parents to ask for a different school to be named*."(*ibid*: 23)

> "*Some schools do not properly apply their oversubscription criteria to in year applications for admissions. The suspicion appears to be that children perceived to be likely to be an asset to the school will be told a place is available and others, who are more likely to be vulnerable, are most likely to be told by some schools that there are no places*" (*ibid*: 26).

The report is littered with overt and implied references to the more vulnerable children in a community being less likely to secure access to the most popular and high

performing schools. Whilst the system is available to challenge these practices that are unlawful under the School Admissions statutory regulations, it would take a confident and articulate parent to challenge large institutions run by professional people, particularly in the knowledge that the child may not be warmly welcomed if parental challenge is successful. This gives weight to the argument that the most socio-economically disadvantaged children are more likely to attend the lower performing and least popular schools in their area. Referring back to the School Admissions Code, this lays out the statutory instrument that encompasses admissions criteria and admission appeals criteria. The enactment of this policy is considered though findings from parents in Chapter Five.

2.12 Mavericks and specialisms

This section reviews maverick approaches to School Admissions, as unorthodox, independent or unique. Specialisms are considered in the context of specific societal groups.

Local Authorities have become increasingly aware of parents' ability to influence their child's school place allocation based on their home address. A further mention of the outcome of the Brighton & Hove Local Authority experiment (section 1.5) that sought to minimise the impact of the local housing market there on School Admissions and social segregation may be helpful to expose this as a real and persisting inequality in England for some children and families. Brighton and Hove Local Authority trialled a lottery allocation system in 2007 for secondary school admissions to negate the influence of a child's home address and consequentially weaken the attainment dependency influence of the primary school attended. The moral intention of this trial could not be reasonably argued with. However, the trial was short lived. Allen, Burgess and McKenna (2010) showed that the impact of variable housing value stock in the town was not ameliorated by the trial. The intended reform in fact significantly complicated the admissions position of the Local Authority for parents. Not all secondary schools in Brighton and Hove agreed to participate in the trial, as not all were maintained by the Local Authority and therefore could refuse. Faith schools in Brighton and Hove refused to participate in the trial. 58,000 children and young people lived in the town in 2014, three percent fewer than the average population size of Local Authorities throughout England. Allen (et al.) showed that there was no significant

change in pupil socio-economic sorting in schools during the lottery trial period. If anything, there were indicators of increased social segregation. There was, however, a significant weakening of predicted secondary attainment dependency on primary schools previously noted. The trial was abandoned shortly after Allen et al. published their findings in 2010 in which they state:

> "*this persistent segregation makes it clear that there are unequal opportunities for poor and rich families to access high quality schools. Residential segregation is the most important contributor to secondary school segregation, and the process of school admissions usually serves to increase inequalities in access to secondary schools*." (2010:1).

The findings of this research could be considered limited as there cannot be any longitudinal findings due to the trial being so short lived.

Moving away from Brighton and Hove, but not the impact of faith schools on equal School Admissions opportunities for all families - this thesis now turns to consider open access to state funded education for all children of all faiths and none.

It has been shown that a greater proportion of families who state they are of a particular religious faith are disproportionately represented as more affluent:

> *Schools educating wealthier pupils tend to achieve exam success, so two school choice factors are linked. Faith schools, or other schools with selective admissions, usually admit higher social status pupils, these pupils get better exam results, this leads to a better OFSTED grade, and so these selective schools "win" the school popularity game* (Bartley 2019:para.10)

That children attending faith schools have more limited opportunities to integrate with children of other faiths and none cannot be refuted. However, if this is a consequence of parent preference, this is also a consequence of a mixed economy of options for parents that the current educational landscape and admissions process condones. Samson (2019) questioned whether Jewish faith schools further polarise families within that faith. He showed that admission based on testing of 'Jewishness' has

created an unhelpful competition to be more Jewish. He argues that the newly available pluralist Jewish School in north London should reduce the exclusivity of existing Jewish school provision in the area. He goes on to conclude that whilst the position is evolving and the new school has sought to reduce Jewish inter-divisions:

> *"notions of Jewish ethnoreligious authenticity and perceptions of Jewish community boundaries remain highly contested*." (2019:1).

In 2011, about one third of state funded schools in England were faith based. In 2018, of three hundred and thirty six new Free Schools opened or planned, thirty six were faith based (Christian, Sikh, Jewish or Muslim). The School Admissions Code allows for priority selection for a place based on faith. Therefore, faith schools and their consequential selection rights are not a small and inconsequential element of the educational landscape in England.

Faith school admissions selection was further considered in Allen and Parameshwaran's work for The Sutton Trust report from 2016 'Caught out – primary schools, catchment areas and social selection'. The report considered why some primary school intakes differ in social composition to their local neighbourhoods. Data analysis over a five-year period showed that most primary schools which are socially unrepresentative of their neighbourhood are in London. Most of these schools have complex oversubscription admissions criteria and are faith based:

> *"….greater choice of schools to church-going families, but this also exacerbates inequalities in choice because these families are more likely to be of a higher social class*." (2016: 3).

Allen and Parameshwaran have highlighted in their work that economically disadvantaged families are less likely to align themselves with a particular faith. This in turn renders their range of schools available to consider for application more limited.

2.13 Market influences when considering local schools for local children

As shown in figure 2.1, the 1988 Education Reform Act saw the introduction of the concept of a marketplace in education. The Government of the day intended that the weakest, and consequentially least popular schools would close and the strongest

expand, based on the concept of parental preference. Open enrolment was introduced so parents could apply for a place at their preferred school for their child. For the first time, parents were actively encouraged to look further than their local school on behalf of their children. This section considers the finding available on the impact of market influences from 1988 on access to preferred schools and social integration.

The Department for Education sponsored a research project to consider "*The effect of changes in published secondary admissions on pupil composition"* (DfE 2012). The aim was to investigate any discernible impact on social composition in secondary school pupil cohorts following the School Admissions changes of 2003 and 2007. Using retrospective fuzzy generalisations for the DfE report, Allen, Coldron and West (2012) found that a very small impact in social composition was discernible. The greatest change was found with foundation and voluntary aided state funded schools which were not maintained by Local Authorities and were newly included in the School Admissions Code requirements from 2003. This inclusion of foundation and voluntary aided schools from 2003 meant that those schools had to cease to be selective in their previous admissions practices. Conclusions from this research were clear, that further reform is required to minimise social segregation through School Admissions:

> "*Looking to the future the effect of new schools within an area will depend on the kind of admissions arrangements they adopt. Regulation to avoid unfair practices and, more radically, balanced intakes will be crucial*." (Allen, Coldron and West 2012: 23)

Six years since after publication of this report, in 2018, 78 percent of secondary education providers in England were academies, not overseen by Local Authorities and responsible for their own admissions arrangements in principle. A 'radical' scrutiny of admissions arrangements is yet to be delivered.

2.14 Research questions

Based on the parameters drawn upon in the literature review, it appears that education is not offering equal access opportunities to the most socio-economically disadvantaged children as policy makers would hope and aspire to under the existing admissions arrangements. This thesis aims to shine a light on the gap between

aspiration and reality through the voice of economically disadvantaged parents, potentially effectively excluded from the best and most popular schools. This may challenge policy aspirations with the reality of the most socio-economically disadvantaged children not gaining places at the best schools.

This thesis has been framed around and sought to address the following research questions in addition to those on page 11:

- What does the School Admissions landscape look like for socio-economically disadvantaged parents? (Chapter Four)
- What are parents' views of that landscape as they see it? (Chapter 5)

Chapter Three Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological approaches which have been determined as most appropriate to understand economically disadvantaged parents' experiences of the School Admissions process when seeking to access their preferred school on behalf of their children. To better understand what is behind parental capacity to successfully engage with the process of securing preference in the School Admissions process, I adopt an interpretative phenomenological approach situated within an ontological constructionist paradigm, whereby parents' experience is determined by their own reality.

Constructionism reflects how individuals' world view and knowledge is based on their personal experience of their own engagement with social structures. As Blaikie and Priest describe:

> "*As access to any social world has to be through the language of the participants, social reality has to be discovered from the 'inside' rather than being filtered through, or distorted by, experts' concepts and theories*" (2019: 104)

Parents voices have been sought, captured and analysed by what they state explicitly and implicitly to inform twelve identified themes and findings in sections 5.7 to 5.18 about their reality of engagement with the School Admissions process.

3.2 Context

This thesis attempts to consider the goal of securing school allocation preference through capturing experiences of economically disadvantaged parents in the context of the four influences highlighted in the quadrants of Figure 1.6. It seeks to better understand parents' motivations and approaches through telling their stories and considers whether politicians' aspirations for education as a vehicle for advancement of all in society is a reality or a myth within the existing policy arrangements. This consideration of social mobility is based on outcomes from socio-economically disadvantaged children's educational experiences.

This thesis takes the principles of the School Admissions process as a legislatively framed social construct and compares it to the 'knowledge' gained by parents from their engagement with that process –in so doing, making their personal experiences their own reality. Coupled with this thesis' interpretative phenomenological approach of identifying commonalities through thematic analysis from individual lived experiences, those experiences are compared to the stated intentions in the legislation and as articulated by policy makers. Heidegger's influence on an interpretative phenomenological approach is best suited to gain insight into parents' reality of the School Admissions process. As stated by Crotty:

> *"Phenomenology is about saying 'No!' to the meaning system bequeathed to us. …it will be as much a construction as the sense we have laid aside, but as reinterpretation – as new meaning, or fuller meaning, or renewed meaning…Phenomenology, it is often said, calls into question what is often taken for granted*." (1998: 82)

This thesis explores how parents describe their personal experiences, operating within the School Admissions framework but from their own perspectives that encompass personal ambitions, frustrations, power, and powerlessness, all through their own unique lens. It seeks to uncover parents' lived experiences of School Admissions processes, within the construct of the Admissions legislation. Comparisons are drawn between what is learned from parents' voices, Admissions Managers' voices and statistical data to draw out the realities of a preference based school allocation system in England. This preference based process is considered by some politicians cited in sections 1.3 and 2.7, as a vehicle for social mobility in adult life through the vehicle of education. As stated by Wilson and Worsley "*education is often lauded for its ability to offer opportunities for social mobility*" (2021: 770). To position parents experiences within the School Admissions process, analysis of statistical data available and interviews Admissions Managers who enact the School Admissions process is provided to offer a range of comparative measures from which to draw conclusions against The Reality of School Place Preference.

Data has been collected from a variety of sources and has been categorised as qualitative and quantitative.

This thesis is predicated by the assumption that parents approach the School Admissions process with an understanding that they have a right of preference which

informs school place allocation. In the event that preference is not secured, the impact on the child's educational experience may be affected in the long term. This thesis considers the impact of family capitals, drawing on Bourdieu and moral foundations described by Haidt (see sections 2.10 and 5.6).
Reflexivity is woven throughout this chapter.

3.3 Research framework which informs methodological approach

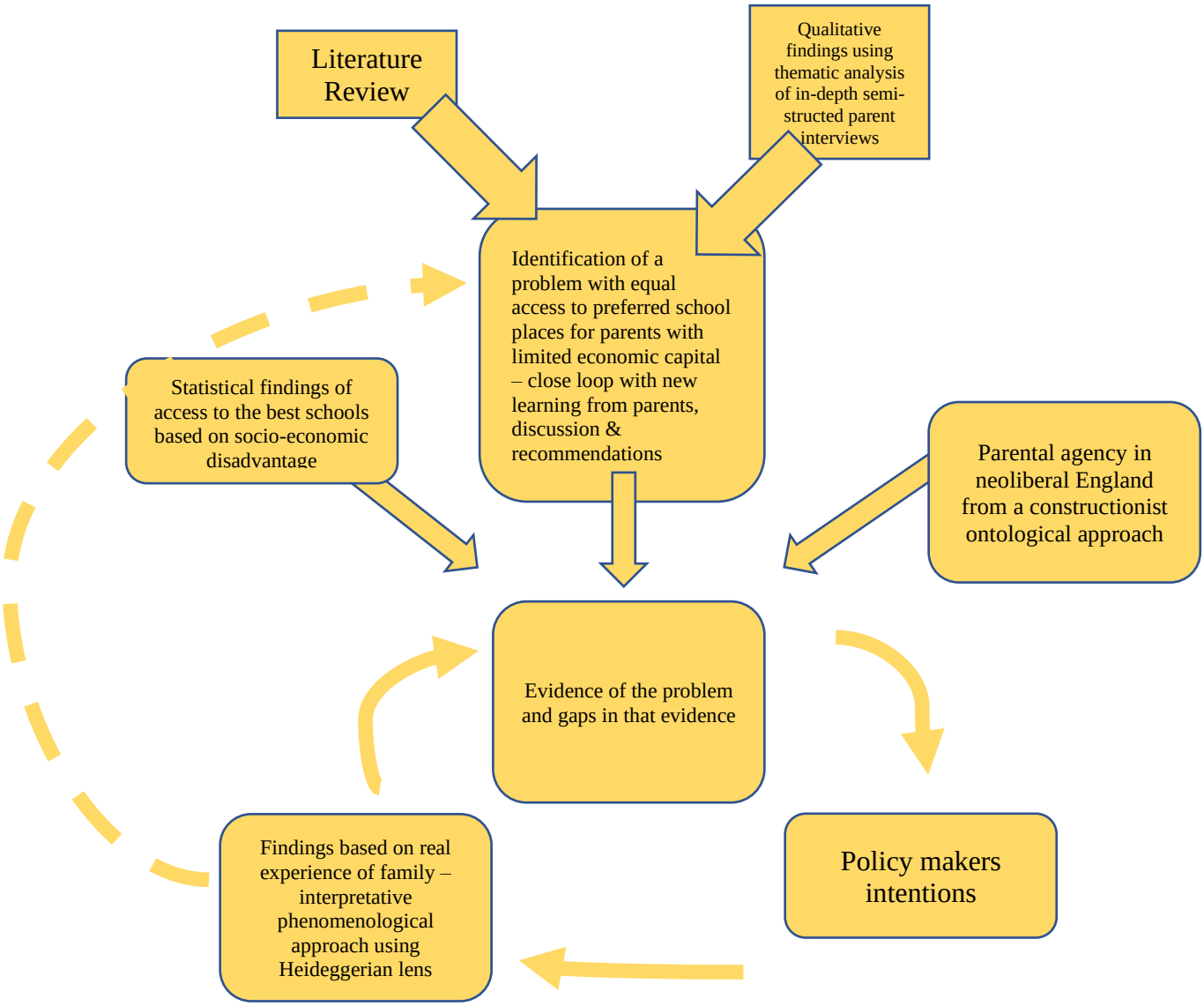

Figure 3.1 Conceptual Design Model "The complete design" adapted from Dr. G. Ineson

The conceptual design model for this thesis considers whether access to preferred schools is equally available to all parents regardless of economic means. It investigates whether parents of insecure economic means lack resources to draw upon to optimize their chances of being allocated a school place at the most popular

schools. The term ‘agency’ has been adopted in Figure 3.1 as a noun to describe parents’ ability to enact a choice. As described by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson “*capacity and context interact to form agency*” (2015: 23). This research considers parental capacity and the context of the School Admissions process as they interact. This thesis considers policy makers intentions in creating legislatively based parental right to express a preference regarding School Admissions. This thesis draws on available numerical data pertaining to School Admissions and seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature that is the paucity of parental voice regarding their Admissions experience.

To expand on the conceptual design model (presented in Figure 3.1 above), for this thesis, it is important to be mindful that the lived experience of England’s most economically disadvantaged families is not captured widely and richly in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The conceptual framework created for this thesis draws upon current School Admissions policy as an aspirational gateway to social mobility for the most socio-economically disadvantaged children, as cited by politicians in sections 1.3 and 2.7 above. Parental habitus may prove to have been disregarded by those politicians cited in sections 1.3 and 2.7. This statement is guided by the statistical datasets available from the existing literature which show socio-economically disadvantaged children fare worse in terms of accessing admission to the most popular schools.

I have used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analytical (IPA) approach, with parents as contributors to knowledge, using personal constructs and life history narratives.

As stated by Smith, Flowers and Larkin “*The researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x.*” (2009 :35) This thesis adopts parents as participants and their School Admissions experience as x.

The methodology adopted for this thesis, one of a mixed methods approach (see section 3.5) with a weighting towards a contribution to contemporary knowledge of qualitative data analysis, attempts to consider the bigger picture over and above slotting children into schools. This qualitative data analysis is compared to supplementary considerations such as national politicians seeking to strengthen the

educational marketplace and local politicians seeking the popular vote through garnering parents' approval. This is shown by comparing the lived experiences of parents, compared to Admissions Managers' professional experiences, in the context of quantitative data sets pertaining to school place allocations based on parental preference.

Stake and Kushner question, "*Is this program in compliance with promises and obligations?*" (Stake 2004: 285) and "*confusing for the citizenry"* (Kushner 2017: 226). The methodology adopted seeks to clarify whether parents' experiences of the school admissions process ('*program'*) is '*confusing'* and does raise false hope of their preferred school, by capturing and analyzing their lived experiences.

The starting assumption, from the Government mandated legislative framework, is that all parents access the School Admissions system with a clearly embedded understanding of their entitlements, the system and preference access processes. The ontological approach for this thesis is to determine whether parental equity of agency and capital exists in reality. As reviewed in Chapter Two above, it is suggested that the agency and capital of parents seeking their preferred school place is not equal which leads to further disadvantage for some cohorts of children – see Wilson and Bridge (2019), Machin and Major (2018), Hermstruwer (2017), Gewirtz (2003) and Dong and Li (2019).

Blaikie defines ontology simply as 'the '*science or study of being"* (1993: 6). However, Crotty takes a more nuanced stance by reflecting on Heidegger's journey to ontology via phenomenology. "*There is…no other way. If, for Heidegger, philosophy is ontology, ontology, by the same token, is phenomenology*." (1998: 96) Crotty writes that:

> *"our culture gives us a ready-made understanding…we must rid ourselves of our tendency to immediately interpret*" (2015: 10).

So, if ontology is the '*what is'* (*ibid*.), this thesis considers School Admissions arrangements and access to preference for economically disadvantaged families. '*What it means to know'* (*ibid.*) is the episteme that this research seeks to reach by capturing parents' lived experience.

3.4 Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA)

IPA emerged as a distinct approach to research in 1996 (Smith et al. 2009) in response to an unmet research need in the field of Psychology. It has subsequently been adopted and adapted by other academic disciplines and continues to develop. Having highlighted IPA's relative immaturity, it is securely founded in philosophy of learning and human development.

The epistemological approach adopted in this research to best acquire valid new knowledge is most suitably interpretative phenomenology. Freire stated that:

> "*not only do they not have a voice, but, once still, they are unaware that they don't have a voice*" (1972: 30).

This is based on human (parents) interpretation of a phenomenon (School Admissions process) as the key focus to glean meaning from data gathered from individual parents' perspectives. IPA offers an effective opportunity and means to capture and analyse lived experiences of parents in detail, to explore the reality of their access to preferred school places and the impact of their School Admissions experience on their view of School Admissions reality. As stated by Pring, "*the gap between intention and reality was rarely explored*" (2000: 124). Blaikie and Priest describe:

> "*In Interpretivism, social reality is regarded as the product of its inhabitants; it is a world that is constituted from the meanings participants produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday activities together*" (1999: 107)

IPA draws on an established tradition of phenomenology. Husserl (1927) is recognised as the founder of this explicit approach to identifying new learning through consideration of reflexive human experiences beyond the day to day experiences of existence:

> "*The founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that this occurs, and in its own terms…The method which Husserl described proceeds through a series of 'reductions'. Each reduction offers a different lens or prism, a different way of thinking and reasoning about the phenomenon at hand. Together the sequence of reductions is*

> *intended to lead the inquirer away from the distraction and misdirection of their own assumptions and preconceptions, and back towards the essence of their experience of a given phenomenon.*" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009: 12 & 14).

One potential flaw in Husserl's approach is that such focus on one's own experience requires time and space to step back for reflexive deliberation of experience (Smith et al. 2009). This could be considered a luxury that parents of limited economic and/or social capital can ill afford regarding their School Admissions experience.

Heidegger, whilst acknowledging Husserl's work as the foundation for his own thinking, developed it further. Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or, being situated, informs this development:

> "*Heidegger is more concerned with the ontological question of existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through the world appears to us, and is made meaningful*." (Smith et al. 2009:17)

Here we move closer to an approach that more appropriately meets the needs of this thesis. This approach acknowledges that parents operate within defined systems and structures, but their experiences of systems and structures will differ based on their prior knowledge and experiences. As Smith et al. state:

> "*we have come to see that the complex understanding of 'experience' invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meaning, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world. In IPA research, our attempts to understand other people's relationship to the world are necessarily interpretative and will focus upon their attempts to make meanings out of their activities and to the things happening to them*." (*ibid.:* 21)

To adopt IPA as an approach for the purposes of this thesis requires mindfulness of hermeneutics as a theoretical underpinning. Hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, requires consideration to understand how things that appear to be, actually are for individuals. Smith et al. summarise hermeneutics in IPA as offering:

> "*Following Heidegger, IPA is concerned with examining how a phenomenon appears, and the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense of this appearance. Heidegger… give insightful and dynamic descriptions of the relationship between the fore-understanding and the new phenomenon being attended to*." (*ibid.*: 28-9)

A further key feature of IPA that supports the requirements of this thesis is ideography. In short, this can be described as a particular focus to delve deeply for meaning from detail, thereby securing understanding of meaning for individual humans. As Smith et al. state:

> *"…analysis must be thorough and systematic…IPA is committed to understanding how particular phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspectives of particular people, in a particular context*." (ibid.:29)

Consequently, IPA requires more than one participant to avoid a singular case study approach, but a sufficiently small research participant cohort so as to secure rich and deep analysis of their particular context in the world, as parents of limited economic means engaging with the School Admissions process. Described by Smith et al.:

> "*There is a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but detective work is required by the researcher to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened*." (ibid.:35)

In summary, the dual adoption of phenomenology and hermeneutics as used by this IPA approach, gets closest to learning from research participants regarding School Admissions experiences for those who are economically disadvantaged. The thesis probes deeply into six research participants' experiences, analyses meaning, then steps back to analyse commonalities and differences to offer as a new perspective for learning.

3.5 Mixed methods of data collection

Qualitative methods offer a relatively unusual approach to data gathering and interpretation in the field of School Admissions. As stated in the literature review, Chapter Two, existing knowledge in the field is mostly based on quantitative numerical statistical data. This does not offer the human dimension, with all its individual stories, that has much richness to better understand how economically disadvantaged families can improve access to their preferred schools. This thesis puts aside Sikes, Nixon and Carr's (2003) view that quantitative approaches remain predominant for academic credibility based on being more attractive as irrefutable to those that fund research. They argue that this is due to:

> *'the protection of academic mystery (statistics are difficult to a still innumerate society, even the academics) and partly grounded in the old faith in science*… (2003: 122).

Their stance appears as somewhat patronising and not a position this research wishes to support. A more appropriate stance for this parent informed research is Blaikie and Priest's:

> *"When qualitative methods are used, researchers have very limited idea of where they should start, how they should proceed, and where they expect to end. They have to accept opportunities when they open up and will want to follow leads as they occur. They see research as a learning process and themselves as the measuring (data-absorbing) instrument. They will want to allow concepts, ideas and theories to evolve, and they will resist imposing both preconceived ideas on everyday reality…Qualitative data gathering is messy and unpredictable*…" (2019: 210)

Based on the need to link the voice of economically disadvantaged parents to the wealth of quantitative admissions data already available, this thesis offers a mixed method design whereby quantitative data is linked to qualitative findings and interpreted in the light of both approaches. Adopting this mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, the intention is to ensure that no relevant source of data available and sought is missed. Drawing on Professor John Creswell, the risk of not mixing methods can mean:

> *"not hear the words of the participants' and this can lead to the data being largely researcher driven… People like stories, but few(er) people (are) studied'* (2013:5).

Creswell goes on to argue that combining two or more approaches is greater than the sum of each individual part. In the case of this research, basing all assertions on parent voice alone could overlook the data available on the scale of first preference allocated school places. Likewise, to base the research solely on a quantitative approach could miss the reality of individual parents' lived experiences. As Crotty states:

> "*we may consider ourselves utterly devoted to qualitative research methods. Yet, when we think about investigations carried out in the normal course of our daily lives, how often measuring and counting turn out to be essential to our purposes…we should accept that, whatever research we engage in, it is possible for either qualitative or quantitative methods, or both, to serve our purposes…without this being in anyway problematic*." (2015: 15)

Retaining one ontological focus, the 'what' of School Admissions, drawing on interpretative phenomenology of 'how' parents perceive their School Admissions experiences, quantitative numerical data has been triangulated with qualitative data from parent participant semi-structured in-depth interviews, pilot questionnaires and anonymous online surveys. This has been augmented by semi-structured in-depth interviews with Admissions Managers. As stated by Blaikie and Priest:

> "*methods can be combined both concurrently and in sequence. The first alternative allows for the use of qualitative and quantitative methods together, provided both types are used with the same ontological assumptions*." (2019: 218).

Seeking parents' views in the context described above requires drawing on Bassey's (1999) concept of 'fuzzy' generalisation, and widening it, to interpret patterns and themes from individuals' views and experience:

> "*A fuzzy generalisation carries an element of uncertainty. It reports that something has happened in one place and that it may also happen elsewhere. There is a possibility but no surety*" (1999: 52).

For this thesis, singular parents' views and experiences cannot be presented as collective fact. However, interpretative phenomenological thematic analysis of all acquired parents' views (from questionnaires, online surveys and semi-structured in-depth interviews) can be presented with some plausible explanation of common experiences.

Qualitative and quantitative findings and analysis are presented in two separate chapters, Chapter Four (sections 4.2 to 4.5) and Chapter Five (sections 5.4 and 5.5) with conclusions from both presented in Chapter Six. This affords the opportunity to weight findings as both numerical data and participant voice informed. One without the other would not be helpful in formulating findings and recommendations. However, as the purpose of the thesis is to learn from individual experiences, the emphasis on contemporary original qualitative findings, using an interpretative phenomenological approach, is the intended focus.

3.6 Researcher positionality

I worked as a Reception teacher and teacher of young people with Special Educational Needs at a vocational college for ten years before moving to Local Authority Education Services. Having worked for Local Authorities since 1992 delivering services for families that did not always share my view of the benefits of formal education, I became aware of the gap between opportunities ostensibly available to all children and families and their reality of experience. This awareness has only been heightened over the decades. I have considered what might underpin such varied educational access for children in what is an increasingly diverse and regulated educational system in England, whilst operating within a marketplace of preference. Inclusion of all children in its broadest sense, defined in this thesis by exclusion and suspension, poor attendance and educational attainment (and meeting additional educational needs) seem to be too obvious starting points when thinking about opportunity gaps. So, I sought to consider more 'up stream' influences. This took me to where it all began for me and begins for many children today – the options available to parents when deciding on which is the best and most appropriate school for their children. Further consideration leads to proposing recommendations in section 6.3 to counter the consequences of being allocated a school place that parents are not fully

committed to making work. Ali referred to her "*insider status*" (2015: 796) when considering positionality. I am not professionally responsible for School Admissions in my Local Authority so am satisfied that I can approach the research process as an outsider.

My local experience of schools' stated inclusive principles is sometimes not borne out by comparison with their exclusions and absence data when considered through the lens of socio-economic deprivation (see Figure 1.3).

As Timpson stated:

> "*78% of permanent exclusions issued during secondary school were to pupils who either had special educational needs, were classified as in need or were eligible for free school meals*" (2019:8)

The Department for Education reports:

> "*Pupils known to eligible for and claiming FSM (Free School Meals) had an overall absence rate of 7.6%, compared to 4.3% for non-FSM pupils*." (2020:6)

The concept of justice is important to me. The findings of Timpson and the Department for Education cannot be accepted without seeking to better understand the reasons behind such disproportionality. This is to ensure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, are afforded the best opportunities to thrive and develop through education. This thesis seeks to start that journey of understanding at source – where children from all socio-economic backgrounds start their educational experiences. That is at the School Admissions stage. Securing a preferred school place may well inform more satisfactory future outcomes for children.

The literature is rich through research hearing the position of educators and public bodies (such as Admissions Authorities). I sought the view of parents as an alternative lens to offer new knowledge to the field. In Hillingdon the attainment gap between those entitled to FSM and not is 15 percent at Key Stage 1, 18 percent at Key Stage 2 and 25 percent at Key Stage 4 (Kennedy LB Hillingdon 2020: 16, 19 and 24). As stated by Bassey, case study research "*investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context*" (1999: 26) and is a:

> "*bounded system…within which issues are indicated, discovered or studied so that a tolerably full understanding of the case is possible*" (ibid: 30)

Mindful of the national attainment gaps between economically disadvantaged children and those children who are not, not confined to the locality where half of this research's parent participants live (Hillingdon), the intention was to seek fuller understanding of the bounded Admissions system for economically disadvantaged parents more widely.

Having rejected case study as an approach for this research, it is inevitable that certain elements of case study methods may need to be drawn upon as three of the parent interview participants live in Hillingdon. This thesis did not set out to adopt a case study approach. However, the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has meant that many of the features of case study methods are drawn upon for convenience and accessibility purposes. Michael Wyness used a single case study school and interviews with fifteen teachers and three members of senior management to demonstrate how the "*responsible"* (2020: 161) parent is a construct based on their relationship with the one school. This approach has been rejected as the term 'responsible' offers a pejorative judgement and does not capture parent views directly. The temptation to focus on one school as a single case study institution has been avoided. This is because access to one school only may offer a distorted view based on one particular admissions process, school culture, population and geographic context.

At the heart of this research is scrutiny of the framework of School Admissions as an equal construct for all children and their parents despite the lessons learned from existing literature and lived parental experiences. As Pascal and Bertram state, this is done:

> *"in conjunction with others and needs to be immersed within a more astute awareness of power (politics) and a sharpened focus on values (ethics) in all our thinking and actions*." (2012: 477)

Based on this view, and drawing on Frechette's approach, this thesis:

> "*allow(s) for the unearthing of phenomena from the perspective of how people interpret and attribute meaning to their existence*" (2020:1).

Frechette's description of discovering new knowledge is adopted in the context of this thesis. Learning from individual parents' experiences of the School Admissions process goes on to identify themes from which recommendations follow in sections 5.7 – 5.18 inclusive and section 6.3.

3.7 Research instruments and design

It was necessary to design research instruments to inform this thesis and build on the existing knowledge laid out in Chapter Two, research instruments that effectively captured parent voice through thoughtful design. It was necessary to design instruments that allowed parent participants (and Admissions Managers) free rein to share and think deeply about their own lived and professional experiences. This was in contradistinction to the statistical context so as to breathe life into the numerical data available nationally and from individual Local Admissions Authorities on the relative success of allocating first preference school places, and the scale of Appeals lodged by parents dissatisfied with their allocated school place.

Research instruments were designed to capture six distinct datasets required to draw meaningful conclusions to consider The Reality of school Place Preference. Each of the research instruments described below were sequentially created to gather credible evidence to formulate a response to the intention of this thesis.

1. Quantitative Department for Education statistical releases, to analyse the scale of preferred school place allocations nationally, trends over time and the scale of parental use of the Appeals process. This was to establish the scale of non-preferred school place allocation and whether parental dissatisfaction with their allocated place was an issue. Without this context, seeking parental voice could have been rendered unnecessary if all allocated places were satisfactory to parents.

2. Quantitative data gathered from Local Authorities using Freedom of Information access, to analyse the scale of first (or any preference) allocated school places across England to identify variances based on locality. This was required to analyse the scale of success in allocating first and any preference school places. See Appendix Two.
3. Quantitative and qualitative parent questionnaire (as a pilot), to test the effectiveness of question design. See Appendix Three.
4. Quantitative and qualitative online parent survey, to attract a cohort of parents for in-depth semi-structured interview. See Appendix One.
5. Qualitative Admissions Managers semi-structured in-depth interviews, to compare professional policy enactors' views of the reality of school place preference to that of parent recipients of their services. See Appendix Five.
6. Qualitative parents semi-structured in-depth interviews, to acquire parental voice and analyse impact of their experience. See Appendix Four.

3.8 Quantitative data sources

Department for Education National Statistics

The Department for Education for England and Wales publishes national statistics for admissions and admission appeals, available annually as part of the statistical releases from the Department. These are drawn upon, manipulated and summarised to inform findings in this thesis. These have been analysed alongside published national data regarding exclusions, absence and Key Stage 4 attainment. This offers summary findings through the lens of parental experience pertaining to preference offer rates and numbers of Appeals lodged, seeking to bring to light the number and scale of parents not receiving satisfaction from the legislatively bound system presented in large data sets.

Local authority school admissions allocation

Freedom of Information requests were sent to all English Local Authorities with School Admissions duties requesting that each area share their first and any preference School Admissions allocation data over a three year period – this is presented in Appendix Two with analysis in section 4.4. One hundred and twenty six requests were

made, and one hundred responses were useable for secure analysis. This represents three Admissions rounds over three academic years. Responses that were unclean, corrupted or not returned were excluded. Blaikie and Priest state that "*some researchers seem to be reluctant to expose the weakness of their research design for fear that their work will be judged as inadequate*" (2019: 29). To avoid this, the explicit issues from the numerical data collection from English Local Authorities with School Admissions responsibilities were as follows.

- Non returns - 10
- Returns outside the requested timescale for return, missing data collection window and research timetable - 6
- Conflated data in incorrect columns - 3
- Data returned for years outside the original Freedom of Information request -1
- Declined returns – 6
- Usable - 100

The data was manipulated to disregard all but correct data as presented and available using Blaikie and Priest's approach of "*capture, cleanse (i.e. filter, parse, format) and aggregate raw data in readiness for preparatory and then detailed analysis*" (*ibid:* 242). This was important for quality assurance purposes as laid out in section 3.12. The FOI findings were analysed by Local Authorities based on their north or south location in England, with Birmingham identified as the dividing point. This was to seek any similarities or differences across the country. Findings are expanded upon in section 4.4 below.

<u>Online parental survey</u>

A small-scale online survey was launched as a vehicle for research interview participant recruitment via an anonymous survey posted four times on Facebook and Mumsnet. This provided data available for analysis and interpretation on a modest scale. Informed by the Literature Review, questions posed are presented in Appendix One. Quantitative data from closed online survey questions is presented as findings in Chapter Four, with qualitative summaries drawn from the 'any other comments' invitation to respondents at the end of the survey. Given the challenges of identifying parents for in-depth semi-structured interviews during the pandemic, the online survey was intended as the primary source of parental voice. However, the extent of the

uptake was disappointing. There was also no way of assuring that parent respondents were of economically limited means, as required for the purpose of this thesis, and no way to better understand parental responses. As Blaikie and Priest (1999) show, understanding of participants' contexts in online surveys is challenging. Also, access to follow up when seeking to be assured of contexts is where researchers have the "*least control and leverage*" (2000: 241). The social media and electronic age mean that citizens are frequently being invited to participate in surveys. Common examples include resident surveys to inform local services or surveys following purchase of goods and services to inform improved customer satisfaction and commercial success. The online connected era may be having a detrimental effect on use of anonymous online surveys for academic purposes, particularly during the pandemic when remote communication was the only permissible means of engaging citizen voice, in this case, parent voice. As Field questions:

> "*despite the opportunities of online technology, we are creating the conditions for undermining our own work as evaluators, by over-using surveys to the extent that they undermine people's patience and trust in research processes. Are we, in effect, creating a 'tragedy of the commons' by treating people's goodwill towards research and evaluation as an infinite source, when goodwill has its limits?"* (2020: 1).

Online surveys may be inexpensive and efficient for researchers, less so for the technologically disenfranchised and survey weary. As stated by Bonevski et al. access to

> "*disadvantaged groups and increase their representation (in research)…institutions need to acknowledge extended timeframes, plan for higher resourcing costs and operate via community partnerships*". (2014:1)

Further consideration is given to accessing economically disadvantaged parents in section 3.13. Section 2.6 reviews Antony-Newman's finding on accessing immigrant parents and the challenges in doing so effectively. The parent in-depth interview section in 3.9 below also identifies challenges and ameliorating actions in accessing the required parental cohort.

3.9 Qualitative data

A test pilot parental questionnaire was conducted prior to the online survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews. This was intended to test the questions for participant understanding and to be assured that data sought was forthcoming from the questions. This can be found in Appendix Three. Twenty parents completed the questionnaire. Of that cohort, only one had children entitled to FSMs. However, three described their economic circumstances as highly limited. One went on to participate in the in-depth semi-structured interviews. The cohort of twenty parents was drawn opportunistically based on convenience. Convenience sampling is described as:

> "*individuals believed to be representative of the population from which they are selected but chosen because they are close at hand and easy to get access to*" (Elmusharaf, 2016: 7).

The questionnaire was then followed by a filtering activity to ensure participants met the research criteria (of limited economic means as defined initially by entitlement to FSMs then by minimum wage income at £8.72 per hour, and engagement in the School Admissions process). Purposive or non-probability sampling is consequently adopted within this thesis to ensure that the parent participant cohort represented the required cohort for in-depth semi-structured interviewing which followed.

Drawing on the OECD definition, the pilot questionnaire was:

> "*a survey…on a small scale, carried out prior to the main survey, primarily to gain information to improve the efficiency of the main survey. For example, it may be used to test a questionnaire…"* (2002: 2).

The pilot questionnaire tested the research instruments later adopted in the online survey and the semi-structured in-depth parental interviews for relevance, clarity and accessibility to the research participants (Krefting 1991). It was undertaken prior to the pandemic, so parents completed the questionnaire and returned it for analysis using hard copy documents. These were disseminated by me delivering to home addresses and collecting when completed. I was available for any clarity required by the respondents, but no clarity was sought, and all respondents completed all sections

of the questionnaire. This offered sufficient assurance of the clarity and relevance of the questions posed for later adoption in the parent in-depth semi-structured interviews. It also offered assurance to Blaikie and Priest's challenge that:

> "*Questionnaires have to be prepared in such a way that respondents can complete them without any assistance other than built-in and/or separate written instructions"*. (1999: 201)

The pilot questionnaire adopted a Likert-style scaling technique to reflect the various elements at play in parental determination of their actions and experiences. "*Scaling is a relatively ancient art in social science and the classic references are still useful"* (Blaikie and Priest 2019: 302). Created in 1932 by the psychologist Rensis Likert, the Likert scale allows survey respondents to express their agreement or disagreement with various pre-determined statements. Most commonly, there are five available responses - strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree and strongly disagree. Frequently adopted for research purposes, the Likert scale can be adapted to measure frequency, importance, quality and likelihood as well as agreement. One potential disadvantage of Likert scaling is that respondents seek to '*please*' the researcher by responding for the researcher's benefit and not with their own position:

> "*acquiescence bias – participants may agree with statements as presented in order to 'please' the experimenter"* (Bertram 2016: 7)

This risk is off-set by the preamble discussed with parent respondents, explaining that anonymity is assured , and that positionally, the researcher's stance is open minded and non-judgemental.

A post-positivist technique was adopted for capturing parental voice as a tester exercise prior to further in-depth interviewing and analysis that informs this thesis' findings. This offered the opportunity to capture experiential fact and interpretation. Pring describes positivism as:

> "*explanations which generally pertain to the physical world, which are characterised by quantifiable generalisations…"* (2000: 45).

The development of knowledge builds on proven facts. Post-positivism can be described as the understanding of the subjectivity of reality. So, for the purposes of this thesis, parents' right to apply for a preferred school place is positivist, as set down

in legislation. The individual lived experiences of parents seeking to secure a preferred school place can be considered through a constructionist lens, as discussed above, considering their bespoke experiences, impacts and outcomes.

> *"You come to some understanding of how people construct and maintain perceptions of the world"*. (Ryan 2006: 18)

Following learning and reflection, an adaption from the questionnaire to the in-depth semi-structured interviews followed. This was undertaken to develop and explore parents' aspirations for their own children and to seek to understand how their own previous experiences have impacted on their current circumstances and decision making processes.

Parent interview participants characteristics

The most effective means of accessing individual School Admissions experiences and the realities of the target parental cohort was by individual semi-structured in-depth interviewing. It must be acknowledged that a challenge to this approach was the limited size of the parent participant cohort. However, Smith, Flowers and Larkin suggest that "*between three and six participants can be a reasonable sample size for a student project using IPA*" (2009:51). They suggest this is a sufficient cohort size to draw out patterns, similarities, differences and trends whilst not becoming overwhelmed with data. Ultimately six parents were interview participants for this thesis.

Contrary to the originally envisaged research plan, School Leaders were unable to assist as a conduit to economically disadvantaged parents due to prioritising pandemic responses, and some reluctance to specifically identify the economically disadvantaged, for fear of stigmatising them as 'other'. Some parents identified were reluctant to share their experiences due to lack of confidence with spoken English, lack of time or disinterest. Consequently, research participants needed to be identified using a convenience-based approach, as defined above by Elmusharaf (2016). Fellow research students at Brunel University (to draw on their professional positions) were approached, requests were posted on local social media platforms and still the desired cohort was elusive. Eventually, through word of mouth within local networks, neighbours, friends, colleagues and supporters proposed the prospect of being

interviewed to their personal contacts. Using this limited but expedient approach, nine potential participants were personally approached by me who met the research criteria of having a child or children within the School Admissions process and experiencing economic disadvantage. Ultimately six participants agreed to share their circumstances and experience.

As Orwell stated many years ago, "*I do know that you can learn a great deal in a working class home, if only you can get there*" (1937: 106). My experience of identifying research participants from economically disadvantaged households for this thesis has been that very little has changed since that time.
Reflexively, I should have considered more thoughtfully the ethics of seeking the views of economically disadvantaged parents when capturing their School Admissions experience as this could have been, for them, another experience of powerlessness and lack of ability to influence their children's destiny. Mills' (1959) work on the blurring of private and public spheres could arguably have been a feature for consideration with my endeavours. The private sphere is interpreted here as parenting, child rearing, family values. The public sphere is citizen engagement with public entities such as schools and health services. Hattie (2009) offers some compelling insights into the positive influences of parents on their child's educational experience. He acknowledges barriers and offers solutions for the education system to adopt to break down home/school misunderstandings. I had originally planned to approach School Leaders as gatekeepers to my required cohort of parent research participants. However, Head Teachers told me that the parents I was seeking to interview often lacked confidence and viewed school staff (and academic researchers by association) with suspicion of being judged in terms of their circumstances and literacy skills.

Those Head Teachers were right. Access to the parent cohort that I sought proved far more challenging than I had anticipated. I had to cast my net wider than I had planned. The impact of COVID-19 did not help. Head Teachers were understandably most distracted during 2020 and 2021 and my requests for their agreement to participate and facilitate access to parents was not a priority for them. I felt I was a burden and needed to be highly respectful of the demands upon their time in terms of keeping children and staff safe and keeping a blended education offer available, in light of the tsunami of government advice and guidance being issued daily. During

week ending 22nd May 2020, School Leaders received forty one guidance documents issued from the Department for Education throughout that one week alone. The first pandemic related Department for Education guidance document on school staff well-being was issued at two o'clock in the morning. Therefore, to seek answers, I needed to adapt.

However, the impact of Covid-19 also offered some unexpected opportunities as well as challenges. I built on these opportunities to amend the research approach to draw on a wider cohort of potential parent research participants using virtual means. As Blaikie and Priest stated

> "*we are living and researching in an increasingly networked world that is enabled by, and is also helping to shape, a stream of often revolutionary developments in ICTs."* (1999: 244)

Covid-19 offered an unplanned but different way of seeking and hearing parental voice through virtual means. Basit referred to her "*selection of participants*" (2013: 511). I actively sought to avoid selection. Selection could feed potential bias and warp any findings. As it emerged that accessing parent participants who met the characteristics criteria (current engagement with the School Admissions process and experiencing economic disadvantage) was hampered by the pandemic, I sought an alternative source of recruiting participants to offer parental voice by creating an online survey. The online survey was an attempt to act as a recruitment tool for more in-depth semi-structured interview participants. The flaw in this approach was that parents who were not entitled to FSMs could also complete the survey (even though this criterion for completion was explicit). Whilst the findings from the survey were interesting, they could not be relied upon for enough detail and validity to get to the heart of what I sought to understand. The need for detailed in-depth individual interviews remained key to deliver on the ambition for this thesis.

<u>Parent in-depth semi-structured interviews</u>

Eventually, a parent research participant cohort was recruited to inform this research. Each described their Secondary School Admissions experience. Primary experiences were not precluded deliberately, but as a consequence of the circumstances of the

recruited cohort. For now, their characteristics are described (by themselves) here. Readers will learn more about them and hear their voices in Chapter Five.

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	No. of parents and children in household	Age of parent	Disability	ESOL	Religion	Work
1 Magda	Polish	F	2 and 2	46	N	Y	Catholic	Cleaner
2 Sasi	Thai	F	2 and 3	34	N	Y	Buddhist	Early Years Assistant
3 James	English	M	1 and 2	55	N	N	C of E	Unemployed
4 Nina	Polish	F	1 and 2	39	N	Y	Catholic	Carer
5 Anne	English	F	2 and 3	41	N	N	None	Carer
6 Gemma	English	F	1 and 1	32	N	N	None	Nanny

Figure 3.2 Parent participants characteristics

Having eventually recruited the parent interview cohort described in Figure 3.2 above through convenience based and snowball techniques (see section 3.12), virtual interview planning (as opposed to in person) was needed at pace. This was regrettable as remote interviewing offered more limited opportunities for trust and empathy building. I had to further consider the impact of my requests on already economically disadvantaged parents in light of the disruption to wider society and fear of the virus during the Covid19 pandemic. Five of the six parent participants had already been further negatively economically impacted by the pandemic due to redundancy or reduction in working hours. A humbling realisation.

Having referred earlier to children and families educational journeys, satisfaction with access to preferred schools and positive consequential outcomes, I must also acknowledge at this point that social and economic class appears to be an enabler, or dis-enabler, when 'choosing' early years childcare. Chen and Bradbury acknowledged that they struggled to access socio-economically disadvantaged parents to support their research which rendered it, by their own admission, "*imbalance(d) in terms of social class*" (2020: 297). However, their findings still clearly demonstrated that parents lack "*real choice*" (*ibid*.) when deciding on childcare provision for their pre-school children. My focus on school preference applications, therefore, needed to

appreciate that economically disadvantaged parents may likely have already experienced compromise in a free market early years provision landscape.

As the developmental thinking behind this thesis matured, I began to better understand some of the systemic and structural inequalities that lead to under-representation of disadvantaged students at all stages of education including access to Higher Education. Referring back to section 3.6, supported by The Sutton Trust, Wyness' report 'Rules of the Game' in 2017 offers some powerful insight into the factors at play; examples include lack of experienced parental coaching with pupils writing a successful personal statement for university application, under-predicted grades for pupils entitled to FSMs, lack of confidence in sourcing relevant information and lack of confidence to aspire to Higher Education based on no or limited family experience to draw upon. I realised that my area of focus was but one element of the reality of economic disadvantage for the families that seemed to be so hard to reach and better understand.

As London went into Tier Two restrictions due to increasing positive cases of Covid 19 on 17th October 2020, then the second national Lock Down in November 2020 and the third Lock Down on 5th January 2021, interviews had to be conducted virtually. Participants' consent was talked through and agreed virtually. Telephone contact details have been made available to academic supervisors to verify that full consent has been explained and secured. Four out of six of the in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone as not all research participants had access to sufficient Wi Fi connectivity to use remote means such as WhatsApp video, Facetime, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This further illuminated the silent struggles of millions of home-schooling parents during the pandemic without full access to reliable technological tools.

Informing the interview protocol of this thesis, Pring states:

> "*to understand particular events, one must see things from the point of view of the participants or of the people involved – how they interpret events and thereby constitute those events as events of a certain sort. One might go further and seek to explain why people*

behaved in the way they did by trying to re-enact their life history, of which this particular action is part." (2000: 100)

To seek The Reality of School Place Preference, to capture the data that best informs this thesis' title (The reality of School Place preference – parents views), the topics detailed in the interview protocol (see Appendix Four) have been designed for in-depth semi-structured interviews with parent research participants. To be clear, the examples noted in the appendix were not explicitly articulated during the interview process to prevent the risk of 'leading' the participants. They were merely available as a guide to the direction of interview questions and emergent additional descriptors for the participants if they sought guidance. None did. What was key was to explore parents' own education experience, current circumstances and aspirations for their children to place their admissions decisions and actions in their own contexts.

The work of Williams and Hanke offers an interesting lens through which to consider acquiring parents' views, untainted by the researcher's preconceived world view and interpreted using parents own lived experience, perceptions and vernacular. Whilst their work focussed solely on seeking the views of children on the Autistic Spectrum, some of the methodologies were thought provoking for this research. "*We all behave in a way that makes sense to us across different contexts as a result of our view of the world*." (2007: 52). They went on to offer a challenge to the use of semi-structured interviews which prompted this research protocol to offer open ended opportunities for parents outside the constraints of semi-structured questions, and the opportunity for follow up interviews as required.

"*Here the authors of the tool are usually adults who donate the constructs or elements that are deemed meaningful…"*(*ibid.:* 53).

Williams and Hanke's statement informed the creation of the interview protocol shown in Appendix Four.

Their work offered further thoughts for consideration which have been built into this thesis as part of the methodology. Particularly:

"*since this is a personal view it cannot be wrong and should be respected as such… we develop and build our theories about life*

> *into a system of constructs that encapsulate our experiences. This construct system provides each of us with our own 'guide to life' and we test out the validity of many constructs daily through our behaviour. Such constructs are said to be developed through our recognition of a series of contrasting experiences*". (*ibid*.: 54)

What better way to consider parents' views in the context of their School Admissions experiences? A helpful summary of Williams and Hanke's work informs the approach in this thesis in that:

> "*a stance that accepts the subjective views of the individual as being wholly legitimate…methods were drawn from a more qualitative, constructive perspective that values individual responses. The researchers intended to carry out 'research with people and for people rather than on people*." (*ibid*.: 54)

A non-structured approach would have risked research participants and the researcher potentially losing sight of the basic premise of this thesis. Consequently a semi-structured approach, with open ended questioning and space and time for reflection and non-verbal communication was most appropriate. As advocated for by Yardley in 2003, empathy and transparency are key requirements to this sensitive element of data gathering, allowing for silences and not filling the gaps with researcher interpretations of what may be in the minds of research participants - sensitive due to the very personal nature of the information being sought, and sensitive due to the potential limitations of participants' circumstances when accessing preferred school places. Smith et al. refer to "*successful IPA research combines…empathetic and questioning*" (2009: 36). Empathy was an intention and focus throughout the in-depth semi-structured interview process.

As current parent voice has been limited to date pertaining to the School Admissions process, based on limited findings from the literature reviewed, research instruments needed to be accessible, draw on vernacular language avoiding technical and bureaucratic terms, non-judgemental and empathetic. As Spradley stated, she wanted to:

> "*understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them"* (1979: 34).

Although her research was ethnographic, this helpful advice has been adopted and reflected in this research. Given the high stakes terminology adopted by politicians articulated in sections 1.3 and 2.7, and popular media messages laid out in Appendix Six, the research instruments were designed to actively avoid this and instead to reflect parents' positions accurately and fairly without the influence of politicians' and media messages.

Admissions Managers in-depth semi-structured interviews

Three Local Authority Admissions Managers were interviewed using the same semi-structured technique described above adopted with parent participants.

The intention, in interviewing Admissions Managers, is to contextualise the information gleaned from parents. Admissions Managers, responsible for administering policy on behalf of their Local Authority employers, are well placed to offer a professional view on the reality of parental preference regarding allocation of available school places. Admissions Managers are also well placed to contribute to a more fully informed conclusion to the question posed by this thesis - The Reality of School Place Preference – parental views.

The Admissions Managers identified and approached as potential research participants were all known to me in their professional contexts. They were all aware that I have never held professional responsibility for Admissions Services. They are employed by Local Authorities in the west London area which accords with the geographical location of some parent participants for this thesis. Each Admissions Manager received full explanation of the purpose of the research and how their information would be gathered and analysed. Full consent was acquired, following Brunel University's Research Ethics Committee requirements. The Admissions Managers are senior leaders in their Local Authorities and hold wider professional portfolios encompassing more than Admissions alone. Only one Admissions Manager delayed her consent to seek the approval of her manager before agreeing to participate. Whilst this delayed the interview timetable, the delay was respected. Her

manager's approval was secured on the understanding that the Local Authority was not named. This was not a barrier as all Admissions Managers were assured of full anonymity, and anonymity for their employers.

Flowers et al (2009:71) was drawn upon for interviewing techniques and approaches. This ensured that the same questions were posed to all Admissions Managers to ensure consistency, whilst allowing for each to have their own views explored in greater depth than merely repeating commonalities borne out of this legislation. Findings were analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach described in section 3.4 as most appropriate for this thesis. This was coupled with a word frequency analysis across the three transcribed School Admissions Managers' interviews to identify prevalence and vocabulary commonly adopted.

Access to Admissions Managers did not require engagement with gatekeepers given my professional context. Their time was offered during their working day as their preferred option. Despite the demands of the pandemic which required these professional participants to adapt and expand their workloads at pace (the transfer of Admissions Appeals to remote delivery being one example), they gave of their time generously. Each Admissions Manager asked to receive the final iteration of the thesis, which was willingly agreed to.

3.10 Analytical approach

There is significant debate in the academic world about the most effective means of analysing qualitative research. I considered a variety of means including Discourse Analysis - "*studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context. It aims to understand how language is used in real life situations*" (Luo, 2020: 1). It was determined this approach is not intended to capture real lived experiences and responses as required for this thesis.

Narrative analysis - "*researchers interpret stories that are told within the context of research*" (Allen, 2017: 1). It was determined that more nuanced forms of communication were required for this thesis to capture lived experiences.

The most appropriate form of analysis to best capture parents lived experience of the School Admissions process from in-depth semi-structured interviews is thematic

interpretative phenomenological analysis. As Braun and Clarke have shown, thematic analysis offers "*flexibility*" (2006: 78):

> "*Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants...Therefore, thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'."* (2006:81)

This thesis seeks to unpick, through capturing parent voice, the motivations, expectations and realities of parents of limited economic means when engaging with School Admissions and seeking their school places of preference. It seeks to go beneath the superficial and identify themes from a breadth of parental experiences that may not be explicitly articulated but inform the experiences described. The capture of what is not articulated is key to interpreting parents' experiences. Non-verbal and emotional responses are captured and analysed to inform findings. These take the form of capturing verbal tone, sighs, tears, laughter, silent pauses and pauses required by interview participants to seek their intended meaning through non-familiar use of English vocabulary. It is accepted that some themes may be fuzzy initially, and some parent participants needed to be re-visited to further explore meaning to secure deeper researcher understanding.

Williams and Hanke's approach to data analysis has also been admired and adapted in the context of this thesis. "*A simple coding system was used in order to refine the views provided…into themes and to develop a theory to explain the data"* (2007:55). This approach has been enriched by Braun and Clarke's observation on analysis that:

> "(*it) is not about following procedures 'correctly' (or about 'accurate' and 'reliable' coding, or achieving consensus between coders), but about the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process."* (2019: 594).

The analytical tools adopted for this research are statistical analysis, word frequency analysis, non-verbal cues analysis, participant characteristics analysis, Bourdieu and Haidt human and moral capitals analysis, Likert scaling, average scoring from online

survey responses and in depth-semi-structured interpretative phenomenological thematic analysis. As the overall approach to this thesis is to capture the lived experience of parents of economically limited means engagement with the School Admissions process – and that cohort of parents has proved challenging to access, particularly during the pandemic – a range of approaches has been required to form the richest picture possible. This has required triangulation with Admissions Managers views and national and local positivist data sets to interpretatively analyse the construct of School Admissions from the perspective of economically disadvantaged parents' perspectives. Noble and Heale describe triangulation as:

> "*a method used to increase credibility and validity of research findings…to help explore and explain complex human behaviour using a variety of methods to offer a more balanced explanation to readers".* (2019: 67).

Analysis of what is offered by research participants, what is non-verbal and what is implied by tone, response reaction and timing, add to the richness of the in-depth interview data which informs this thesis. Silences, sighs, tears, laughter and changes in vocal volume and tone were noted alongside spoken words and identified as emotional non-verbal responses – some ironic, some frustrated, some determined and some regretful. As stated by Frechette et. al., the interpretative phenomenological tradition:

> "*aims to bring to the fore taken-for-granted practices by qualitative researchers and make them explicit in light of the interpretative phenomenological philosophical foundations."* (2020:11)

There is a risk that spoken words can be accepted at face value. The analysis of non-spoken communication enriches findings shown in Figure 5.5.

3.11 Thematic analysis

Each in-depth semi-structured interview was transcribed in full. Some commonalities and differences were immediately identifiable. However, on reading and re-reading the transcripts, other patterns emerged. To prevent researcher interpretation holding sway, each transcript was coded, with a colour highlight used against each emergent

theme consistently across all transcripts. These colour coded narratives were then uploaded into a table to examine prevalence. Themes were named based on explicit or implicit meaning (often offered by parent participants and Admissions Managers themselves). Whilst this reflects the basis of Nvivo coding, this software was not utilised as a failsafe approach for accuracy. It was necessary to repeatedly re-visit the transcripts to reflect on patterns and themes identifiable for making meaning of, often with initial reactions not being substantiated by later analysis, whilst new and substantial, sometimes unexpected, alternatives took their place. This reflection, re-visiting and re-thinking was crucial to check against the researcher's professional experience, and consequential conscious and unconscious assumptions, not colouring the participants' narrative with the researcher's own professional experience. Analysis was repeated as a cycle of revisiting and re-reading as described by Frenchette et al. using Gadamer:

> "*from a hermeneutical tradition, the following questions are used to dialogue with the texts (Gadamer, 1981): How is the phenomenon being expressed in this encounter? What is the meaning for the interviewee and the researcher about this element in relation to the studied phenomenon and why? The first constructed narrative synthesis provides a paradigm case from which other narrative syntheses can then be examined."* (Frechette 2020:10)

Smith, Flowers and Larkin describe analysis using an interpretative phenomenological approach as "*an iterative and inductive cycle*" (2009: 79). They describe a staged approach which has been adopted for the data analysis in this thesis as:

- Reading and re-reading
- Initial noting of descriptive comments, linguistic comments, conceptual comments, deconstruction, overview of writing initial notes
- Developing emergent themes
- Searching for connections across emergent themes, abstraction, polarisation, contextualisation, numeration, function
- Moving to the next case
- Looking for patterns across cases
- Taking it deeper: Levels of interpretation

Smith et al. refer to levels of interpretation as moving from descriptive to focussing on particular passages of transcript that resonant and inform the entire narrative. Moving from describing themes, deeper levels of interpretation can take the researcher closer to participants' unstated motivations, interpretations and psychological dispositions. Deeper levels of interpretation thicken research understanding of narrative to inform findings.

3.12 Quality assurance in qualitative research

To ensure that the data is validated to secure authenticity and is convincing, pilot questionnaires were conducted to test the validity of research questions and questions raised from the Literature Review in Chapter Two. Following later in-depth semi structured interviews, informed by the pilot questionnaires, full interview transcripts were offered back to participants for them to check for meaning and accuracy. This reflects the work of Guba and Lincoln (1985) which considers the trustworthiness of the human instrument. Krefting urges for "*qualitative designs that ensure rigour without sacrificing the relevance of the qualitative research"* (1991: 215)

Sequential research design is an attractive framework for this thesis as participants offered a lot of information in a short space of time, but also has the benefit of longitudinal consideration if parents have previous experience of the School Admissions system through an older sibling or can refer later to their admissions allocation experience. Longitudinal opportunities present within this thesis due to the timings of the School Admissions process in England. The process requires parents to apply for primary school places between the beginning of September and the middle of January of the year that the child is due to start the following academic year (i.e. 1st September 2020-15th January 2021 application window for start date September 2021). Primary offer date is mid-April, required acceptance date is the end of April and appeals are heard during June and July. For secondary places, applications must be made between 1st September and 31st October of the year prior to admission in the following September. Offers are received on 1st March with acceptance required by 15th March, appeals submitted by mid-May and appeals hearings completed by end July. Each Local Authority must publish and publicise their local timeline for the admissions process. The timeline offers longitudinal data capture opportunities

(across the limited period of eleven months) from parent participants at their respective stages in the process.

Cross sectional opportunities arise as data analysis is available through identifying themes from the in-depth interviews. These are considered alongside autobiographical accounts of individual experiences of the School Admissions process.

Following Guba and Lincoln (1985), applicability has been considered by transparency of questions and sub-questions posed. This could be adopted by future researchers seeking to further explore the lived experience of parents of limited economic means in future studies – to uphold or refute the findings laid out in Chapters Five and Six. Numerical data drawn upon is from public bodies, therefore publicly available, and will be updated by those public bodies over time. This is therefore available for future adoption by researchers seeking to test and build on. What has not been available in this thesis is a wider group of research participants due to School Leaders, as gatekeepers of access to a wider parent cohort, having been understandably distracted and unavailable for this research during the pandemic of 2020-21. Hopefully future researchers will be able to capitalise on greater opportunity for wider collaboration with School Leaders, and therefore parents, once the pressing demands of continuing to keep schools operational during the pandemic has passed.

Keeping with Guba and Lincoln (1985) regarding transferability, the methodology and methods described for this thesis can be adopted and adapted by researchers for different cohorts of parents, perhaps based on race and ethnicity, as a narrow geographical or school type case study or faith group.

Neutrality, as described by Guba and Lincoln (1985), is demonstrated through the methods by which parent participants' were identified. The findings from parents and Admissions Managers should withstand challenge based on participants' views being presented as their own which are as free as consciously possible from researcher bias and influence. Parent participants were not personally known to the researcher and were secured by opportunity, with two participants being introduced through existing participants as encouraged and invited by the researcher to broaden the participant

field, using a snowballing technique. Snowballing is a non-purposeful sampling technique to secure primary sources of original data when they are hard to access. Parker, Scott and Geddes describe snowballing as:

> "*The researchers usually start with a small number of initial contacts (seeds) who fit the research criteria and are invited to become participants within the research. The agreeable participants are then asked to recommend other contacts who fit the research criteria and who potentially might also be willing participants, who then in turn recommend other potential participants, and so on. Researchers, therefore, use their social networks to establish initial links, with sampling momentum developing from these, capturing an increasing chain of participants".* (2019:1)

Originally recruited parent participants nominated further parent participants from their own networks who met the criteria for this thesis, in this case, parents of economically limited means engaging with the School Admissions process.
To demonstrate neutrality further, characteristics of parent participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews is demonstrated in Figure 3.2.

Neutrality is offered for scrutiny in the presentation of the findings in Chapters Four and Five. Lincoln and Guba (1985) in Krefting advocate this approach when they state, "*rather than looking at the neutrality of the investigator, the neutrality of the data was considered"* (1991: 217) when seeking to establish truth value and trustworthiness. Whilst longitudinal ethnography has not been adopted as a method for this research, approximately nine hours of interviews have been analysed (excluding preamble, ethics and consent explanation and securing then closing). Permission to return to the participants was secured once they learned of their allocated school place, or allocations performance as Admissions Managers. This represents a further approximate four and a half hours – totalling nineteen and a half hours of interviews. Neutral open questions were adopted to prevent giving the impression to participants of an agenda, of 'right' and 'wrong' answers being sought, and to allow participants to expand on areas of particular importance to them. A further four and a half hours interviewing Admissions Managers further demonstrates neutrality.

A field journal was adopted during this thesis as a tool for reflexivity and to check any potential emergent bias and assumption. It has been invaluable in terms of needing to adapt at pace in light of the constraints of the pandemic, particularly impacting on research participants and changes in parent participants' economic circumstances. As described by Krefting:

> *'One of the ways that researchers can describe and interpret their own behaviour and experiences within the research context is to make use of a field journal. This journal is kept throughout the research process and includes three types of information"* (1991: 218)

My field journal has been used as a tool for recording reflexive and reflective insights particularly following individual in-depth interviews, reminders to check bias against positionality, and ideas for further research development. It was also a jotter for the planned timetable to keep the research current and on track.

Peer researchers and academic supervisors have had the opportunity to consider and critique the methodology, methods and progress of this thesis regularly through group sessions, monthly tutorials, annual progression panels and annual conferences. This has been helpful in sharpening my thinking and approach to what has become this thesis. Prior to gathering data for this thesis, interview skills were practiced via trial interviews with peer researchers and colleagues. These actions and opportunities demonstrate strategies to ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the human instrument.

Considering quality assurance, whilst the corpus of data available for consideration includes an online survey, questionnaire and quantitative numerical data, it was using interpretative phenomenological thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews (of parents and Admissions Managers) that really offered illuminating experiences to inform the findings of this thesis. Helpful numerical information was gleaned from a Freedom of Information Request (sent to all Local Authorities in England) but offered no opportunity for further detailed scrutiny as necessary within this qualitative and quantitative mixed methods approach. Some insight was also gleaned from the online parental survey, details of both are shown in Chapter Four.

However, the validity and reliability of the online survey findings cannot be secured. Therefore, those findings do not inform secure conclusions offered in Chapter Six but could afford some plausible explanations.

Hermeneutically, Heidegger (1962) suggests that researchers can bring their own preconception to their analysis. This is a key facet of IPA adopted for this research. Methods and processes in interpreting the data must be free of preconception. Thematic analysis and repeated re-analysis of the data offsets this risk of pre-determined outcomes. Methods and processes in interpreting the data must be free of preconception, unless explicitly stated – and then that must be weighed against challenge to validity and credibility.

The challenge in establishing the "*trustworthiness of the human instrument*" (Guba 1981), described by Krefting (1991) is important based on the uniqueness of individuals' lived experience as the primary data source in this qualitative and quantitative mixed methods approach. Significant reflection has been required in considering myself as the researcher, or 'human instrument'. As such, assurance of quality and integrity is laid out through the lens of truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. Whilst the human instrument may offer "*subjective meanings and perceptions*" (Krefting 1991: 214), with sufficient attention evidenced to "*truth value…applicability…consistency…and neutrality"* (*ibid*.:215), validity can be secured as credible.

A key facet of trustworthiness is consistency. This can be demonstrated through the repeatable nature of the approach adopted. Krefting states:

> "*the key to qualitative work is to learn from the informants rather than control for them…. qualitative research emphasises the uniqueness of the human situation, so that variation in experience rather than identical repetition is sought."* (1991: 216).

It is important to ensure trustworthiness as secure, rigorous and persuasive within this chapter as qualitative data must be accountable. This section describes how all facets of Guba and Lincoln's work are met in this thesis to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Or as Nowell, Norris, White and Moules state:

> "*To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible*." (2017: 1)

Truth value has been protected in this thesis through the use of semi-structured interviews which offer a consistent framework to all parent participants and School Admissions Managers for their own sharing of their experience of the School Admissions process. Adopting interpretative phenomenological thematic analysis of these interviews as most appropriate and illuminating, Krefting states from Lincoln and Guba:

> "*that internal validity is based on the assumption that there is a single tangible reality to be measured. If this assumption is replaced by the idea of multiple realities, the researcher's job becomes one of representing those multiple realities revealed by informants as adequately as possible."* (1991: 215)

Credibility is assured in this thesis through in-depth interviewing of convenience based identified participants, explicit and implicit thematic analysis by emerging and repeated themes, by participant characteristics and forms of human capital, as described in section 3.10 above. Evidence of a further claim to credibility is the use of participants' verbatim excerpts to exemplify themes so allowing readers to better understand where interpretations stem from. An example of an anonymised and colour coded interview transcript is shared as Appendix 8.

3.13 Ethical considerations

As shown in Appendix Seven, consent of the Brunel Research Ethics Committee to pursue this research project was secured, to offer a new perspective on School Admissions and access to preferred school places. This is based on a taxonomy of reasoning from parents – I classify parental views from practical and emotional

perspectives. The emphasis is very much on the lived experience. In creating a research participant consent document I sought to articulate:

> "*why their participation is necessary, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used and how and to whom it will be reported."* (BERA 2018: 9).

Ethics were considered for this thesis based on The British Educational Research Associations (BERA) latest guidelines (2018). As I am a declared current member, this is expected, alongside the complimentary requirements of the Brunel Research Ethics Committee. Seeking participant consent required "*Kant's deontological perspective of individuals as rational, autonomous agents as well as not using individuals simply as a means to some end…"* (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2020: 9). The purpose of the research is not to identify whether "oppressed" (BERA 2018) parents, by dint of their economic circumstances, were, are, or can be "emancipated" (*ibid.*) by optimising their children's educational opportunities through the School Admissions process through the lens of Freire. However, Chapter Six offers discussion on whether "*washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral'* (1997: 122). Policy makers and policy enactors hold the power regarding the system and allocation of school places. Captured parental voice shows the extent to which they felt empowered by their right to express a preference as a realistic expectation and outcomes following their school place applications.

Considering the five ethical principles for Social Science research (AcSS, 2015:1) cited in Zwozdiak-Myers (2020: 11), I have included participants from a range of ethnic backgrounds, educational attainment levels, faiths and genders – all of whom shared the under-represented focus cohort of financial disadvantage. This intersectionality best represents the complex characteristic makeup of parents in England, in their rich diversity.

No researcher value ladened questions or comments were consciously incorporated in the interview process, and this was checked in the reading and re-reading required by the interpretative phenomenological data analysis process. The fundamental

purpose of this research hinges on establishing the integrity of justice and equality for all parents (regardless of economic circumstances) in a democratic public process, that of School Admissions. I accept my responsibility to the research participants fully and seriously, respecting their rights, not raising any expectation that I can influence the outcome of their school applications, being transparent that their words may be published and widely shared without them being identifiable. Pseudonyms have been adopted. Professionally, I hold no responsibility for School Admissions, and explained this fully to all parent participants. I also explicitly articulated this to School Admissions Managers from the out-set, as part of the explanation and consent acquiring process. Further regarding positionality, it is transparent to re-state that after over twenty years' service as a Local Authority Education Officer (in various capacities and Local Authorities), I am aware of the consequences for children in terms of attendance, exclusions and attainment, when parental confidence in their allocated school is insecure or diminished.

Two participants explicitly thanked me for the opportunity to share their experience "*thank you for asking. No one ever has*" (Magda). "*It was a terrible time, it's good to talk about it"* (Nina). As required in BERA's ethical guidelines, participants were put "*at ease*" (2018: 19) to facilitate the data that was "*harvested*" (2018: 18). It is suggested that the parent participant feedback cited here is indicative that they felt sufficiently at ease to reflect on the experience positively.

Each participant (parents and Admissions Managers) was invited to sign the consent form for this research after a thorough explanation of its purpose, the extent of the commitment, assured confidentiality and no consequential risk to their employment, their school place application, themselves or their children either personally, professionally or educationally. The ability to withdraw at any point was explained, an invitation to re-visit for sense and accuracy checking post initial interview secured and further potential necessary follow up interviews discussed and negotiated. The reason that participants were invited to take part in the research was explained, the ethical approval process was articulated and all consequential protections that this affords were explained. In the event that participants had any concerns, the contact details of the ethical overseer from Brunel University were shared. Significant time was afforded at the beginning of each interview to check full understanding of consent and

to explore and address any concerns raised. It is important to note that the professional position of the researcher was not explicitly known to the participants to avoid any risk of expectations of influence in the school place allocations process – the role of academic researcher was, however, fully explained.

It is asserted that the actions and conduct above ensure that the five ethical principles for social science research have been adhered to:

1. *"Social science is fundamental to a democratic society and should be inclusive of different interest, values, funders, methods and perspectives.*
2. *All social science should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values, and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.*
3. *All social science should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.*
4. *All social scientists should act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research.*
5. *All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm.*" (AcSS, 2015:4)

As referenced earlier, in the 1980s Guba and Lincoln introduced the terms reliability and trustworthiness of the human instrument apropos confidence and validity particularly in relation to qualitative research. For building on this research, these terms are considered above in section 3.12. They are considered again here with specific reference to ethical considerations. These are concepts that are key to the credibility of this thesis, and me as a researcher, in terms of capturing parents' views about access to preference in the School Admissions process. It is a great responsibility to do this properly, with "*quality*" and "*democracy*" at the heart of this work (Kushner 2017:7) with care in merging the findings from qualitative and quantitative data "*standards and criteria. Evaluator responsiveness & interpretation*" (Stake 2004: xi).

I have the utmost appreciation and respect for those parents who engaged with the in-depth semi-structured interviews for their openness in sharing such personal information on a subject so close to their private family experiences. This thesis aims to consider the *"power base*" (Kushner 2017:263) within the School Admissions

process in England, the "*donors*" (*ibid.*:261) and their motivations. I am also most grateful to the School Admissions Managers who took the time from their busy work commitments to share their professional experiences and views with thought and candor.

3.14 Limitations to research

Acknowledging the limitations of the research methods adopted in this thesis will go some way to support future researchers with an interest in expanding on the new learning from parents pertaining to the reality of their School Admissions experience. School Leaders were reluctant to identify parents of limited economic means to be identified as research participants and candidates for in-depth semi-structured interviews. They did not want to be seen to add to any perception of stigma that these families may already have experienced or continue to experience. School Leaders then became entirely consumed by the demands of the international pandemic, so those discussions were ceased. This reluctance on the part of School Leaders approached to identify economically disadvantaged families to capture their detailed School Admissions experience suggests that a quiet and little sought voice (based on findings from the Literature Review in Chapter Two) may be even further from being heard than the general parent population. As it transpired, three of the six explicitly stated that they had welcomed the interview as an opportunity to share what had been a testing experience for them.

Five datasets have been considered necessary to offer the broadest range of insight available as one data source would have been too narrow and limiting to evidence secure findings. The national data from the Department for Education does not identify the pertinent cohort for this research – those children from economically disadvantaged families. The local data from Local Authorities is limited for the same reason, coupled with inconsistency of offers – some Local Authorities offer three school preference options during the application process and some as many as six. The findings from the online parent survey were limited by poor uptake and the inability to exclude responses from parents of secure financial means. It also assumed that the desired parental cohort was reachable through Facebook and Mumsnet, not considering digital poverty when seeking to access the economically disadvantaged

cohort. Nor did the online survey consider access to fathers, potentially somewhat deterred from accessing the webpages of Mumsnet due to its exclusively gendered name. The most limiting aspect of the parent questionnaire and online survey was the inability to probe individual stories, acknowledging the inherent risk that researcher influence on the fixed questions posed may have influenced results from parent responders. To have relied on survey responses in isolation would have rendered any findings superficial at best, outside of the remit of the theoretical framework of this research, and unable to withstand scrutiny.

Reliance on School Admissions Managers' interviews alone would have missed the intention of this research, to capture and learn from the lived experience of parents of economically limited means engagement with the School Admissions experience.

It has been challenging to define economical limitation pertaining to parents. The measure of entitlement to FSMs (and therefore required to be in receipt of State Benefits) is used in the English education system. I am of the view that this is a blunt measure that does not capture families living month to month or week to week, reliant on insecure and low paid work, without additional financial means at their disposal to seek to capitalize on the concept of preference regarding school place allocation. Additional advantages may take the form of funds available for long journeys to school, for tutoring to achieve a place at a selective school, to move home address nearer a preferred school, contribute to school budgets through voluntary donations or provide extensive and expensive school uniforms for their children. Only through in-depth semi-structured interviewing, has knowledge about economic circumstances been acquired. This is shown in Chapter Five. Most parents recruited for this research as pilot questionnaire participants could not be drawn upon more fully for in-depth semi-structured interviewing as their economic means precluded most of them, with the exception of one. Visible and more definable intersectionality of parent characteristics, such as by residence locality or ethnicity, may have been more transparent and easier to access as a participant cohort. However, as the purpose of this thesis is to learn from the experiences of economically disadvantaged parents specifically, the presenting challenges and setbacks had to be faced and embraced to meet the stated ambition of the original theoretical framework. Given the challenges acknowledged, it is understandable then that previous researchers, to my knowledge, have not focused

widely on economic disadvantage specifically as a parental characteristic regarding School Admissions research. This is what makes this research new and can be used as a building block for future academic attention, legislative and process review.

An additional reflection on limitations to this research that future researchers may wish to build upon is that parent voice has been sought and captured. Child and young person voice has not. Had time permitted, the opportunity to seek the views of the children who had not attended their parents' preferred schools may have offered insight into their longitudinal experience, the family connection and effective partnership with the allocated school and any impact that may have had on those children's schooling experience and consequential life opportunities.

Due to various logistical constraints borne out of the pandemic, some of the sample sizes on which this research is based are limited. For this reason, it is recommended that the findings be viewed as relating to the research participant cohort only, indicative rather than conclusive of all parents in similar circumstances. Nevertheless, these findings shine a clear light on the experiences and perceptions of the participant parents of economically limited means regarding their School Admissions experience. This thesis therefore represents a new body of evidence to help inform future strategic and operational decision making.

Should future researchers seek to replicate or expand on this research, it is anticipated that they would learn that online surveys offer limited responses and opportunities for in-depth and conclusive research, and therefore exercise caution when interpreting and reporting findings. Future researchers may also have improved access to parents as social distancing becomes a memory, and distracted gatekeeper Head Teachers have greater capacity to support research when not managing safe educational provision in the face of Covid 19.

3.15 Conclusion

To conclude Chapter Three, having started this research with the intention of exploring The Reality of School Place Preference in the context of economic disadvantage, mindful of politicians' neo-liberal education marketplace creation and 'responsible'

parenting stances – the need for further issues to be addressed have emerged. These are as follows

- What does the School Admissions landscape look like for economically disadvantaged parents? (Chapter Four)
- What are parents' views of that landscape as they see it? (Chapter 5)

This is in addition to the issues in section 2.14 that emerged from the Literature Review.

- What are the educational and occupational aspirations of parents of limited social and economic capital for their children?
- What are the barriers to admission to preferred schools for children and parents of limited social and economic capital?
- Are there recommendations to be drawn from the findings to inform policy and practice?

Chapter Four Analysis of the contemporary School Admissions landscape in England

4.1.Introduction

In this chapter I explore the School Admissions landscape in England through an analysis of quantitative national statistics and Local Authority statistics. In addition, to provide further context, I draw on qualitative findings from School Admissions Managers' semi-structured interviews. This is intended to offer an insight into the School Admissions landscape that parents enter and manoeuvre in. Those parents may be unaware of School Admissions Managers' views and unaware of the quantitative data analysed below. This demonstrates whether there are a significant number of parents unsuccessful in securing their preferred school place from which to drive their aspirations for their children, on a national scale. Further insight from in-depth semi-structured parental interviews, parental online survey and parental questionnaire findings are presented in Chapter Five.

4.2. National School Admissions preference allocations position

In June 2020, the Department for Education released School Admissions applications data pertaining to School Admission in September 2020. 1,212,498 applications were received for a Primary or Secondary school place in England. 3.3 percent of those 1,212,498 children did not receive the offer of a place at any of their first, second or third preferred schools – 40,012 children in total. More than 40,012 appeals were launched by families dissatisfied with their allocated school. 48,113 families appealed their allocated school place suggesting that second and third preference allocations are clearly not satisfactory to all. Looking at first preference offers for September 2020, 167,325 (in excess of thirteen percent) did not get offered their first-place preference. Even assuming that only non-first preference applicants appealed their allocation, that still only represents 28.75 percent of the total number of families entitled to appeal. Figure 4.1 below presents summary findings of the Department for Education published statistics.

	Proportion of preference offers made against total applications received	Improvement or reduction on previous proportion of preference offers made	Total number of applications received
Secondary First Preference Offers made	82.2%	Up from 80.9% in 2019	2020 total national applicants 600,352, 0.7% fewer than 2019
Secondary Any Preference Offers made	95.6%	Up from 94.8% in 2019	2020 total national applicants 600,352
Primary First Preference Offers made	90.2%	Down from 90.6% in 2019	2020 total national applicants 612,146, 0.5% more than 2019
Primary Any Preference Offers made	97.8%	Down from 98% in 2019	2020 total national applicants 612,146

Figure 4.1 Department for Education 2020 Admissions published data

Information on parent or child personal characteristics is not available from the Department for Education national data so there is no way to know more about the families unsuccessful in securing their first or any preference and what proportion are from, for example, economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The one hundred individual Local Authorities which returned their own data via the Freedom of Information route described in section 3.8 (data presented in 4.4 below) all stated that this parent and child characteristic data is not gathered. On enquiring, this has been explained by the obligation in the current School Admissions legislation to gather only very limited information, not including financial circumstances. It could be argued that

this is a statutory requirement to offer a failsafe mechanism to counter real or perceived conscious or unconscious bias when admitting children with certain characteristics. A link could be made back to the first legislation which made Primary education compulsory for all children up to the age of 10 (Elementary Education Act 1880) and made grammar education post 14 free to all (Education Act 1944) which ensured that state funded education was for and remains available to all children regardless of economic means. This is shown in Figure 2.1.

4.3. National Admissions Appeals

The Department for Education issued annually available data on Admissions Appeals on 20th August 2020. What is evident from the granular data available from the 2020 iteration (and previous iterations) is that parent and pupil personal characteristics of appellants is not shared, which raises the question as to why such information is not gathered, and whether this could be a missed opportunity to address inequalities and disproportionality. To date, the Department for Education has offered no explanation as to why this data is not gathered. One explanation could be that the School Admissions Code does not permit economic status of families being sought as part of the application process. The School Admissions Code states it is not permissible to:

> "*give priority to children on the basis of any practical or financial support parents may give to the school or any associated organisation, including any religious authority…give priority to children according to the occupational, marital, financial, or educational status of parents applying*". (2021: 11)

The opportunity to scrutinise the characteristics of appellant parents is therefore not available which may mask disproportionate disadvantage in terms of Appeals success. There may be an alternative argument that to gather such information may invite non-inclusive and potentially illegal practices such as declining admission to children considered to be not in keeping with a school's desired cohort. 'Cream skimming' is discussed in Section 2.10 above as identified by Allen (2013), Goldring and Phillips (2007) and others. For as long as this financial status data is unavailable, the risk of potential inequality and disproportionality pertaining to successful appeals

for families that are economically disadvantaged cannot be assessed. For the same reasons as pertain to admission applicants, there is no way of knowing whether socio-economically disadvantaged families are more or less likely to appeal their allocated school place. Burgess, Greaves and Vignoles (2019) offer views pertaining to quantitative analysis of School Admissions preference successes compared to family characteristics drawing on national data sets. They draw on entitlement to FSMs as an indicator of economic disadvantage. What this does not show however, is the success in securing first preference for families who are economically disadvantaged or economically insecure and not entitled to or claim FSMs. They show that:

> "*Comparing offers and attendance, for FSM pupils 81 percent attend their first-choice school, compared to 84 percent who received an offer, whereas this is reversed for non-FSM pupils – more attend their first choice than receive an initial offer, perhaps due to successful appeals*". (2019: 702)

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What is evident is that 48,113 appeals were lodged, of which 20.35 percent were successful. Even if successful, an immediate place at the preferred school may not be available and the parents are rendered obliged to accept a place elsewhere pending a vacant preferred place becoming available in due course. What cannot be ascertained is the numbers of parents dissatisfied with their allocated school place who do not appeal. Those parents may go on to accept their allocated place and then either make the best of it or accept the position without confidence that their child will thrive in that setting. Section 1.8 refers to Burgess, Greaves et al. (2011) findings on parents being "*resigned*" to their allocated school. Goldring and Phillips (2008) have shown that "*resigned*" parents are less likely to be satisfied with their allocated school, with consequential negative impact on home-school relationships.

Lack of access to preferred school places may also be reflected in the significant increase of families electing to home educate in England. It was found in the Association of Directors of Children's Services annual Elective Home Education survey that "*did not get school preference*" (2021: 2.3) was the sixth highest reason out of thirteen that parents cited for electing to home educate. A 20 percent year-on-year increase in elective home education numbers for the five years to 2018 was reported by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (2018 ADCS Elective

Home Education Survey). During the pandemic, elective home education rates are thought to have increased by a further thirty four percent on pre-pandemic levels (awaiting confirmation from Department for Education). This has been shown by the Association of Directors of Children's Services annual survey:

> "*During the 2020/21 academic year, we estimate that the total cumulative number of children and young people being home educated was 115,542. This represents a 34% increase since the 2019/20 academic year*" (2021: 1)

In 2019-20, Primary admissions appeals fell from 1.7 percent to 1.5 percent of places allocated, representing 12,465 appeals heard. Of these, 18.5 percent were successful in challenging their allocated place, down from 19.7 percent from the previous year. During the same period, Secondary admissions appeals rose to 4.9 percent from 4.6 percent in 2018-2019, representing 35,648 appeals heard. Of these, 22.2 percent were successful in challenging the allocated place, down from 23.3 percent from the previous year. (Department for Education 2020). This shows that parental dissatisfaction with their allocated Secondary school place is increasing and more parents are prepared to act through the Appeals process. It also shows that likelihood of success at Appeal is diminishing, all enhancing parental disappointment with their admissions outcome.

Parents are entitled to appeal a school place allocation if they are dissatisfied with it. This requires meeting and presenting their case to a trained and chaired Panel in a quasi-legal formal setting. There is a branch of the legal profession that specialises in Admissions and Exclusions matters. However, professional legal advice is not accessible to all families entitled to access the Appeals process at no cost. This is due to education related legal advice not being available under the Legal Aid system which supports people of very limited economic means with serious criminal matters that may lead to a custodial sentence only. While charitable organisations have been established to support parents at Exclusions appeals hearings, this does not stretch to Admissions appeals. The Department for Education (2020) states that the best measure for reporting Admissions Appeals outcomes is to focus on those Appeals Hearings that go ahead and are heard and concluded, disregarding Appeals that are lodged then abandoned:

> "*Applicants can lodge appeals for any school they have not been awarded a place in, but not all lodged appeals are heard at an appeal panel. A number are withdrawn before that point, for example because the child has been offered a place at the school via the waiting list.*
>
> *Therefore, the best measure is the number of appeals which actually reach the stage of being heard by the appropriate authority, and this release focuses on these figures.*
>
> *Lodged figures are, however, provided if required. In 2019/20, 19,032 primary appeals were lodged, but only 12,465 reached the stage of being heard by an appeals panel. At secondary level, 43,299 appeals were lodged and 35,648 heard.*" (DfE 2020, Admissions Appeals in England)

This Appeals data shows that thirty five percent of Primary allocated places appealed were withdrawn or abandoned before conclusion. Eighteen percent of Secondary allocated places appealed were withdrawn or abandoned before conclusion. The Department for Education suggests that this may be due to parents being offered an alternative school place that is deemed satisfactory by parents *"…because the child has been offered a place at the school via the waiting list."* (2020: 3). However, no further insight is offered. It cannot be known why the not inconsequential number of 14,218 parents who withdrew from the Appeals process in 2019-20 prematurely did so. However, it may be suggested that the formal process presented as overwhelming, adopting opaque quasi-legal language and process for some parents with limited confidence and/or insecure English language skills. It is questionable that there were 14,218 unallocated places at alternative popular schools available, or that many places were made available from waiting lists.

4.4 Local Authority School Admissions data (preference rates for Reception and Year 7) over a three-year period

The following data demonstrates the national position pertaining to parental success at securing first preference school places. A breakdown based on entitlement to FSMs (as a measure of economic status) is not captured on national datasets or permitted to be gathered by Local Authorities (under the terms of the School Admissions Code 2014) and therefore not available. Entitlement to FSMs provides only a partial picture of economic disadvantage but is the only one currently available in national education datasets (excluding Admissions and Admissions Appeals datasets). This offers some insight when considering other datasets such as Attendance, Exclusions and Attainment, but masks the experiences of economically disadvantaged children from families operating in low paid and insecure jobs pertaining to Admissions and Appeals.

The Freedom of Information data from returning Local Authorities was mixed, with some of it corrupted as numerical data did not stand up to scrutiny when checking totals. Additionally, some Local Authorities declined the request, responded too late (outside of the required time period for this research timetable) or failed to respond. On that basis, the data presented below is from a total of one hundred English Local Authorities (68 percent of the total English Local Authorities with School Admissions duties). Having sought to analyse findings by Primary (admission to Reception) and Secondary (admission to Year 7) school place applications against first or any preferences offered, further analysis was undertaken to seek any potential geographical differentiation of parental likelihood to secure a first or any preference offer. Based on the geographical location of the one hundred Local Authority data sets that were useable when received, the data has been analysed from a national whole dataset from England and sub-divided as a North/South division of England (48 Local Authorities in the North, 52 Local Authorities in the South), with Birmingham being the dividing point for geographical and relatively equal division of Local Authorities. This was undertaken as a potential vehicle for seeking further understanding of more local admissions phenomena – perhaps due to an urban/rural school accessibility consideration, or a demographic shift across England in the post Brexit, pre-pandemic era. Following analysis, it is not suggested that a nuanced rural/urban analysis (as rural/urban areas are features across both Northern and

Southern Local Authority areas) can be shown from this iteration of data but may be something that future researchers can pursue.

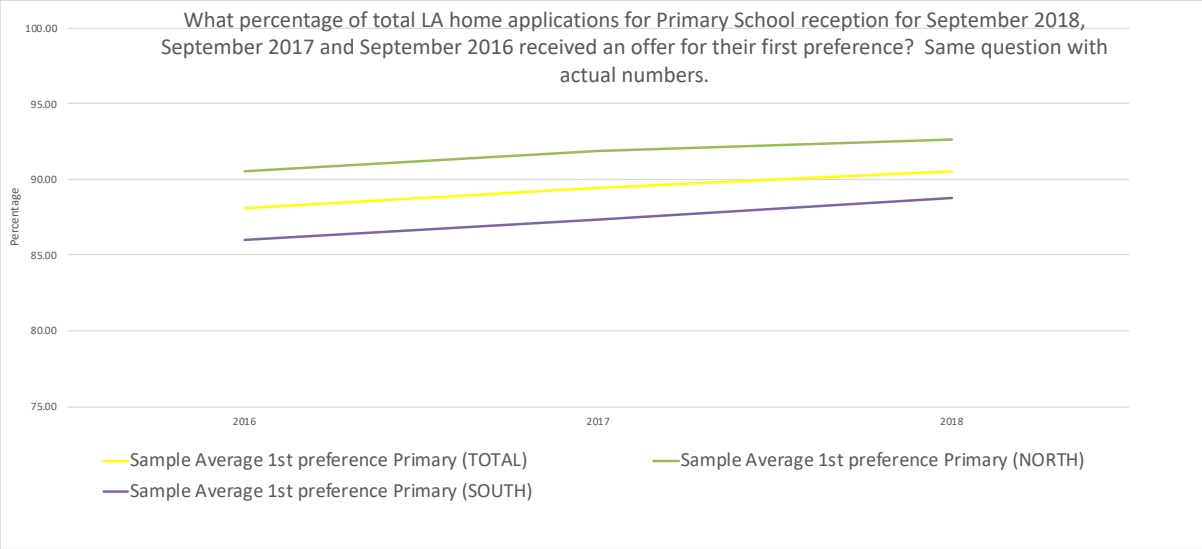

Figure 4.2 Primary first preference offers made 2016-18 from FOI returns

By 2020, two years after the period of the data captured in figure 4.2, the first preference Primary offer rate had decreased to 90.2 percent nationally (Department for Education, 2020), indicating that the upward trend nationally between 2016-18 was not sustained.

To further analyse the data available on first preference Primary offers, the question must be posed as to how the North achieved approximately ten percent better outcomes for parents and children than the South. It is also noteworthy that parents' access to preferred schools offer of places has improved steadily and consistently over time. This raises a question about the correlation of demographic change in size, national population mobility and an increase in numbers of Primary Schools and existing Primary Schools' capacity. The impact of the cost of living in the South compared to the North may be considered as a factor for young families when deciding where to settle for their children's education. The Office for National Statistics data on population mobility cited in Chapter One (ONS, 2016) shows that demographic shift from London in the South is the greatest negative movement during this period with greatest migration from London 9.1 per 1000 and the greatest migration to the South West 5.5 per 1000. (ONS 2016/1).

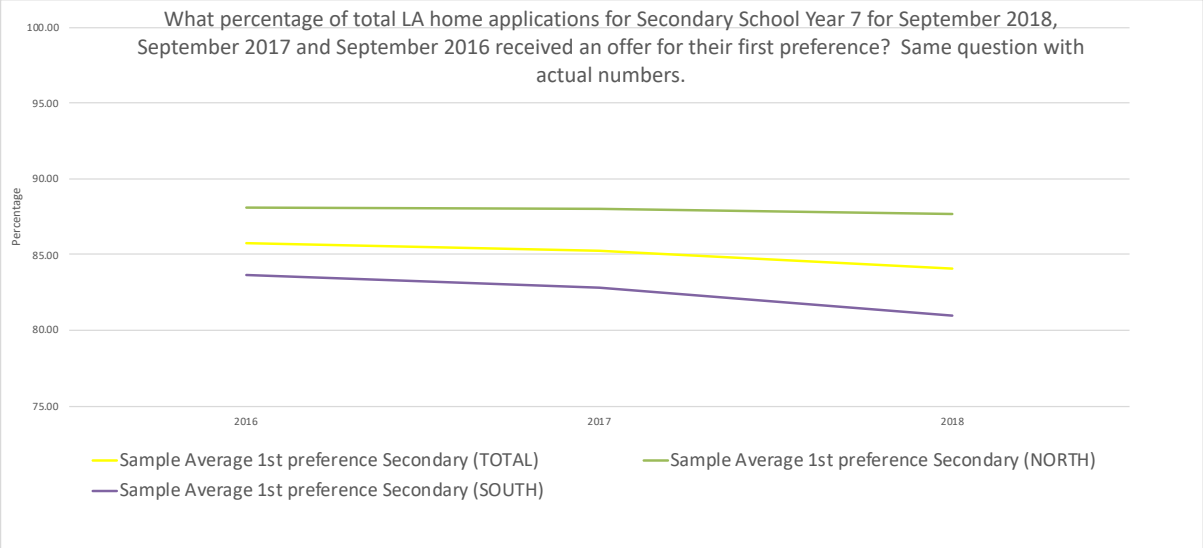

Figure 4.3 Secondary first preference offers made 2016-18 from FOI returns

Figure 4.3 shows that during 2016-18 a reduction in success for parents in achieving their first preference of Secondary school, particularly in the South occurred. The North remained relatively consistent. By 2020, the first preference Secondary offer rate had decreased to 82.2 percent nationally (although an improvement on 2019), indicating that the downward trend nationally between 2016-18 was sustained.

It may be argued that this could be influenced by the cost of family housing as a determinant of where families are able to reside, with more families favouring the better value housing in the North and delay in expansion of Secondary School provision by the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme in 2010. Building Schools for the Future, announced in 2003 by the Labour Government of the day, was an ambitious programme to invest in rebuilding or upgrading school buildings across England. It was cancelled without consultation in 2010 by the newly elected Coalition Government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat).

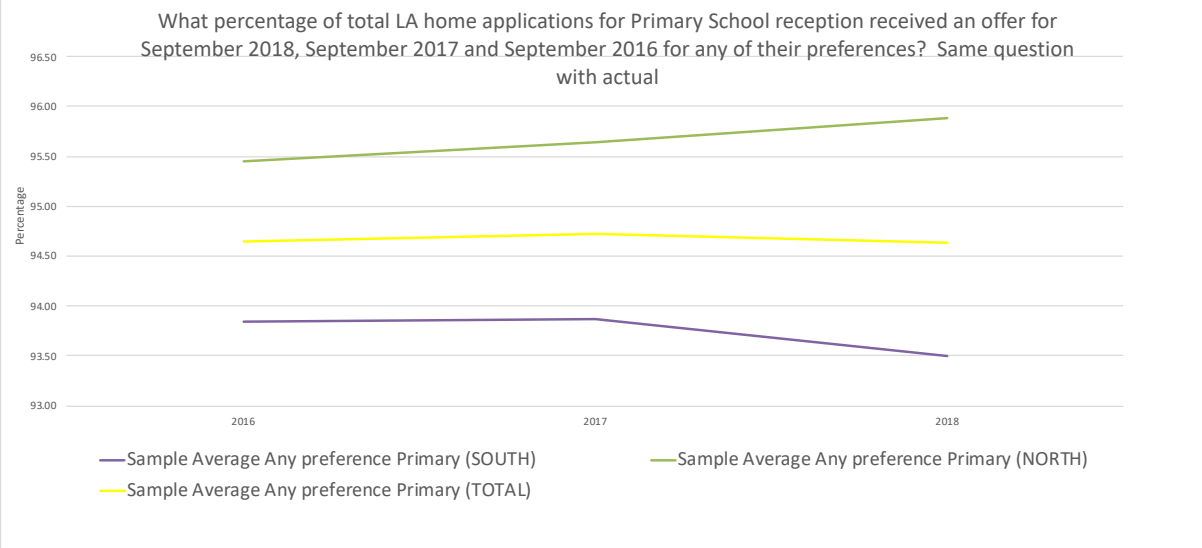

Figure 4.4 Any preference Primary offers 2016-18 from FOI returns

Figure 4.4 demonstrates that, when considering the success of parents receiving an offer for any of their preferences (sometimes as many as six), the North and the South show increasingly divergent positions. Between 2016-18 the North shows an improvement whilst the South shows a reduction in any preference offered. Consequently overall, there is a slight reduction nationally. This raises a question of regional inequity for parents and children. It also raises a question of parental satisfaction. If a sixth preference is offered, the Local Authority can report a preferred allocation positively. In reality, a sixth preference offer may well be a disappointment and significant compromise for parents and children. Consequently, publicity on 'any' preference offered reads more favourably. Whilst regional disparity information pertaining to School Admission preference successes is not widely available for the English Primary and Secondary education system, Burgess, Greaves et al. have shown that:

> "*For families living in small towns and villages, around half of the schools within the 3km radius are genuinely accessible to the child on the basis of de facto catchment areas. Thus the distance measure of choice actually works better for rural families*". (2011: 540).

Burgess, Greaves et al. show this as a comparison of 32 percent of economically deprived children against 40 percent of wealthier children having access to preferred schools within 3km of their home address in

urban areas where more schools are available from which to determine a preference.

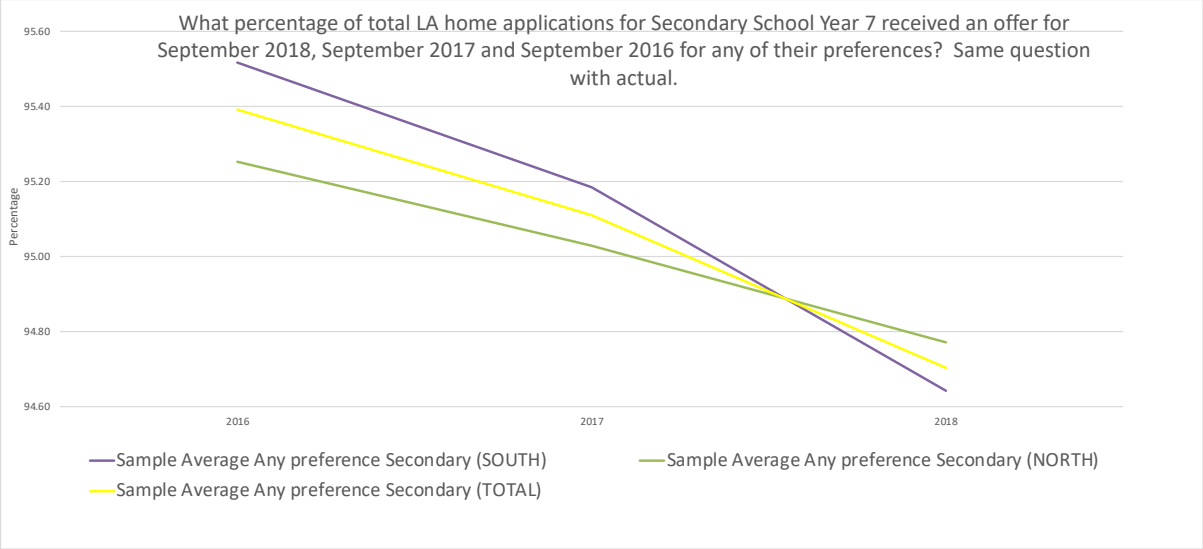

Figure 4.5 Any preference Secondary offers 2016-18 from FOI returns

Figure 4.5 shows that parents of Secondary pupils receiving any stated preference admissions offer is considerably less positive over time. Both the North and the South show the same downward trend, more acutely downward in the South. Consideration must be given again to the number of options available to parents. There is on average one secondary school to five primary schools in each Local Authority area, considerably reducing the number of preference options available to parents within reasonable travelling distance. When discounting unavailable selective, gender or faith-based schools, parental preference options are narrowed further.

Burgess et al. suggest:

> "*Almost twice as many choices are made in LAs where more choices are allowed…this is partly related to population density, as urban areas are more likely to allow more than three choices…households in LAs where only three choices are allowed are also more likely to receive their first choice. This may be because these LAs are typically more rural or that households are more cautious when choices are limited…pupils have a lower chance of getting an offer from their first-choice school if they live in dense urban areas*". (2019: 697, 702)

This accords with findings cited in Sections 2.7 and 2.8 pertaining to the influence of distance from home and access to affordable transport to access schools outside children's immediate domestic locality.

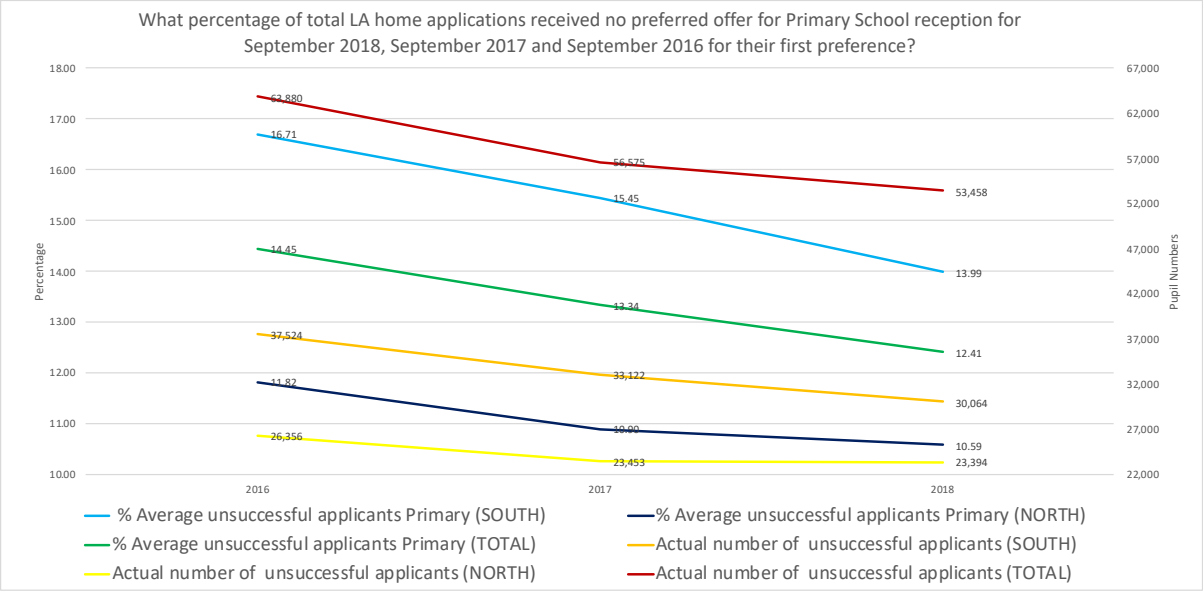

Figure 4.6 No preference offers made for Primary places 2016-18 from FOI returns

Moving from Secondary to Primary offers, Figure 4.6 shows that there has been a welcome reduction in the number of parents receiving an offer of a non-preferred Primary school over time. Non-preferred offers are higher in the North than the South. While the position is encouraging for parents, there were still 173,913 disappointed families nationally over the three-year period being scrutinised, or 16.3 percent of total applicants.

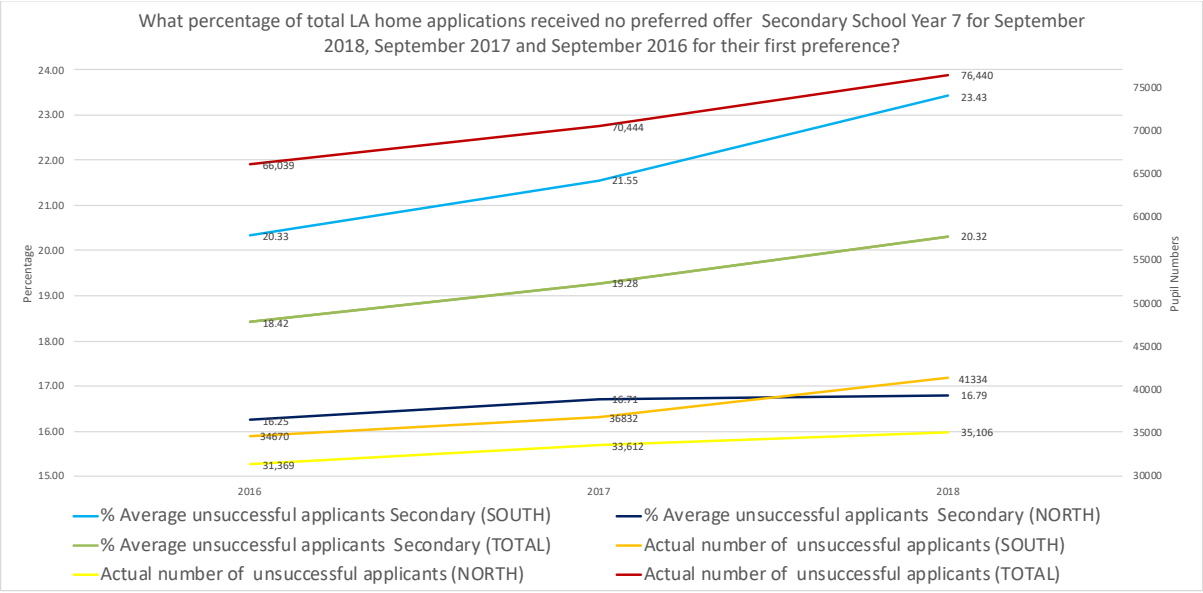

Figure 4.7 No preference offers made for Secondary places 2016-18 from FOI returns

The increase in disappointed Secondary parents is no surprise based on the first or any preference Secondary offer reductions demonstrated above in Figures 4.4 and 4.6. In reality, this equates to 214, 923 families or 22.9 percent of total applicants with the total being lower in the South but increasing more rapidly than in the North.

Ultimately, this data shows that parental preference is not delivered to all families when they apply for a Primary or Secondary school place to be allocated. The political aspiration for parents to influence their child's allocated school place as outlined in sections 1.3 and 2.7, is not available consistently to all families engaging with the School Admissions process. 380,836 families not receiving a preferred school place offer over the period 2016-18 represents a sizeable cohort of those that have been potentially disappointed. Their voices about the experience and impact of not securing a preferred school place is little heard and scant in the existing literature – despite Goldring and Phillips showing that:

> "*parents tend to be more satisfied with the school their child attends if they are able to choose the school when compared to parents who are assigned to a school*". (2008: 212)

Wilson and Bridge (2019) have shown that a parental preference-based School Admissions system results in social sorting. Social sorting is described in this context as by economic means. Sellgren (2019) demonstrates the extent of additional costs for parents levied by some schools (such as trips and voluntary contributions) as exclusionary factors for some parents of economically limited means. Bagley et al. cite a father's consideration of cost when considering school preference:

> *"…if you've got to pay for those children to go on a bus, they'd better do damn well, because it's a big investment…you've got to be spending £30 a month haven't you at least…what about after school activities*". (2010:214)

Taylor (2009) refers to parents and children as winners and losers in the School Admissions process. 388,836 families in England between 2016-18 may be considered as 'losers' in not securing a preferred school place.

What is needed in addition to a reading of the statistics is to seek and present what Allen has identified, that is that economically disadvantaged parents are less well equipped to optimise their right to secure a preferred school place. She showed that "*cream skimming*" (2013:29) of favoured potential pupils is a reality in some isolated school cases. To seek and present parents' lived experiences of their School Admissions engagement demonstrates their reality, as their voices are frequently unsought and unheard. Their limited economic capital may not render them favoured for 'cream skimming'. An exploration of this viewpoint follows in Chapter Five.

4.5. Local Authority Admissions Managers' experiences

Having captured and analysed numeric data pertaining to School Admissions on a national and local basis, this chapter now turns to the position of those who are responsible for processing the legislative framework on behalf of parents seeking admission for their children. Three Local Authority Admissions Managers were approached, and their consent secured to be interviewed about whether parental preference is myth or reality. The interview protocol is available in Appendix Five. Once the semi structured in-depth interviews were transcribed, recurrent terms and phrases were identified by frequency and captured in Figure 4.8. These were then used to inform thematic analysis below.

Common terms, words & phrases	Local Authority 1	Local Authority 2	Local Authority 3
Myth	1		1
Reality		1	2
Preference	1		2
Choice	1	1	3
Socio/political references	1	2	1
Catchment/distance	1		5
Types of schools		2	2
Gaming the system	2	1	1
SEN/LAC	1		2
Luck		1	2
Realistic		2	3
Appeals	2	1	2
Admissions criteria (interpretation)	1	2	2

Figure 4.8 Recurrent phrases used by Admissions Managers

Distance from home

Analysis of the interviews with three Local Authority Admissions Managers suggests that distance from the child's home address is a significant influential factor on the schools' allocation process, cited five times by one Admissions Manager:

> *"Parents with the right amount of knowledge know that they can game the system by moving / rent and then returning to their main home with very little chance of getting caught."* (Admissions Manager 2)

Distance from home is a significant factor in parent decision making as shown from existing research which accords with Admissions Managers' views. It is summarised by the findings of Burgess, Greaves et al.:

> "*In England, the dominant over-subscription criteria for secondary schools, straight line distance, is likely to induce strategic school choices, residential segregation and unequal access to the highest quality schools*" (2019: 703)

Goldring and Hausman show the same finding in America as "*proximity is a major factor influencing school choice*" (2010:484).

Distance from home as a commonality cited by Admissions Managers is tellingly closely followed by the term '*realistic*' as used five times by two Admissions Managers. The implication then is that parental preference is a reality if economically disadvantaged parents, having similar agency and capital from which to draw upon with their decision making processes compared to all parents, favour and apply for their most local school. Admissions Manager 1 commented on this by drawing on her personal interpretation of policy makers intentions:

> *"It's a backlash. Parents were restricted which is prejudicial. If you live in a poor area why should you be stuck with a poor school? It's a response to public opinion. Transport links can impact on choice. It's fair, it's Government not telling you where you have to send your child to school. It's parents taking responsibility for themselves*." (Admissions Manager 1)

Admissions Manager 1's interpretation may accord with what Burgess, Greaves et al. cite from Taylor and Gorard (2001) as:

> "*the enduring link between areas of residence and the socioeconomic composition of local schools*" (2019: 693).

Admissions Managers, who arguably know the Admissions process better than any, used the term '*choice*' five times and the term '*preference*' only three times. In fairness, one of the Admissions Managers corrected himself. However, this use of terminology by the professionals, coupled with the widely used media messages about school '*choice*' (see Appendix Six), is telling in terms of parental expectations being raised - and rendered unmet when their favoured school is out of reach. Burgess et al. identified the concept of realism regarding parental preference when they state:

> *"…there is a distinction between the first choice and preferred school, however, as households may make pragmatic choices based on the probability of admission at each school*" (2019:701).

Admissions Managers and Burgess et al., it can be argued, have identified a similar phenomenon. That is, parents may prefer a school that is realistically available to them. This is in contrast to preferring a school which is inaccessible due to distance from home, or any other barrier such as travel cost.

Appeals

Another high instance term used by Admissions Managers was '*appeals*'. Admissions Manager 1 offered her view on the fairness of this mechanism for parents:

> "*The right to appeal your Primary allocation is misleading for parents. Infant class sizes cannot be exceeded by law. That's unfair on parents and crushes their hopes. We have enough choice in (LA). We offer 6 preferences, not the minimum three. That way our stats look better when we can say parents got one of their preferences*." (Admissions Manager 1)

When parents utilise their right of Appeal, Local Authorities and academies are put to considerable time and expense in managing these hearings which also represent high stakes and high stress experiences for parents. Drawing on Mills (1959) in section 3.2, there is a distinction between private family life and engagement with the public sphere, where personal matters become public and therefore open to scrutiny and criticism. This creates discomfort at best and distress at worst for families experiencing this blurring of private and public lives. Appealing a school place allocation is an example of private life meeting the public sphere. Since the creation

of academy schools, independent profit-making companies available for commissioning to manage academy Appeals have emerged. Fourteen such companies had a web presence in Spring 2021. The costs to academy budgets of companies commissioned to manage their Appeals diminishes funds available for the education of pupils. Bagley et al. (2010) found that some schools adopt strategies to promote themselves to "*particular groups of parents, namely those from middle-class households*" (2010: 317). Whilst these strategies cannot be overt, appeal for admission to a school that targets particular social groups is likely to "*put…certain parents off certain schools*" (2010:318).

Nursery influence

An additional theme identified by Admissions Managers that is unhelpful in managing parental expectations with regard to Schools Admissions is that any child can attend any school nursery prior to statutory school age. Nursery admissions are managed by each separate institution without any local or regional coordination of admissions. Places are frequently not at a premium as some parents may choose to delay entry to the state funded education system until Reception, either keeping their pre-schoolers at home or in private provision where the hours are more suited to the needs of working parents. Therefore, nursery places tend to be more abundantly available to meet parental first preferences. When a state funded Nursery place at a Primary School is taken up, the child starts in Nursery, makes friends and becomes familiar with the environment. Parents also make friends with other parents and become part of that community. If then, they are not offered that school for a Reception place, the social needs of their child may form the basis for an Appeal. This is not an accepted reason for Appeal and parents may be left disappointed. The reasons that parents may appeal are defined as:

- *"The admission arrangements haven't been followed properly*
- *The admission criteria aren't legal according to the school admissions appeal code*
- *The decision to refuse your child a place wasn't reasonable"*

(Department for Education, Your Case for Appeal section 2021)

It can be suggested that these criteria are couched in legal terms that may be inaccessible to some parents, particularly the parents that Antony-Newman wrote of as ‘hard to reach’, cited in section 2.6. It may be that parents are not sufficiently familiar with procedural connotations so as to be able to evidence that Admissions processes have not been correctly followed. Also, what is considered ‘reasonable’ by an Admissions authority may not be considered ‘reasonable’ by parents. The assessment of what is ‘reasonable’ could be deemed as subjective. It is for Appeals Panels to assess ‘reasonableness’ which could render both Admissions authorities and parents as frustrated and thwarted. It is also tempting to view School Admissions as an administrative process using a computer algorithm, based on distance from home and demographic demand. However, for parents, this is an emotional, personal experience so the challenging mix of an administrative process and high personal interest cannot be understated, as will be shown in Chapter Five. Additionally, minimising Appeals is clearly a motivation for Admissions Managers who want to satisfy their residents. But in the age of on-going austerity, minimising Appeals also represents a considerable financial saving to the public purse.

Political environment

A further theme to consider when reflecting on the data from the Admissions Managers interviews is that all three work in highly politicised organisations. If their Local Authority performs 'badly' in terms of numbers of parents securing their first or any preference school place for children resident in the area, this would likely put pressure on elected politicians in the area. The issue of sufficiency of ‘good’ school places that are popular with local residents could be exposed by poor preference rates secured which may galvanise the electorate. As public elections dictate political leaders' appointments, a dissatisfied local parent population will render them out of office at the end of their term. As previously stated, the Admissions Code 2014 mandates that parents are entitled to express three preferences of school for application for admission purposes. Some Local Authorities offer more preference opportunities through their local admissions arrangements. One result of this is that local published headlines can state that xx% of parents in yyy Local Authority area received a preferred school. What is less clear is whether that preference is first or sixth. Of course, to a parent, the difference is a considerable one. But to the wider electorate, a preference achieved may be construed as a positive headline or sound bite. Goldring and Phillips allude to political motivations of local public authorities in

Tennessee when they state, "*the active choosers …are precisely the engaged middle-class parent clientele that urban districts are trying to retain in their schools*" (2008:227). Burgess et al. state that "*our findings provide system-wide evidence that LAs could improve the percentage of households allocated a preferred school simply by offering parents the option of making more choices on the application form*" (2019: 703). Whilst this simple suggestion is appealing, it does not acknowledge the data shown in section 4.3 which demonstrates that any preference does not satisfy parents as fully as a first preference offer.

Sibling preference

Another theme identified as articulated by Admissions Managers, was that of sibling preference. If an older sibling has secured a place at a school, their younger siblings that follow are prioritised for a place in the event of over-subscription, even if the family has moved from the local area and commutes to school. This renders likelihood of success in securing a preferred school place as inconsistent based on the impact of local demographic changes (as experienced in the aftermath of Brexit and during the pandemic), high birth rate years and the size of local families (frequently informed by ethnicity, faith and cultural norms). As Admissions Manager 3 stated '*you can live next door and it's still no guarantee'*. Burgess et al. identified sibling influence in the following terms, "*the presence of an older sibling of secondary school age is strongly correlated with household income*" (2019: 695). They suggest that families may be smaller if wealthier, thereby opening up wider options to wealthier parents less constrained by systemic sibling constraints and convenience considerations.

Parental agency

Quotes from Admissions Managers describe their views candidly from their position of co-ordinating a seemingly transparent and legislatively-bound bureaucratic system. Having sought to draw themes from their articulated views, onus on parents to research when engaging with the existing Admissions system to secure their preferred school place allocation is prevalent. What is not articulated is the assumption that all parents have equal (or at least sufficient) capital to influence where they live, or even to '*look into'* (Admissions Manager 2) realistic school options. "*Middle class parents are able to make the system work for them to the detriment of other parents*." (Admissions Manager 3). Admissions Manager 3 did not go on to define what makes parents '*Middle Class'*, but the implication was clear that he perceives '*Middle Class*'

parents as having greater social and economic capital to make the '*system work for them'*. Or, put another way by Ball and Vincent:

> "*agile and well-resourced middle-class parents seek out and maintain social advantage in educational settings where there are others 'like them' "* (1998: 226).

Based on the professional Dasein of the Admissions Managers interviewed, there can be little doubt that there is room for manipulation of the School Admissions system as it is laid out, by parents. What is not reflected by Admissions Managers is knowledge of parents' lived experiences. Admissions Managers' anecdotal views may be based on assumption of parental self-determination. The anticipation that parents have sufficient human capital and agency to manipulate their preferred school place allocation chances through researching their realistic options, cannot be assumed. Equally, parental understanding of schools that are their own Admissions authorities and not engaged with Local Authorities as sole Admissions Authorities for an area cannot be assumed as consistently secure for all parents. Only academy and selective Grammar schools can be their own Admissions Authority according to the School Admissions Code 2014. Whether parents are, or even should be, aware of this systemic differentiation, could be argued. *"How do parents understand radius', bandings, faith criteria and grammar results - they have to look into it*." (Admissions Manager 2). Burgess et al. refer to "*grapevine knowledge*" (2019: 692) and "*a general good impression*" as parental approaches and selection criteria based on their available agency and capital. This, of course, will vary from parent to parent.

In terms of all parties in the Admissions process, it can be argued that there is opportunity for manipulation by all – parents by manipulating their primary place of residence, Local Authorities by claiming preference success based on offer of a sixth preference and schools by the warmth of their welcome and positive recruitment strategies of families that they perceive will augment their aims and ethos. Bagley et al. describe this as " *working class…were made to feel unwelcome and unwanted*" (2010:317). This echoes Speck (2019) as discussed in section 2.9.

School influence

As stated above, schools are also cited by Admissions Managers as seeking to influence the children that they are allocated for enrolment, outside what is permissible in the School Admissions Code 2014:

> "*Some schools will do anything they can to not take the children to the extent they interview and do everything possible to make the parent/carer feel unwelcome so they don't want to go to the school as they would rather go anywhere else than the school they initially thought. Very difficult to prove. Some schools say they are full but aren't*." (Admissions Manager 2)

This was a phenomenon familiar to Speck – "*More schools are now at the initial consultation refusing to admit for less and less justifiable reasons"* (2019:2). Bagley et al. also found similar when they (unusually in the existing literature) captured parent voice:

> "*We didn't feel the teachers had time for you. You know I am working class and I am wanting to talk to someone and then another parent comes in and they smelt of money and the teacher went straight over to them…and ignored my husband and me…if that is the attitude…who are the teachers going to look at better*" (2010: 317)

Admissions Managers, drawing on their professional experience, are of the view that some schools may seek to influence their cohort for admissions. Bagley et al. described this through the voice of their parent research participant cited above.

4.6. Conclusion

Reiterating the scale of disappointed parents, drawing on the FOI data findings for the period 2016-18 from one hundred Local Authorities in England, a total of 388,836 non-preferred Primary or Secondary school places were allocated. If scaled up as an average to accommodate all one hundred and twenty-six Local Authorities with Admissions duties in England, that is 489,993 children (and their parents), potentially disappointed to have received an allocated school place offer based on no expressed preference. This statistical finding represents 489,993 individual lived experiences of

being allocated a non-preferred school place which may be unheard and understood. It represents 489,993 children (and their parents), who have not experienced success in accessing their preferred school, with the consequential potential impact on 489,993 relationships between non-preferred allocated schools and those children and parents, which may influence attainment outcomes, attendance and exclusions – further reflection on potential impact of this appears in Chapter Six.

Seven themes were drawn from Admissions Managers interview analysis (distance from home, appeals, nursery influence, political environment, sibling preference, parental agency and school influence). The need for parents to be '*reasonable*' ran throughout all the themes. The national datasets show that likelihood of success in securing a preferred Primary school place is reducing, as is likelihood of success at Appeal. Whilst Secondary preferences likelihood of success has improved slightly, 17.8 percent of applicants are still not able to secure their first preference. That is still a considerable cohort from 600,352 applicants. Themes identified by Admissions Managers in this chapter offer insight into the research issue which emerged in section 3.15 – what, if any, are the barriers to admission to preferred schools for children and parents of limited social and economic capital? The ability to influence home address is dictated by economic capital. Parental agency to research and influence their allocated school is informed by their social and cultural capital.

Qualitative research to date has not reflected fully on the human impact on participating in the School Admissions process, as shown in sections 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12 and 2.13. School Admissions arrangements are more meaningful to parents than a bureaucratic allocation system which is blind to the unique situation of each family and child needing a school place from a wide range of theoretical school place options available.

This research intended to capture the formerly quiet voice of parents lived experience of engaging with the School Admissions process if they are of economically limited means. Consequently, parent voice is described and analysed in Chapter Five, as a counter discourse to the quantitative School Admissions numerical data, School Appeals numerical data and qualitative Admissions Managers interviews presented here.

Chapter 5 Analysis of qualitative and quantitative findings from parents

5.1. Introduction

This chapter builds on the findings laid out in Chapter Four. Drawing on the corpus of Local Authority admissions data and Admissions Managers interviews, this chapter lays out the interpretative phenomenological analysis of parent voice. Parents with limited economic capital have shared their experiences of their manoeuvrings and responses when seeking to optimise their opportunities to secure their preferred school places. In terms of congruence with the original thesis intention, drawing on the Heideggerian tradition of thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews within a thematic conceptual framework, in-depth semi-structured interviews are analysed along with findings from parent questionnaires and online surveys. This chapter considers findings from each data source in relation to the two specific research foci in section 3.15, and then brings them together thematically in Chapter Six.

5.2 Testing parent voice using questionnaires

For testing purposes prior to pursuing more in-depth semi-structured interviewing of an economically disadvantaged parent cohort, a questionnaire was used to explore parents views as discussed in Section 3.9. Testing utilised the opportunistic technique of seeking the engagement of parents known from within personal networks. These parents have used the state funded education system and therefore used the School Admissions process. Of twenty parents canvassed for their informed consent and completion of the questionnaire, 35 percent live in a west London borough. The remainder live in a variety of London Boroughs and Counties. This opportunistic sample represents a limited geographical spread across England, and is made up of 100 percent English language speakers, 68 percent white British, 20 percent Black Caribbean and 12 percent Indian ethnicities. None of their children have an Education Health and Care Plan although 21 percent have additional learning needs (predominantly Dyslexia, slow processing skills and Autistic Spectrum diagnoses). Two of the children are entitled to FSMs. Whilst this cohort may not represent the breadth of family characteristics across the country, they do offer authentic and legitimate individual positions which inform the findings of this research through their lens of School Admissions experiences.

Question posed in parental questionnaire

1 When applying for a Reception place, how convinced were you that your preferences would be considered?
2 When applying for a Year 7 place, how convinced were you that your preferences would be considered?
3 How seriously did you consider moving home to secure your first preference of Reception place?
4 How seriously did you consider moving home to secure your first preference of Year 7 place?
5 Did you alter or amend your religious habits to influence your Reception application?
6 Did you alter or amend your religious habits to influence your Year 7 application?
7 How seriously did you consider using the Appeals process if you did not secure your first preference Reception place?
8 How seriously did you consider using the Appeals process if you did not secure your first preference Year 7 place?
9 How seriously did you consider electively home educating if you did not secure your first preference Reception place?
10 How seriously did you consider electively home educating if you did not secure your first preference Year 7 place?
11 How important was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Reception place?
12 How important was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Year 7 place?
13 How important were your preferred schools' exam results to you when applying for a Reception place?
14 How important were your preferred schools' exam results to you when applying for a Year 7 place?
15 How important was the local reputation of your preferred schools when applying for a Reception place?
16 How important was the local reputation of your preferred schools when applying for a Year 7 place?
17 How important was distance from home when identifying your preferred schools for Reception application?
18 How important was distance from home when identifying your preferred schools for Year 7 application?

19 How satisfied were you with your Reception application experience?
20 How satisfied were you with your Year 7 application experience?

Figure 5.0 Questions posed in parental questionnaire

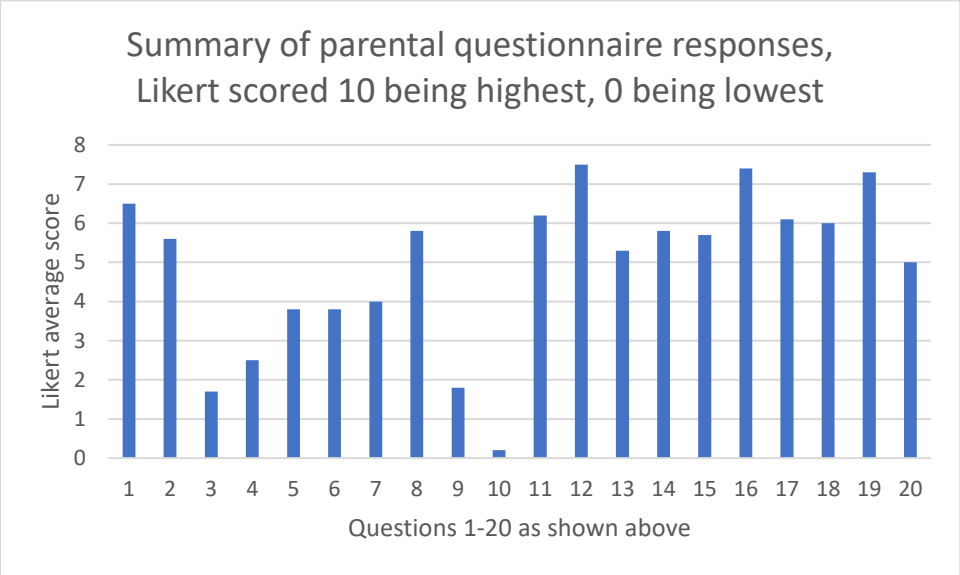

Figure. 5.1 Summary of parental questionnaire responses, Likert scored 10 being highest, 0 being lowest

What is evident from the parental questionnaire responses average scoring results as shown in Figure 5.1, is the mediocre confidence levels in securing a preferred Primary school place (6.5), even less confident at Secondary level (5.6). Whilst considering more extreme measures of securing preferred school places for their children (such as moving (2.1), adapting religious habits (3.8) or electively home educating (1)), this was reported by parents as least likely – but not out of the question. The importance of local reputation and OFSTED judgement was of greatest importance to parents in informing their Admissions decisions, particularly at secondary level (7.5 and 7.4). There were no compelling parental indicators of satisfaction with their School Admissions experience, although Primary admission (7.3) fared better than Secondary admission (5). Parents stated that they would be least likely to consider electing to home educate their children, despite the findings stated in section 4.3. This may suggest that whilst elective home education is not a widely desirable option, the impact of the pandemic has enhanced the use of this option, perhaps as a necessity and not a preference. This thesis does not reflect further on that phenomenon but may offer suggestions for future research opportunities. The parental questionnaire, with a 45 percent return rate reflecting nine respondents, offers an insight into how personal the experience is for parents. The Likert scale offers extremes of scoring responses with extremes of dissatisfaction outweighing extremes of satisfaction. What emerged was a parental tendency to expect greater likelihood of success at securing their first

preference at Primary phase admission than Secondary phase admission. It may be suggested that this is due to more Primary provision being available closer to home than Secondary provision. "*Pupils in metropolitan areas have around 19 schools within 3 km of their house whereas those in towns and villages have only three schools within 3 km*" (Burgess et al. 2011: 536). What was also illuminating was a parental tendency to value more highly the attainment results and OFSTED judgement of Secondary provision than Primary. Lastly, parents would consider electively home educating more readily at Primary phase than Secondary phase. It may be suggested that this is based on parental confidence with managing the Primary curriculum, even though electively home educating parents are not obliged to follow any recognised curriculum. 'Reputation' was highly valued by parents. How parents define 'reputation' could be an entire thesis question in its own right, and not one for now. As Burgess et al. state "*academic standards may not necessarily be of prime concern to parents"* (2011: 532). Of all parental behaviours and considerations to secure their preference of school, amending religious habits scored highest. Two parents referenced religion disparagingly in their comments:

> "*I spent time as a volunteer on Admissions Appeals for the Local Authority prior to applying so understood and was comfortable with the system. As we were after a local non-selective state school the choices became rather by default (but as rural comp kids that was good enough for us). Thinking about selection by faith probably hardened my atheism*." (ST questionnaire)

> "Reception application required an interview and assessment of 'Catholicity' " (PH questionnaire)

NT was in the minority when stating religion in positive terms pertaining to School Admissions:

> "*I was lucky, I have two really good Catholic schools near me." (*NT questionnaire)

Goldring and Hausman found that "*Catholic schools are chosen for moral reasons*" (2010: 473) based on parental impressions of secure discipline and safety.

One respondent moved home twice to secure the school places of preference:

> "*My husband and I moved home for both school admissions. The first time was locally but mainly for the school of our choice. As we were in the middle of moving home, we had to use the appeals process, which at the time, was highly stressful. The second move was for work purposes, but we selected an area where we knew the schools had a very good reputation*." (CH questionnaire)

Whilst CH was in a position to secure her preferred school place at both Primary and Secondary admission by moving house, this is not an opportunity available for all. As Burgess et al state, *"evidence suggests that the proximity criteria have increased house prices in desirable catchment areas, which effectively prohibits access for pupils from less advantaged families who are priced out of the market"* (2011: 535).

Parents referenced media raised expectations of parental 'choice' pertaining to School Admissions and referenced an uncaring system and an opaque system to a parent unfamiliar with the English system. These references also raise opportunities for further expanded research. They also accord with the findings of Burgess et al. when they discuss, "*the complicated process of school choice for those without established cultural capital*" (2019: 692). The semi-structured in-depth interviews analysed below sought to better understand how these considerations and experiences were reflected by parents with limited economic capital to draw upon. What the test questionnaire did demonstrate was the need to adapt the semi-structured interview protocol to ensure parental aspiration for their children, and parental educational impact on their current circumstances were included. As Goldring and Hausman show "*not all students and parents see education as relevant to their futures*" (2010: 472). Sections 2.8 and 2.10 offer a review of Wilson's research which drew upon a similar approach to gather parental voices.

5.3.Social Media Online Survey

Thirteen responses were received from responders who completed the survey which was offered on Facebook to three community groups based in west London and Mumsnet, a national forum across England. The survey was offered during August 2020 and repeated in September 2020 after the School Admissions application window opened. It is shown in Appendix One.

Parent voice acquired from the online survey was limited. Whilst there were some findings in terms of willingness to use the appeals process if necessary (twenty percent of respondents for Primary places and forty percent for Secondary places), the anonymous survey method adopted did not afford an opportunity to investigate further into this finding. There were some illuminating anonymous comments that expose the perceived realities of the existing system and the systemic frailties that may be capitalised upon by the unscrupulous, canny or highly motivated, as follows:

> "*People cheat the system by renting closer to schools and then moving back when they get a place at the secondary school*." (Anon. survey respondent 4)

This example foregrounds the weakness of the existing Schools Admissions process that being resident close to a favoured school is mainly available only to those who are able to afford to choose to live in specific locations. Burgess et al. identify this finding through their work when they state, "*the current schools admissions criteria that prioritise distance penalise poorer families*" (2019: 690).
The sense of resigned hopelessness for those not in a financial position to move home is stated by the following parent comment:

> "*no choice if you don't live close to good schools*." (Anon. survey respondent 6)

As described in Section 3.8, the online surveys for parents were offered on social media as a recruitment exercise to attract research participants of limited economic means for in-depth semi-structured interviews. This was attempted as a consequence of the impact of the pandemic 2020-21 when School Leaders, as gatekeepers to economically disadvantaged parents, were professionally distracted from research approaches, and when parents were elusive due to schools being partially closed for three protracted periods. Whilst valid and credible findings are limited, due to responses being unverifiable and due to responders' economic status being mixed (despite entitlement to FSMs being a criterion for completion, this was not consistently adhered to), the responses received are offered below as supplementary to the semi-structured in-depth interview findings.

As previously stated, there is no reliance placed on the online survey findings securely capturing parent voice. The responses are worthy of reflection, nevertheless. What is apparent is parental value placed on the reputation of Secondary provision over Primary provision. Ball (2018), referring to the fractured landscape that is state funded education in England as a muddle for parents to navigate, highlighted the risk of social division in seeking to secure preference. Without clear and universally understood comparative measures for parents to receive and interpret, decisions based on 'reputation' will continue. Goldring and Hausman identified a similar theme as "*informal networks, limited dissemination of information*" (2010:471).

What is also clearly articulated is the importance of their child's happiness at school as stated by parents in the online survey. Full responses are shown in Appendix One with examples such as **"***just that my child was happy"* and *"that they were happy, formed positive friendships, they were well supported in their learning and also emotionally supported, felt safe and secure and are happy to go to school."*

Bagley et al. cited a parent as stating, "*there seemed no mention of the child's personal feelings"* (2010: 3018) when considering School Admission. How happiness is measured is not sought in this thesis, although propensity of references to friendship may go some way to assume a parental measure of happiness. Happiness measured by secure friendships (in the view of parents) could be linked to the findings from Wilson (2014) who wrote of parental tribal affiliations as opposed to parental preference based on the best school for their children. Bagley et al. refer to similar findings as "*parents selecting the human environment according to the social type that they consider suits or will most benefit their child*" (2010:320).

Reflecting the findings from the pilot questionnaire described in Table 5.1, the degree of confidence in securing preferred Primary allocation emerged as stronger than Secondary from the online survey, along with confidence to engage with the Appeals process at Secondary phase. Questions about amending religious habits and moving home offered online survey responses showing that these approaches to School Admissions were not unanimously dismissed as strategies by parents to secure their preferred school place offer. Illuminating parental feedback from the online survey were the two additional comments: "*people cheat the system by renting closer to schools and then moving back when they get a place at the secondary school*" and "*no choice if you don't live close to good schools*". This indicates a degree of cynicism

with the existing School Admissions process and the reality of parents' experiences in securing their preferred option. This reflects the findings of Reay (2008) who showed that 44 percent of parents would consider using "*underhand tactics*" (2008: 646) to manipulate the School Admissions process to secure their preferred school for their children. Allen, Burgess and McKenna (2014) state that some policies may allow for manipulation within the existing system to secure parental preferences. The online survey did not offer further opportunity for more in-depth scrutiny of these statements (although request for follow up in-depth interviews appeared on the online survey, no parent consented to this follow-up), so additional parents were sourced for in-depth semi-structured interviews to better understand if this was a more widespread parental view.

5.4 In-depth semi-structured interview participant characteristics

This parent participant characteristics analysis builds on Figure 3.2 and is offered to demonstrate an inclusive stance, based on opportunistic and snowball identification of participants. The criteria for selection were limited economic means (entitlement to FSMs, insecure employment and minimum wage income) and current engagement with the School Admissions process. This ensures consistency with the principle aim of this thesis, to capture the lived experience of economically disadvantaged parents regarding their School Admissions experience.

Before offering findings from the in-depth semi-structured interviews of six economically disadvantaged parents, a brief biographical introduction to each participant will assist in doing justice to their stories as they unfold through this chapter.

Magda moved to England from Poland with two children and no prior knowledge of English School Admissions arrangements. She spoke no English and was unable to transfer her existing vocational skills and experience to the English employment market. Magda describes speaking and understanding English as an ongoing challenge for her. She is a domestic cleaner paid cash in hand.
Sasi moved to England from Thailand to join her second husband. She left her eldest son in Thailand with her mother to prepare a life in England before he joined her. She now has three sons, all of statutory school age and has three School Admissions experiences that she shared. Like Magda, Sasi's vocational skills and experiences, she

found on arrival in England, were not transferable. She has secure English skills, spoken, written and understanding, and is a university graduate (from a Thai university). Sasi was made redundant as a direct result of the pandemic and has secured alternative employment, albeit at a reduced rate of pay, increased hours and long commute. This is in the childcare sector.
James was educated in the independent sector in England. He has experienced divorce from his children's mother and the failure of his business. The business was sales and marketing related, did not survive the pandemic and not requiring any specific academic or professional qualifications. James states that his father was a great influence on him. He worries that his two children are reluctant readers and socially quiet. They are entitled to FSMs based on James drawing on State Benefits due to unemployment.
Nina arrived in England from Poland, having divorced her son's father. Her son has SEN, which Nina describes as having to 'fight' to have recognised. She has a daughter now too and offers two very different School Admissions experiences. Nina found her vocational skills and experience were not transferable to England's employment market and learnt English whilst working in low paid casual employment. The pandemic meant that Nina is working in a new industry for her (the caring industry), following redundancy.
Anne has three daughters and has just been rehoused to a new area by the Local Authority with her husband. She was born and educated in England. She is working in a new sector for her, following pandemic related redundancy. Anne has a wide circle of friends and enjoys her new job as a Health Care Assistant at a hospital.
Gemma was also born and educated in England. She is estranged from her wider family network, is a single parent and works as a casual nanny for a professional couple's child. Gemma did not enjoy her own schooling and has experienced frustration in identifying a training and employment pathway that she could aspire to and gain satisfaction from. Gemma is protective of her son and sees their family of two as isolated from their local community.

Figure 5.2 Parent Participant Profiles

5.5 In-depth semi-structured parental interviews thematic analysis

Building on the methodological stance described in Chapter Three, one of the benefits of semi-structured in-depth interviewing from an IPA approach is the opportunity to consider non-verbal participant responses as discussed in section 3.9.

Non-verbal parental responses

Pseudonym	Silent pauses	Laughter	Tears	Sighs	Angry tone	Resigned tone	Determined tone	Frustrated tone	Regretful tone	ESOL pauses
Magda	2	0	2	7	0	5	0	2	7	12
Sasi	4	3	0	6	1	3	5	7	3	2
James	2	5	0	5	1	3	3	2	3	0
Nina	8	2	0	3	6	1	6	8	3	3
Anne	7	0	0	1	5	4	4	7	5	0
Gemma	12	5	1	13	0	8	0	3	8	0
Total	35	15	3	35	13	24	28	29	29	17
Percentage of all responses	15%	7%	1%	15%	6%	11%	12%	13%	13%	7%

Figure. 5.3 Non-verbal response analysis

It is accepted that descriptors of non-verbal responses may be criticised as subjectively based on the researcher's interpretation, particularly regarding description of verbal tone, as discussed in section 3.9. Notwithstanding that opportunity for criticism, there can be little dispute that the non-verbal responses presented in Fig. 5.3 demonstrate the process for parents, and their retelling of their experience, was an emotional one for them. These non-verbal responses have been captured for later use within thematic analysis of findings. It is suggested that silent pauses indicate thoughtfulness and reflection or recall. It is suggested that what is termed 'ESOL pauses' indicate when the parent participant sought the word in the English language that they wished to use; this can be quite protracted when English is not the first language and the parent participant is not confident speaking in other than their original language. The temptation for the researcher to assist with vocabulary had to be consciously resisted to avoid unduly influencing which words the participants adopted. This was achieved by allowing for pauses without interruption and making encouraging non-verbal signs such as smiles and eye contact.

As an exemplar of tears, sighs and regretful tone, Magda said "*I feel bad because I speak very bad English and can't help my daughter – because it was my choice to come here. Xxxx was in a very bad position. We put her from home into a strange place. (tears and long pause) It was not a good time". "I feel like I've let the children down."* (Magda)

An example from James' angry tone is *"The problem is we got divorced. We just couldn't work as a team. We both went to independent schools and expected the same for the children. But the divorce did set us back financially very badly, then the recession hit, and my business was badly affected. My clients just stopped selling and needing marketing. She's self-employed and a sole trader. The children tell me they don't pay for lunches. (harsher tone) It annoys me, she gets maintenance when I can."* (James)

Gemma offered laughter and a resigned tone in the following example of her statements: "*I didn't want to live in xxxxx. It's rough. But there's no choice. If you turn down a place (housing), they don't offer any more…. anyway, Maths was a waste of time. Never used it. English, well I can and write so I supposed that worked (laughter)…. I was going to be a hairdresser but I couldn't go to college because I already had xxxx. It's too late now, you have to pay for your own equipment, and I can't afford it. Plus, I'm too old, I'd stand out." (laughs).* (Gemma) One may question the genuine humour or whether this laughter was ironic.

Examples of determined and frustrated tones were offered by Sasi: *"With my little and middle son, I tell them to move up one grade per term….If they go below the green line I'm not happy." "The English system is stupid (frowns)…. we were really happy in xxxx but had to move to get xxx school. I hate stupid catchment system. We live next door now so we should get it…. we have to pay a lot more rent now (regretful tone). It's a lot smaller and £600 per month more which is why I have to work full time now…. it's annoying for all parents. It's upsetting"* (Sasi). Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane (2019) refer to the 'right' catchment areas that Sasi was so frustrated about.

Nina offered clear non-verbal examples of determination and frustration in her tonal delivery of "*no doctors listened to me (angry tone). He doesn't associate with other*

children. I had to fight the system for eleven years." And *"you have to fight for your rights…we had to fight for nearly a year…it was hard to fight the system (*spoken at a faster and louder pace and volume*)." "You have to work harder for your child because there is no-one there to help you (*resigned tone*)"* (Nina). Nina's experience reflects Speck's (2019) findings cited in Section 4.5 regarding the reality that a minority of schools may seek to dissuade the parents of children with SEN from seeking a place within their setting.

Failure to be mindful of non-verbal communication when capturing parents lived experiences of their School Admissions journeys would fail to capture their stories as fully as possible. Words can identify the emotional nature of their described experiences; non-verbal responses are equally illuminating in terms of the impact of those experiences.

Individual parent participant response analysis

Pseudonym	Educated abroad	ESOL	Moved	Emotional references	Limited research	Parental education relevance reference	Religion	Impact of Covid on finance	Friends	Digital disadvantage	Race	'Happiness' as an aspiration
Magda	2	6		6	10	1	5		12	4		1
Sasi	1	6	8	19	9	4		3	3		5	2
James			1	10	8	6	1	2	8	4	1	3
Nina	2	3	1	39	4	2	1	3	2	1	3	
Anne			2	24	1	3	2	3	2		1	1
Gemma			5	19	2	2	1	1	3	1	1	4
Total	5	15	17	117	34	18	10	12	30	10	11	11
Percentage	2%	5%	6%	40%	12%	6%	3%	4%	10%	3%	4%	4%

Figure. 5.4 Individual parent participant response analysis

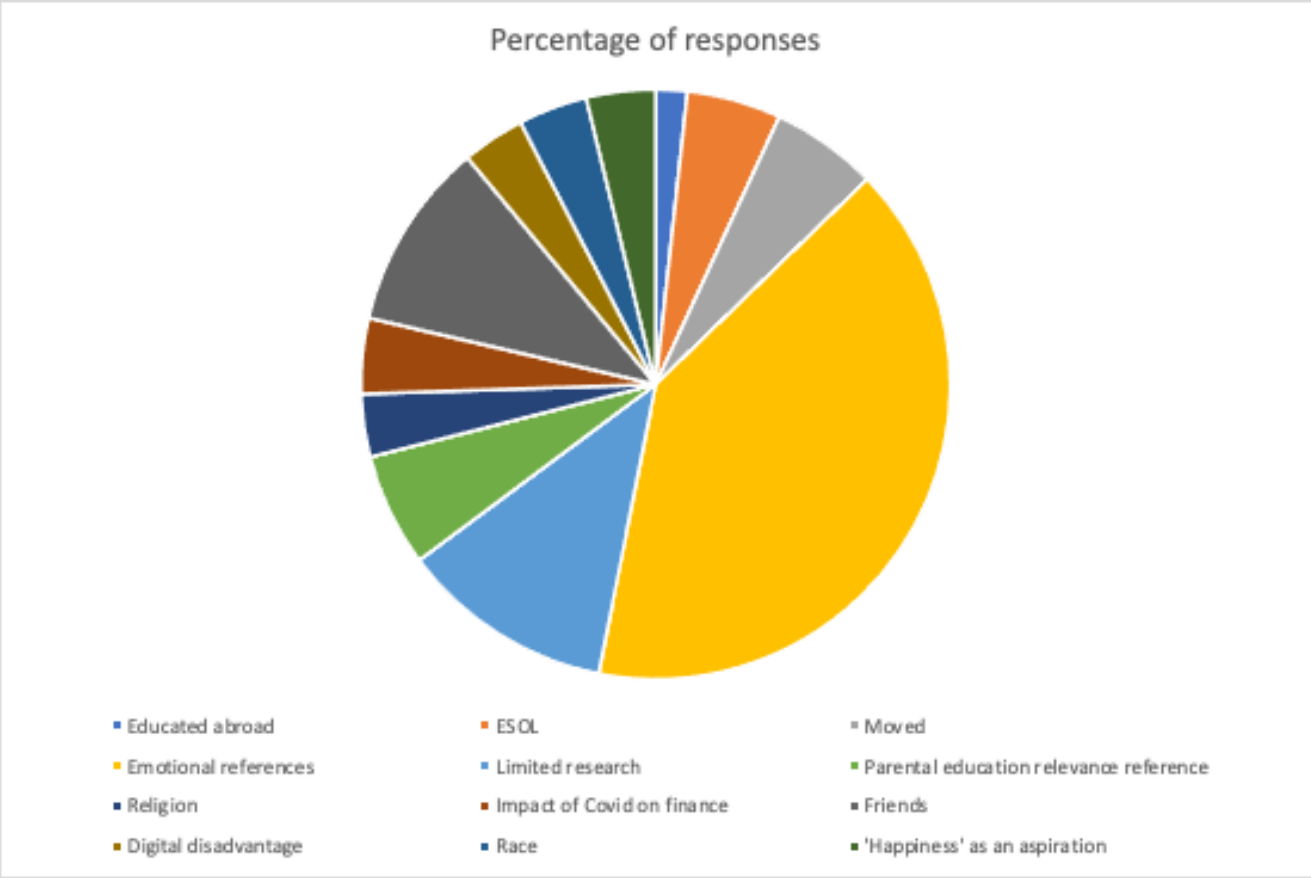

Figure. 5.5 Total sample response analysis

Figure 5.5 represents the proportion of all responses within each category whereas Figure 5.4 reflects individual responses within each category. Figure 5.5 demonstrates that collectively, parent participants referred to their School Admissions experience using emotional terms. This was the most cited reference, that parent participants' experience was an emotional one, mostly couched in terms alluding to stress, worry, frustration or anger and guilt. What emerged as second most commonly cited was the limited research undertaken by parents. Two parents were thorough in their research, one parent was ambivalent in terms of research by relying on his ex-wife's influence, one did not see any value or merit in researching school preference options believing that the outcome of her application was a predetermined inevitability. Two parents relied almost exclusively on the opinions and influences of friends, avoiding schools that made them feel unwelcome. As Bagley et al found "*perception of reputation…gained not from personal experience…but from word of mouth in discussions with friends and neighbours*" (2010: 319). This is reflected in the third most

cited response from parent participants, the influence of adult friends and desire for friends for their children as a desirable outcome from their educational experience, in other words avoiding feeling "*unwelcome and unwanted*" (Bagley et al. 2010: 317). Being educated abroad, digital disadvantage and religion were the least referenced influences on parent participants' narratives. That said, when they were spoken of, these influences were relayed in significant detail. This is exemplified by Nina who spoke in great detail about her fractured educational experience in Poland due to family mobility while fleeing domestic abuse. Anne's description of her frustration at manoeuvring through the online application process entailed her sharing details of the mobile phone she has, the software required and the need for her husband to complete the online process on his mobile phone which holds different technical capabilities.

The purpose of this thesis is to capture parents' voices through inviting them to share their own School Admissions experiences. Their narratives have been authentic. Some common themes have been illuminating. Parents expressed aspirations for their children to be happy. Some expressed specific career path aspirations for their children. Not one mentioned social mobility explicitly, or linked career aspirations to aspirations of wealth. The emotional impact of their School Admissions experience was the paramount response from all parent interview participants. When compared to Admissions Managers' interview analysis, the impact of English as a second language, digital poverty, friendships and the emotional impact on parents do not feature once. This suggests a disconnect between system users and system facilitators regarding School Admissions which will fail to meet all parties' expectations unless and until both parties are familiar with the other's perspective. Recommendations to address this disconnect will be made in Chapter Six.

5.6 Parent participant capital analysis by Haidt moral foundations

Drawing on Haidt's six moral foundations referred to in Chapter Three, direct quotes from the online parental survey, pilot questionnaires and six in-depth semi-structured parental interviews are shown below

Care/Harm Can also be described as empathy, generosity, sympathy, care and protect from harm	Fairness/Cheating Can also be described as seeking mutual benefit, dishonesty, faithfulness and objectivity	Loyalty/Betrayal Can also be described as dealing with conflict, sticking together, allegiance, teamwork	Authority/Subversion Can also be described as hierarchies, claiming or submitting authority, respect, acquiesce	Sanctity/Degradation Can also be described as importance, unviability, uprightness, loss of dignity, humiliation, disrespect	Liberty/Oppression Can also be described as freedom, right of privilege, unjust, subjugation, tyranny, exploitation
I liked that vibe and that welcome (Anne)	*It was only because they had two addresses that we were able to play the system. (James)*	*The system doesn't know us and the schools don't really care (James)*	*My English might be the problem. The connection with the school is not good. (Magda)*	*At the time of the Year 7 admissions there was evidence to suggest that the school was actually influencing the intake by areas (CY pilot)*	*We are only in XXX for the education. My sons won't do the kind of jobs I have to. They will do better (Sasi)*
As long as he's happy and not bullied (Gemma)	*If you play the game, you can better your chances, but it still feels like a lottery (James)*	*More emphasis is needed to explain that parents express a preference not a choice. The two are often interchanged particularly in the media. I've a "preference" to drive a Ferrari – but it's not going to happen.' (GY pilot)*	*There is no choice there. You go to your closest school (Nina)*	*They saw me as another mad mother (Nina)*	*The whole process is very stressful. It is very clinical and uncaring (James)*

There was a lot of bullying (Gemma)	*People cheat the system by renting closer to schools and then moving back when they get a place at the secondary school (Anon. survey)*		*Stop pretending there's a choice (CY pilot)*	*The priest stopped us (Magda)*	*It's crap, everyone knows it, but I can still pick him up and drop him off (Gemma)*
			The whole process of school admissions were particularly stressful times and my experience with both Reception and Year 7 has led me to believe that there is absolutely no choice in the process. (GY pilot)	*You feel that you and your children are just numbers and their needs are not considered let alone the worries and concerns of parents. (James)*	*I just sent him to the closest school…pay bus fares (Gemma)*
			no choice if you don't live close to good schools (Anon.survey)		*Exams aren't everything, we do ok without qualifications (Gemma)*
					I brought him here for education (Sasi)
					I moved to area with Grammar Schools, Grammar better for academic education (Nina)

Figure. 5.6 Parent quotes analysed by Haidt's six moral foundations for human behaviour

The examples shown in Figure 5.6, based on Haidt's six moral foundations for human behaviour, suggests that parental actions and experiences reflect all Haidt's descriptors. Drawing on direct quotes from parents, there are some strong and emotive comments which accord with Haidt's analysis and will inform new learning and recommendations in Chapter Six

.

Drawing on Bourdieu's descriptions of Human Capital as discussed in section 2.10, parent participants' circumstances, shared directly by themselves, are analysed against each discreet descriptor.

Pseudonym	Implicit Social Capital	Implicit Cultural Capital	Implicit Economic Capital	Implicit Symbolic Capital
Magda	Positive	Negative	Negative	Negative
Sasi	Positive	Negative	Negative	Positive
James	Positive	Negative	Negative	Negative
Anne	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
Nina	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
Gemma	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative

Figure. 5.7 Parent participant capital analysis

This analysis of positive or negative human capital (based on Bourdieu 1984a and b) expressed implicitly by parent participants is drawn directly from the semi-structured interviews. It is arguable that families' experiences of the School Admission process and associated considerations of preference chime with all four types of associated capital. Economic capital in that finance offers families options in terms of where they live in proximity to favoured schools, access to fee paying schools or ability to fund tuition for entrance exams to selective schools, and the ability to fund required transport to preferred schools. Bagley et al. found the same when they cited parents and conclude "*certain groups of parents being deprived of options...because of resources*" (2010: 323). Symbolic capital in that preferring a certain type of school symbolises families' ethical and moral choices, such as faith schools. Bagley et al. referred to a similar finding in the negative as "*there's no way that I'd want my child to go to that school because of the coloured children*" (2010:316). Social capital in that families have a right to express a preference when considering varying schools ethos' principles and beliefs. These are described by school leaders and evidenced by outcomes for children in terms of inclusion and well-being as well as more traditionally recognised outcomes (attainment and post 16 destinations). These are also described as reputations and information available and acquired as influenced by personal networks of friends, wider family members and community members. Bagley et al. refer to their similar finding as *"parents avoid schools where human warmth is relatively neglected and where a concern with the rational academic is seen as too dominant*" (2010: 321). Cultural capital in terms of access to the widest range of information available, access to English language skills and Information Technology skills and tools. Basing their findings on reasons for rejecting school options Bagley et al. state "*schools might be rejected largely on the basis of vague rumour and*

hearsay" (2010: 319). Bagley et al. has been drawn upon so extensively as their work is based on direct findings from parents, similarly to this research, and unusually, compared to the majority approaches adopted in existing literature on School Admissions.

Magda made twelve discreet references to drawing on friends as a support network when navigating the School Admissions process in positive terms such as '*when I find a good person, they help me'*. Magda made six references to her perceived weak English language skills and two references to having been educated abroad *'I always think this is my fault. I don't speak very good English'* and *'in my school the only other language was Russian. Now English is taught in almost every school, even in village schools like mine – and German and French. I don't hear of Russian now. This language helps us with nothing.'* Magda made five references to economic capital in negative terms, an example being *'she didn't go in the end because…would have to pay train fares. My husband's work was little then so she stayed where she was given.*' Magda referred to symbolic capital, in the form of religion, on five occasions during her interview, in negative terms. One example is *'we needed agreement of the church. The priest said he didn't know us but knew we are Christian. She didn't get C.W school because of the priest.'*

Sasi made three references to positive social capital during her interview about her School Admissions experience, an example being "*he said everyone was very kind*." Regarding cultural capital, thirteen phrases from the interview referenced negativity, such as '*all the people there look at me funny. I'm not saying it's racism but….*'. Economic capital was implied in negative terms on eleven occasions during Sasi's interview, two examples being '*there are no grammar schools here and the extra lessons to get in would be too much'* and '*the play group had to shut and I was so sad. Now I have to work full time to pay more rent for the school and have a long journey.'* Sasi's implied symbolic capital was reflected in positive terms during her interview, exemplified by '*we were really happy in the Xxx Xxx community and I appreciate the teachers' jobs*'.

James was the participant able to describe greater capital than all the others, with two of the four capitals identified as being referred to in positive terms. James is also the

only father to agree to being interviewed about his School Admissions experience. In terms of social capital, five references were made to the impact of divorce in negative terms such as '*but the divorce did set us back financially very badly….it annoys me….*" and *'if we hadn't split up, I wouldn't have moved out, wouldn't have thought about catchment areas, would have paid to go private*'. Regarding cultural capital, the interview exposed positive capital twice: *'Some of her friends' families are interesting, mixed, that's a good thing. This is the world they're growing up in'* and '*my father's influence'*. Economic capital was referred to on three occasions in negative terms during the interview, exemplified by '*that's fine when business is good, less so now. I feel like I've let the children down*.' Symbolic capital was referred to three times, in the context of a faith-based school preference, in positive terms, '*she wanted a faith school. I wasn't that bothered, but I suppose I like the structures, expectations and routines, so I took them to mass when I had them.'*

Anne referred to friends' influence on her School Admissions experience as positive social capital on eight occasions during her interview, one example being '*one lives close to us and we know him so we can check about whether what he said was real or not (in a school marketing video).*' Cultural capital was alluded to on six occasions by Anne, in negative terms such as '*I was good at Art but that was sabotaged*'. Negative economic capital was referred to six times, exemplified by '*I did the first year of a Health & Social Care course because they took people without GCSEs. I couldn't afford to stay so I quit and cleaned in old peoples' homes and a nursery in the evenings.'* Symbolic capital was referred to three times by Anne, in negative terms such as '*I tried St X's on xxxx Lane, but they wouldn't accept us because the priest for our area hadn't signed the form.*'

Nina implicitly described social capital in negative terms on seven occasions during her interview about her School Admissions experience – *'he doesn't associate with other children', 'he accused my partner of refusing him something'* and *'we had to run away and change our name three or four times'* (due to domestic abuse). Cultural capital was referenced in negative terms, exemplified *by 'when they saw my daughter, they said 'good, you're white. We don't have enough white children here'. I was too shocked, speechless. I didn't want her to go there. At the end of the interview, I said the school isn't for my daughter. The Head Teacher said I was being rude.'* Economic

capital was also referenced (four times) in negative terms by Nina, '*I couldn't afford private'*. Symbolic capital was only referenced once by Nina, in religious terms explicitly, and negatively based on unavailability – *'I was searching for something Catholic, outstanding. I researched higher than Primary before I moved to the Hxxxxxxx area because there are grammar schools there…. Living in Exxxxx, there are no grammars, so I researched wider.'*

Gemma's interview analysis did not identify any positive personal capital based on the four characteristic capitals of Bourdieu. Regarding social capital, there were three references to friends and family, in negative terms such as *'most of the mums at school are friends because they go to the same mosque. I'm not part of their group. Like I say, keep yourself to yourself.*' Cultural capital references totalled six, exemplified by *'I don't agree with exams, they don't mean anything*.' Economic capital was referenced three times in negative terms, including the costs of travel to school and digital access, *'this Covid thing has really messed things up job wise*.' There were no phrases offered by Gemma during her interview that could be recognised as symbolic capital.

Moving from analysis of parental capital based on Haidt and Bourdieu, the following key themes have been identified from in-depth semi-structured interviews. These pertain to specific features of their School Admissions experience as identified by the semi-structured interview parent cohort. Haidt and Bourdieu remain relevant to the following analysis

5.7. Theme 1 Home address

Having sought parents' lived experiences of their School Admissions experiences, moving address was cited by parents implicitly or explicitly throughout the semi-structured interviews frequently. This accords with Admissions Managers, parental online survey and parental questionnaire findings. The implications of home address must be accepted as a reality for many users of School Admissions processes as a significant influence when seeking to secure a preferred school place, which also reflects the numerous citations from the literature throughout this thesis.

The anonymous parent respondents to the online survey showed that twenty three percent would consider moving home to access their preferred Primary school to secure admission. This increased to fifty percent considering moving home to access their preferred Secondary school to secure admission.

From the in-depth interviews of parents with limited economic capital that followed the online survey, some clear themes emerged. Despite sixty six percent of the participants having been directly adversely affected by the economic impact of the global pandemic in 2020-21 and ongoing to date, fifty percent referred to moving home to optimise their chances of securing their school of preference for their children. The scale of the sacrifices made to achieve this emerged clearly in the narrative:

> "*we were really happy in Pxxxxxx but had to move to get Dxxxx Mxxx. I hate stupid catchment system. We live next door now so we should get it*" (Sasi) and " *I researched higher than Primary before I moved to the Hxxxx area because there are grammar schools there.*" (Nina)

James referred to the benefit of having two homes from which to register the children for School Admissions purposes following a parental divorce:

> " *Anyway, it was only because they had two addresses that we were able to play the system. They are at their mother's about eighty percent of the time, but we agreed to apply from my address. I don't know what we'd have done if we had to apply from her address*." (James)

Linking home address referred to by Sasi, Nina and James with De Voto and Wronowski (2019), they showed that attempts to reduce racial segregation in American Schools has not been wholly successful. Whilst the reasons for this cannot be conclusively understood, the ability to move to a more popular school which is affordably accessible from a housing cost perspective must be considered. Communities may also seek some comfort from clustering in homogenous groups to reduce the risk of threat and judgment. Wilson and Bridge (2019) also highlighted parental preference for social sorting in terms of residential area. Machin and Major

(2018) demonstrated that one third of middle-class parents moved home to access their preferred school, drawing on their economic capital and freedoms to do so. Miller (2019) showed that there is a twenty seven percent premium on residential property within close proximity of OFSTED 'Outstanding' schools. The clear implication is that those parents with sufficient economic capital use their economic power to price out those without economic capital to access these 'Outstanding' schools.

Whilst Sasi and Nina both moved homes to access their preferred schools, Sasi had to double her working hours and take on a long commute to afford the higher rent for a smaller property nearer the preferred school. She expressed sadness at leaving their previous community. Nina took on extra cash in hand cleaning jobs to support the expense of a move. She too referred to leaving her own racial community residential cluster and the support that community offered her.

The assumption that economically disadvantaged families cannot and do not move home to secure their favoured schools cannot be shown from the in-depth semi-structured interviews. However, what the interviews have demonstrated is the significant sacrifices that two of the parents made to realistically stand a chance of securing their preferred school place. Sasi and Nina drew on personal agency to '*play the system*' (James, research participant and Cameron 2008), but at considerable personal sacrifice to secure their school of preference for their children.

The influence of home address on School Admissions experiences can be shown as an exemplar of Bourdieu's economic capital in action.

5.8. Theme 2 Private Tuition

Seeking parents' views of their School Admissions experience, for the purposes of this thesis, was deliberately confined to capturing the voices of economically disadvantaged parents, despite being augmented by parental online surveys and questionnaires. Consequently, what was unexpected was that two interview participants referred to finding the funds for additional tuition, despite both having been laid off due to Covid, and both working second jobs or sending money to their country

of origin. Both these participants were born outside of England and also moved accommodation to secure their schools of preference for their children
The quality and effectiveness of this tuition is questioned now by both participants. Nina shared the following:

> "*There are different techniques in Poland, so we paid for extra lessons to learn the English techniques. I was at the airport then, so took on private cleaning in the weekends to pay for this…. I didn't know if the tutors were any good. I went through Explore Learning in the end, then Covid crashed everything*."

Sasi stated that when working as a hotel receptionist:

> *"I sent money home* (Thailand) *for years for him to have English lessons. I paid for nothing for years. They taught him American English. That money was wasted. It didn't work*. "

This drive and ambition for their children's education contrasts with the somewhat passive approach by two participants born in England: *"What can you do?"* (Gemma) and "*I didn't look at the OFSTED reports or the exam results*" (Anne).

Jerrim and Sims (2019) analysed the economic status of children who had secured places at selective Grammar Schools in England. Selection is based on entrance exam performance, colloquially known as the Eleven Plus, which inevitably requires preparation and tuition to be able to compete. Only three percent of Grammar School pupils are entitled to FSMs (The Sutton Trust 2015). In January 2021, 17.3 percent of the English pupil population were entitled to this benefit (BBC 2021: 2). Sasi, with her degree in Mathematics, worked as a hotel receptionist to fund private English lessons for her son to prepare him for the English education system and Nina worked as a cleaner to fund tuition for her daughter's Eleven Plus. Both expressed views that the tutoring they paid for had been a waste of money. The regulation and measure of effectiveness of private tutoring providers is scant at best in England. Parents with strong social capital can draw on their networks to seek recommendations based on prior performance. Nina and Sasi, new to the country, have been more vulnerable to

possibly unscrupulous or ineffective tutoring providers and expressed dissatisfaction with the impact of their tutoring input. Goldthorpe (2016) demonstrated the positive impact of parental (or grandparental) economic capital on a child's educational outcomes based on access to additional tutoring, and the ability to move home. Major and Machin (2018) showed that forty two percent of pupils in England had received some form of private tutoring during their years of compulsory education, at an average cost of £29 per hour. The tutoring industry, exclusively available to those who can afford it, or for those that make considerable personal sacrifices to afford it, is an invisible (in that, unregulated) influence on equality of educational opportunity and access to selective state funded schools in England for all children. The influence of private tutoring does somewhat go behind policy makers' and politicians' aspirations for education to be the vehicle for family advancement for all.

The theme of tutoring can be interpreted as Bourdieu's economic capital in action, cited as affordable with sacrifices by some participants, or out of economic reach for all from the literature. It could also be argued that social capital can facilitate access to the most effective tutors via personal recommendation.

5.9. Theme 3 Gender of parent

Seeking parents' views of their School Admissions experiences, through the lens of economic disadvantage, must encompass both parents to offer equitable and realistic findings. Four of the six children for whom parents told their School Admissions stories for this thesis do not live with their birth fathers. The view of three of the four non-resident fathers was not referred to even once by mothers.

Of all the parent in-depth semi-structured interview participants, only one was male. Female participants stated involvement of fathers in the decision-making process minimally at best or remained silent on fathers' influence regarding School Admissions at most. The sole male research participant referred to his ex-wife's influence on their admissions decisions. As stated in section 5.6, James shared that his ex-wife was committed to a Catholic education for their children. He explained that to secure this, he had to make the application from his address as his ex-wife did not live close enough to a Catholic School. James also explained that he had to take the children to Catholic church services, even though he is not a member of the church, to secure

a Priest's signature of support with the application. Cherlin (2010) shows that children often attain better and have fewer disciplinary problems during their school years if fathers' resident in the family home are highly involved with their education. But parent involvement has frequently been assumed to be mothers' involvement. He shows that in schools and settings in America, communication to home has been targeted at mothers, invitations to visit and support schools have expected to garner a response and attendance by mothers. Lynch (2019) states that although mothers have traditionally been more involved in their children's education than fathers, research suggests that fathers have become more involved over recent years. Existing research is reasonably conclusive that fathers who are well integrated and involved in all aspects of their children's lives, whether the mother works or not, are most likely to positively influence the educational experience of their children. Access to fathers as semi-structured in-depth interview participants proved to be highly challenging. The attempt to recruit parent participants through social media was disappointing, but one of the social media sites utilised was Mumsnet. Head Teachers also referenced access to fathers as being challenging when declining my approaches to facilitate introductions to potential parent participants. They shared that fathers remain very much in the minority at school drop off and pick up time when staff/parent relationships are informally created during the early years of Primary School.

Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) discuss how researchers being of the same gender as their research participants aids with openness, comfort and information sharing. Reflexively, this was not found to be true during the data gathering phase of this research. As a female researcher, I do not believe that I was hampered in accessing parents due to my gender. The greatest challenge was accessing parents of any gender during the pandemic. Commentary on accessing fathers is recognised across the education system in general terms, not specifically a barrier to me as a female. However, Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt's position suggests that access to fathers as participants for this thesis may have been less of a challenge for male researchers when using a convenience and opportunistic approach based on existing networks and snowballing recruitment. The challenges for policy makers and public service administrators are more profound when seeking to meet the aspirations and expectations of all parents. It is suggested that the voice of fathers, especially fathers who live apart from their children, is quieter than that of mothers

pertaining to their children's education, especially regarding influencing parental preference in school place allocation.

The legislation pertaining to Parental Responsibility was changed so as from 1st December 2003, unmarried fathers who have their names registered on their child's birth certificates have full Parental Responsibility automatically conferred. Mothers have the power to determine whether fathers are named when a new-born baby is registered when the parents are unmarried or in a civil partnership (Children Act 1989 Section 3 (1). When applying for a school place, then, the parent with automatically conferred Parental Responsibility at the birth of the child (the mother when the parents are unmarried) holds the right and responsibility to determine how that child is to be educated (at school or otherwise). It also significantly weakens fathers' rights (when Parental Responsibility is not conferred) to influence their preference when applying for a school place. This suggests that the School Admissions process does not fully recognise the experiences of absent fathers or fathers without Parental Responsibility in accessing their preferred places. In terms of the School Admissions process being unsighted on families situations, knowledge of economic circumstances is prohibited from being sought in the application process. Whilst this allows for 'blind' allocation, not allowing for overtly favouring applications from families with secure economic capital, it also disallows for positive discrimination in favour of the economically disadvantaged. Mothers have shared generously of their personal experience of their School Admissions experience for the purposes of this research. Fathers have been marginalised in capturing their voice, not by design, but due to lack of access. This is reflected in the work of David, Goouch, Powell and Abbott (2003) when they considered the limited knowledge of working class fathers' attitudes and behaviours regarding their children's education. If the experiences of the economically disadvantaged have been such a challenge to capture and understand, the experiences of economically disadvantaged fathers have been even less understood. This presents a challenge to schools when considering the positive influence of fathers engaged with their children's upbringing on their children's attainment and behaviour – a shared goal for parents and schools. Bourdieu's *habitus* and cultural capital can be said to be informed by gender. Feminist theorists may also contest that social capital is informed by gender, linked to Haidt's foundation of oppression.

5.10. Theme 4 Emotional impact of Admissions experience

Excluding explicit references to happiness, emotional references cited by all parents emerged as the most prevalent theme, with all parents using some emotion based descriptive vocabulary when articulating their School Admissions experience. These made up a compelling forty percent of commonalities identified from parent participant narratives. Examples from all parent participants include (not exhaustive) stressful (8), struggle (7) and annoying (5) as the most common terms.

Positive emotional terminology used by parent participants	Negative emotional terminology used by parent participants
Kindness	*Nervous*
Comfortable	*Upsetting*
Warm	*Sad*
Pleased	*Struggle*
Encouraged	*Clinical and uncaring*
Proud	*Threatening*
Lucky	*Panicky*
Passion	*Awful*
	Shocked, speechless
	Rude
	Intimidating
	Terrified
	Worries and concerns
	Feels like a lottery
	Control and influence
	Boring
	Mean
	Cried every night
	Annoying
	Stressful

Figure 5.8 Analysis of emotional references as greatest prevalence in Figures 5.4 and 5.5

Analysis of all in-depth semi-structured interviews and parent questionnaires showed the emotional nature of the School Admissions experience. One hundred percent of participants referred to some degree of personal negative emotional response during and after their engagement with the School Admissions process. Wilby (2007) referred to middle class parents' angst and fear about being allocated the 'wrong' secondary school for their children. What was clear from the descriptive language of all the parents that participated in the in-depth semi-structured interviews was the emotional responses they experienced during their engagement with the School Admissions process. The parent participants did not categorise themselves as middle class and did not describe sharing information about School Admissions over the dinner parties that Gibbons wrote of:

> "*Chatter of middle-class dinner parties in Britain that good schools push up house prices. Stories of anxious parents buying or renting at inflated prices in the catchment areas of well-regarded schools are commonplace*" (2012:1).

The parent research participants described having conversations about school applications at the Primary school gates, or with friends as members of their own ethnic communities. As Burgess et al. refer to this as: "*Grapevine knowledge informed choices rather than published information*" (2019: 692)

Major and Machin wrote of the middle classes "*commandeering*" education to retain their privileged position using a range of "*tactics*" (2018: 19). They also referred to an admissions "*arms race"* (*ibid*.). This war-like vocabulary certainly echoes with vocabulary adopted by the in-depth semi-structured interview participants: "*fight*" (Nina) and "*struggle*" (Sasi) as examples. If successful engagement with the School Admissions process is a battle to secure a preferred allocated place, the economically disadvantaged parents that were interviewed certainly did not describe having sufficient weapons and resources in their armoury to draw upon to guarantee success. Having uncovered the emotional nature of the School Admissions process for parents, the question remains, where within the bureaucratic process is this recognised? It is suggested that this aspect of the process for parents is not explicitly recognised by the system that administers that process. It most certainly did not emerge from School

Admissions Managers' interviews. The emotional findings from parent participants can be said to draw from each of Haidt's foundations to a degree, but most clearly *fairness/cheating* and *authority/subversion*.

5.11. Theme 5 Happiness

Capturing parents' views of their experiences in seeking a preferred school place as the theoretical framework for this thesis, it would be remiss in not seeking to hear parents' aspirations for their children. This is particularly key when considering politicians' stated aspirations for education to be a principle vehicle for social mobility. Parental aspirations for their children can take many forms. Having analysed parent voice through the lens of their economic disadvantage, one might assume that financial security may be an aspiration. However, this is not exclusively the case.

Analysis of spoken responses from the in-depth semi-structured parent participant interviews conducted, expressed common emergent aspirational themes. Explicit references to 'happiness' as an aspiration for their children emerged strongly as a commonality as shown in Figure 5.5. How happiness is measured and quantified was not pursued in this research but may be an area of further research moving forward.

The concept of happiness for their child/children was an aspiration cited by all in-depth semi-structured interview participants and seventy percent of the online survey parent respondents. When seeking a better understanding of what happiness meant to each semi-structured in-depth interview participant, it was apparent that this is a vague term which could not be quantified. By drawing from the interviews, happiness was widely described as having career choices, financial security, friendships and not being bullied. But all these examples of personal capital were explicitly described under the ubiquitous term of happiness. *"It means that Axxx has mates, no one gives him a hard time like I got, that he ends up with a job that he likes, don't know what that would be"* (Gemma).

To meet parental aspirations of happiness for their children is a challenge for school leaders and policy makers. Ensuring that all pupils are happy is virtually impossible

as happiness is such a subjective term with a plethora of meanings that are individual and subjective.

The term 'happiness', cited by all in-depth semi-structured parent research participants is a new finding. From the existing literature reviewed, happiness for parents' children is not explicitly articulated as an aim, aspiration or goal within education.

Happiness was also a significant theme from the online survey pertaining to parents' aspirations for their children's school experience. Examples include: "*That they were happy, formed positive friendships, they were well supported in their learning and also emotionally supported, felt safe and secure and are happy to go to school*." (anon. survey respondent 2) and "*Good friends, quality teaching and to be happy"* (anon. survey respondent 6). In summary, survey respondent 7 offered a phrase that accords with much of the parental voice captured from parental questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews and online survey – *"just that my child is happy"*. A simple, but common aspiration shared by the majority of parents for their child's schooling.

The concept of happiness at school emerged more clearly than aspirations for quality learning and exam success. Anne stated that "*they'll learn far better if they're happy"* and survey respondent 2 stated that she sought "*a happy school and learn through play*". This suggests that parents consider access to learning is better facilitated through children being happy at school. This accords with Buchanan's call to:

> "*pull a key lever of change…. positive education and well-being support learning. They ought to sit alongside maximising pupils' achievements as strategic aims in our schools and the education systems in the UK*." (2018:1).

This was echoed by Erricker when she stated that:

> "*we know from experience that happy children are healthier, learn better, display more emotional literacy and are better behaved*" (2009:1).

She goes on to refer to a culture within education as happiness being seen as 'soft'. This is reflected in the latest OFSTED inspection framework 2021 'what will inspectors consider when making judgements' section. There is no explicit reference to happiness of pupils or staff. Language adopted is:

> "*learner positive attitudes…committed…resilient…take pride…positive and respectful culture…create an environment where bullying, peer on peer abuse or discrimination are not tolerated"* (2021:239).

Wilson and Worsley, when considering Lareau's work, refer to a parent research participant as "*striving for her children to be happy"* (2021: 780).

It would appear that parents value happiness for their children at school, and the education system, through its inspection framework, is not required to recognise or be measured against happiness matrices. Social and emotional well-being is referred to in the current inspection framework which parental references to happiness may point to. However, even accepting this as a linguistic nuance, the disconnect needs to be recognised and addressed for all parents to be able to determine the best schools for their children to meet their aspirations of happiness. Whilst measurements of happiness are challenging to achieve due to the very personal nature of happiness, an education system shy of adopting the term will not bridge the gap between parental aspiration and confidence in making the most appropriate school application decisions. The findings of the World Happiness Report 2021 (Helliwell et al.) have been, unsurprisingly, dominated by the worldwide pandemic. Scant comment has been made about education. However, much has been stated about the negative impact of the pandemic on well-being. What is also shown is that the pandemic has disproportionately negatively impacted on the happiness of low skilled workers with almost three times more lower skilled and low income workers losing their jobs or having to reduce their working hours. Women were worst hit, with four in ten experiencing reduced income. Bagley et al. found similar findings in their parent interviews and state that:

> "*whereas some parents expressed concerns…about a school not providing a caring environment and over-emphasising exam results, no evidence was*

found of the reverse: namely parents being put off a school because it did not…provide an academic environment and placed too much emphasis on a caring environment" (2010: 319)

Bourdieu's cultural and social capital can be identified as relevant when considering how parents are influenced to understand and describe their own interpretations of 'happiness'.

5.12. Theme 6 English and overseas born parents' experiences

The findings from Admissions Managers in-depth semi-structured interviews did not identify the impact of speaking English as a second language for parents. Analysis of parent voice from parents in-depth semi-structured interviews offers considerable insight into the impact of this characteristic. Learning from this finding will follow in Chapter 6. Nor did Admissions Managers acknowledge the variance in knowledge of the admissions system and research undertaken by parents born abroad:

'Didn't know about the Appeals procedure until I was in that predicament. As an overseas mother I was not aware of how to apply for Reception until I discussed with other mothers at Play Group (KMW questionnaire)

What was striking was the lack of confidence of parents not born in England pertaining to School Admissions: "*My English is rubbish", " We are shy. It's a problem*" (Magda). Nina stated, "w*hen you come to a new country, you have to work harder to get the best for your child because no one helps you.*" This reflects Antony-Newman's findings in 2019 which shows that levels of communication between teaching staff and parents born outside the United Kingdom differed from those born within the United Kingdom. Bringing together the political concept of active and responsible parenting, and the experiences of parents born outside England, Antony Newman states:

"In English-speaking countries the impetus is on parents to initiate the involvement (Crozier and Davies, 2007), but "good parents" are expected to do it in a way that supports existing policies and

> *practices rather than criticizes the school system (Doucet, 2011; Guo, 2011). Parental involvement is encouraged, but only in forms approved by the school and beneficial to it. If you are overtly critical of school practices, you are labelled as "too involved" (Doucet, 2011), but if you are not a frequent visitor in classrooms, then teachers may consider you "hard to reach" (Crozier and Davies, 2007). Coming from different cultures and being shaped by different educational experiences, immigrant parents are often caught between the two extremes of inadequate and excessive involvement (2019:13)"*

Two overseas born mothers were relentless and focussed on securing their school of preference for their children, with limitless sacrifices evident in their manipulation of the process, such as moving home away from known communities and accessing additional tutoring. This may be a reflection on their perception that this is what is required to achieve their preference of allocated school place. Sasi's experience from Thailand is that any school is available to any child, regardless of their home address, as long as they can travel there. Nina's experience from Poland is that all children are enrolled at their local school, without any option for expressing a preference for another school. It may be suggested that English born parents are less likely to believe such personal investment is required to secure their preferred choice as they take this concept of preference for granted.

Nina and Sasi were also satisfied to settle for schools for one of their children (that they perceived to be less academically able than the other/s) as long as their English Speakers of Other languages (ESOL) and SEN were kindly met: "*I'm not going to fight because he started here without speaking English. I can't expect too much*." (Sasi) and " *My son didn't need anything. He's smart. We sat with my daughter and worked with her*." (Nina)

Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane (2019) demonstrated that some popular schools adopt covert selection techniques when recruiting new pupils. They showed that complex admissions and appeals arrangements can present barriers to admission for some parents. Magda was highly aware of her own perceived poor English

language skills. She referred to a language barrier no less than fourteen times during her interview. "*I speak very bad English*" (Magda) was the most explicit. Sasi stated that "*my English is rubbish*" and Nina stated "*I learned English in the old people's home and at my private cleaning jobs. One job, he was a judge, she was an artist – she helped me to learn English by telling me to watch children's TV programmes.*" It could be suggested that Magda, Sasi and Nina may be the parents that Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane were referring to as being ill-equipped to navigate complex admissions and appeals criteria based on their self-identified lack of proficiency in spoken and written English.

Two of the three participants born and educated in England reported feeling powerless in terms of their influencing the School Admissions process. "*It's crap, everyone knows it….no point in looking anywhere else, all the good schools are full*." (Gemma). Gemma's position reflects Reay and Ball's findings *into "the ambivalence displayed by many working-class parents in the research to the idea of choice of school"* (2006:89*). "It is very clinical and uncaring; you feel that you and your children are just numbers and their needs are not considered let alone the worries and concerns of parents. Having said that, if you play the game you can better your chances, but it still feels like a lottery.*" (James). Both Gemma and James appear to have more cultural capital than Nina, Magda and Sasi as they are native English speakers. However, the School Admissions system rendered them as feeling like passive participants in a pre-determined process based on where they live, with little or no influence being possible to exercise within the School Admissions system. Overseas born parents can be said to reflect Haidt's foundation of liberty/oppression and Bourdieu's cultural capital influences regarding their descriptions of their School Admissions experience.

5.13. Theme 7 Transport costs

When capturing the reality of school place preference from parents of economically limited means, the emergent issue of transport costs was not entirely unexpected. Gemma referenced the cost of transport as a consideration when making her School Admissions application, referring to her ability to pick her son up and drop him off. In 2021, in London, free bus passes were allocated to all school aged children (Transport

for London, 2021). If Tube travel is required, parents must meet that cost, albeit subsidised. In other parts of England, there is a cost implication if parents apply to and are allocated a school further than three miles from home (Primary) or further than five miles from home (Secondary). These distances are deemed as 'reasonable distance' in the School Admissions Code (2014). In Oxfordshire, as one example, subsidised public transport is provided when allocated schools are further from home than the prescribed distances as laid out in the School Admissions Code, but not if the distance is exceeded due to parental preference of school. This distance consideration feature of School Admissions allocation pertaining to transport is a particular feature of large rural areas of England. Even heavily subsidised, as the Oxfordshire school transport is, parents must still contribute £5 per child per week to meet transport costs if their preferred school place is allocated and is beyond 'reasonable distance'. There are thirty-eight school weeks per year, an average of two children per family, at £5 each child which represents a £760 per year financial burden to economically disadvantaged families (and all families living in Oxfordshire) living beyond reasonable distance from their allocated preferred school.

De Voto and Wronowski (2019), when considering racial segregation of public schools in America, cited transport costs as one of the influencing factors. If families cannot afford transport costs, they will be limited in terms of preferences available when identifying schools for their children. Through the opposite, but complimentary lens, Van den Brande, Hillary and Cullinane (2019) referenced transport costs as not being a barrier to middle class parents when accessing their preferred school for their children.

As Gemma stated: *"I couldn't do a long journey, leave too early in the morning and pay bus fares….. Well he'll be going to N****** H***. It's crap, everyone knows it, but it's close so I can still drop him off and pick him up."* Transport costs were certainly a barrier to preference for Gemma and her son.

Goldring and Phillips show that:

> *"those who were most likely to say that location was important were those who were least likely to have the resources necessary to*

sustain daily transportation to and from a faraway school" (2006: 213)

The influence of transport costs on School Admissions experiences directly reflects the impact of Bourdieu's economic capital in reality.

5.14. Theme 8 Digitalisation as the tool to apply for School Admission

The thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews of parents of limited economic means identified digital poverty as a potential barrier to securing a preferred school place. When compared to the Admissions Managers assumption of equal parental digital capital, through their silence on this feature, this could add to learning for policy makers and facilitators of policy. The impact of digitalisation referred to by parents is not unique to School Admissions alone in accessing public services as the circumstances surrounding the pandemic have highlighted. The pandemic did influence the method of interviewing parent participants as face to face was not always permissible and not all parents had access to Zoom, Teams or adequate connectivity.

Unexpectedly, the thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured parent interviews identified that eighty three percent of the participants expressed the online nature of School Admissions processes as a barrier to ease of application. Magda shared that *"I was happy because the Polish lady did the form for me and could speak to me and my daughter (in Polish)"*. Having to cover the cost to print out forms for individual schools (specifically Grammar Schools) was also identified as a challenge. Nina stated, *"but I had to go directly to each school, pay to print the forms and fill in each one separately*." Making applications through a mobile phone which is not configured to access the full pan London admissions system (called Admissions Gateway) was reported as a barrier to submitting admissions applications. Anne relayed that "*my husband had to finish the choices on his Android…. If I had to do the Admissions Gateway again, that would be a big problem. I'm dyslexic and don't like computers. A paper form would be much better."*

Digital poverty has been highlighted as a challenge for some parents during the pandemic. (UK Parliament Post, 2020). During the pandemic 2020-21 and ongoing to date, the Department for Education had to provide 1.3 million laptops and dongles to

school aged children to facilitate their access to remote learning during periods of school closure (DfE 2021). Based on parent participant interviews, digital poverty has disadvantaged them prior to and during the pandemic when accessing the School Admissions system online, more recently coupled with the wider challenge of remote learning being accessible to all children nationally. As Magda stated, "*we don't have a computer*". Politicians and policy makers must be sensitive to and cognisant of the digital and literacy poverty experienced by some parents if the aspiration for education as a social mobility vehicle through preference based school place allocation is to be realised. The pandemic has exposed this inequality regarding digital poverty, and the learning from this must be sustained in the post pandemic world for all citizens to be able to fully access resources and services available to them.

Digital poverty may be a direct result of limited economic capital, as Bourdieu theorised. However, digital poverty could arguably be said to demonstrate insufficient symbolic capital to access learning opportunities adequate enough to access digital tools.

5.15. Theme 9 Parents' educational experience

Capturing parental voice about their School Admissions experience from their economically disadvantaged perspectives, it was important to seek parents' own educational experiences, linked to current work status. These findings may also go some way to assess politicians' aspirations for education as a vehicle for families' advancement as realistic or not.

One hundred percent of the in-depth semi-structured research participants referred to their own educational experience as not directly relevant to their own careers/jobs/means of earning their livings. The three participants born and educated outside England all described a clear professional pathway established in their countries of origin, but these did not translate to the English employment market. All three had to amend their personal career aspirations when arriving and making their homes in England and referred to wanting different for their children. Examples cited by parents as ambitions for their children were *'Engineer'* (Sasi) and '*multi-media'* (Nina). Sasi, as a Mathematics graduate in her country of origin, is working as a Nursery Assistant in England. Magda completed an apprenticeship in Retail before

moving to England where she is now a domestic cleaner "*but now I have been cleaning for 15 years and my shop course is no good"* (Magda). Nina went to university in her home country, and now in England, *"I've been a carer in an old people's home for seven months since Covid."* (Nina)

Gemma was born and educated in England. Her view of the education system that she experienced was reported as " *I don't agree with exams, they don't mean anything. Doesn't make you a good person…. The system doesn't know us, and the schools don't really care"* (Gemma). English born James described his own education and how it prepared him for his working life as "*it wasn't very good, but we had fun. I didn't get great results, well, quite bad really. Some went into the professions. I went into business, always expected to. My father's influence I suppose. That's fine when business is good, less so now"* (James).

None of the in-depth semi-structured interview parent participants, whether English born and educated or not, were working in trades or professions that they had originally trained for. Gemma and James did not have any specific vocational training. Without exception, all parent participants described their income as being negatively impacted by the pandemic. Sasi, having described the lengths she has gone to in order to secure her preferred school for her son (taken on full time low paid work outside what she trained for, with a long commute, moved to a smaller home with higher rent and paid for tutoring), stated "*We are only in E**** for the education. My sons won't do the kind of jobs that I have to. They will do better, be professionals, earn well and be happy."* Sasi's drive and person sacrifice on behalf of her sons has been clearly articulated here. She has equated admission to the professions as a route to contentment. This reflects the politicians' aspirations for education as a vehicle for social mobility as laid out in sections 1.3 and 2.7. However, the politicians did not articulate the sacrifices that Sasi has described. A longitudinal study would illustrate, in due course, whether Sasi's ambitions for her sons, and her personal sacrifices, have paid off. This thematic finding is echoed by Goldring and Phillips when they state:

> "*Parents with higher educational attainment tend to place emphasis on the importance of education, and they are more likely to seek out information on the varieties of educational choices*" (2006: 211)

Bourdieu's symbolic capital is key to the influence of parents' own educational experience as identified within this theme. Arguably, Haidt's foundation of liberty/oppression may also apply as parents' educational experiences have afforded them freedoms or restrictions in adult life.

5.16. Theme 10 The influence of friendships

The influence of friends when determining admissions decisions by parents was the third most prevalent spoken reference that emerged from the semi-structured in-depth parent interview thematic analysis. Tellingly, this highlights yet another gap between Admissions Managers experiences, politicians' aspirations and parents' reality as friends are not referenced once in the School Admissions Code (2014) and are not considered as a ground to appeal an allocated school place. Parents stated:

> *"Well, it (happiness) means he has mates…The other mums in the area said…"(*Gemma*)*
>
> *"They should at least let the children meet before they start to make friends so they could match classmates together, all the quiet ones in one class and all the boisterous ones in another." (*James*)*
>
> *"I lived in xxx when I first arrived. My friends told me I needed to move for good schools….His friend's family drives him…My friend knew the xxx lady." (*Sasi*)*
>
> *"My girls just want to be happy with their friends…Other mums say there's a lot of space there…Her friends want to go there too…All the mums who went there said my daughter should go there…Everyone (friends) says it's strict." (*Anne)
>
> *"I told them about her friends…My friends said it was bad." (*Nina*)*
>
> *"My friend says it's good…My husband asked friends…My friend took me… I spoke with my friends." (Magda)*

The term childhood friendship is moderately illusive in the available literature on School Admissions reviewed in Chapter Two. Samson (2019) referred to social relationships and commonalties. However, this was through the lens of Jewish inter-divisions based on ethnic origin and levels of religious observance. The importance of friendship during the school years cannot be underestimated. As children learn to manage relationships, a skill that is important in adulthood, they learn how to temper their emotional responses, learn about loyalty and develop a shared moral code. When childhood friendships are secure, parent participants viewed them as a conduit to happiness. Ferrer and Fugate showed that:

> *'having friends even affects children's school performance. Children tend to have better attitudes about school and learning when they have friends there.*' (2002:1)

So when Gemma stated, "*as long as he's happy and not bullied*" and when James stated that "*some of her friends' families are interesting, mixed, that's a good thing*", by describing in their own words their aspirations pertaining to friendship and happiness, they may have been drawing on their own childhood experiences and the impact of friendship then. Gemma shared "*I sort of lost touch with most of my friends from school…. I was bullied by a group of girls*." James stated of his own education that "*we had fun*". Gemma's negative experience could be said to reflect her ambitions for her son, and James' positive experience accords with his reflection of his daughter's experience with school friends.

This research has been undertaken cognisant of existing literature about communities seeking reassurance within like-minded groups. Burgess et al. describe this as "*parents search for the 'right' social and racial mix for their children*" (2019: 692). In the context of this research, parental description of friendships has been adopted to reflect this thematic finding.

Adult friendships seem to have a significant influence on fifty percent of the participants during their engagement with the School Admissions process. "*My friend told me to go to the Catholic school in the next road to where our room was*." (Magda) "*I spoke with my friends. We went for one school…. Her friends want to go there too and there are kids from the year above who went there.*" (Anne) "*Other mothers say*

there's a lot of space there." (Gemma). It is reasonable to state that adult friendships are known to be positive influences on adult well-being and can influence decision making processes. However, the literature pertaining to School Admissions refers to societal and community groupings sticking together for security and understanding of social norms, as shown by De Voto and Wronowski (2019). Parents adopt the vocabulary of friendship in this research in lieu of societal and community grouping explicit references. Wilson and Bridge suggest that school places should be allocated based on social characteristics and proportionate representation in each institution to the local area. This would require identification of levels of deprivation based on postcode, from which prospective pupils could be positively recruited for admission to the most popular accessible schools. Whilst the work of De Voto and Wronowski and Wilson and Bridge recognises the value that communities place on proximity, they do not reference adult friendships, and their influence on children's education as explicitly as the parent participants did in their in-depth semi-structured interviews. Verbrugge, in her work examining '*status-similarity'* in adult friendships, shows her proximity principle that "*the more similar people are, the more likely they will meet and become friends*" (1977:591). The wealth of literature that is available examining the phenomenon of adult friendships is extensive (such as Lyubomirsky, Veenhoven, Argyle and Ahmed) and commonly concludes that adult friendships are key to secure mental health and well-being. What is not evident from the existing literature is the direct influence that adult friendships have on parental decision-making pertaining to School Admissions. However, drawing on Verbrugge, similarly minded individuals will inevitably value the views, opinions and influence of their friends. This has been shown by Magda, Anne and Gemma in their reference to their adult friendships, or lack of, and those influences on School Admissions decisions. The dinner party chatter about School Admissions that Gibbons (2012) wrote of (section 5.10) was not an experience familiar to the in-depth semi-structured interview parents in this thesis, perhaps because their economic and social capital precluded them from the middle-class circles of Gibbons' work. Bourdieu's social capital is exemplified within this theme.

5.17. Theme 11 Religion and Race

Given that parents identified for in-depth semi-structured interviewing were identified by drawing on convenience based and snowballing approaches, the influence of religion on their lived School Admissions experiences was noteworthy.

Religion was referenced by fifty percent of the in-depth semi-structured interview participants, specifically the Catholic faith coupled with aspirations to a Catholic education for their children. The supporting signature of a priest required for admission to a Catholic school thwarted the ambitions of two parents, Magda and Anne:

> *"We needed agreement of the church. The priest said he didn't know us but knew we are Christian. She didn't get C.W school because of the priest" (*Magda*).*

The priest supported the ambitions of one parent interview participant, James, albeit because he had taken his children to church services despite not being a member of the Catholic faith himself:

> *"She wanted a faith school. I wasn't that bothered, but I suppose I like the structures, expectations and routines, so I took them to Mass when I had them…. She (*the Head Teacher*) interviewed me really, just checking where I lived and whether the children went to Mass. My ex-wife had to get the priest to sign something" (*James*).*

Religion was also referred to as an excluding characteristic by Gemma:

> *"Most of the mums at school are friends because they go to the same mosque." (*Gemma*)*

Race was referred to by Sasi as an excluding characteristic, although not directly linked to School Admissions:

> *"In my husband's village (*Lancashire*) they look at me because maybe I am Asian. We came here (*London*) and everyone was so kind to me." (Sasi).*

Wilson and Bridge (2019) and De Voto and Wronowski (2019) wrote of the impact of race in terms of School Admissions. Sasi became aware of it on her move from Thailand to a small village in England. She has stated that her subsequent move to London "*for the education*" has been more "*welcoming*" and "*friendly*". (Sasi)

The last available National Census data from 2011 shows that over twenty five percent of the population in the United Kingdom declares as having no affiliation to any organised religion. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that twenty five percent of parents are effectively excluded from preferring a school that happens to be faith-based for their children if a supporting reference from the local faith leader is required for admission, despite those schools being funded by all taxpayers, of all faiths and none. Samson (2019) explored how Jewish schools may exacerbate inter-Jewish tensions regarding observance of the faith. Allen and Parameshwaran stated:

> *"…. greater choice of schools to church-going families, but this also exacerbates inequalities in choice because these families are more likely to be of a higher social class." (*2016:3*).*

And yet, in 2018, ten percent of new schools opened in England were designated as faith schools. The School Admissions Code (2014) allows for faith observance to be a priority criteria for admission to a faith school. Pring (2018) explores the place of faith schools as a potentially divisive element in multi-cultural Britain. Parent questionnaire respondents referred to having their "*atheism hardened*" (ST) and being "*interviewed and assessed for Catholicity"* (PH). Conversely, another parent questionnaire respondent stated that she was "*lucky to have good Catholic schools near me"* (NT). It could be suggested that luck should not be a determining factor in School Admission success. For fifty percent of in-depth semi-structured interview participants, a faith-based education was an aspiration (achieved by James alone, not a member of that faith, but able to manipulate the system to his advantage by amending his religious habits).

Responses from the parent online survey showed that eight percent of parents have amended their religious habits to access their preferred Primary school with a further eight percent somewhat amending their religious habits. To access their preferred

Secondary school place, twenty percent of parents who responded to the anonymous online survey have amended their religious habits.

Baroness Berridge (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for School System) stated in 2021 that she would 'not rule out' significant additional funding to support the expansion of faith based Multi Academy Trusts in England. A spokesperson for the Catholic Education Service said "*the schools admissions code is incredibly complex and is accompanied by hundreds of pages of legal framework*". (26th February 2018 The Independent)

The position regarding the place of faith-based state funded schools in modern Britain remains mixed with strongly held opposing views. What is not in dispute is their exclusivity to parents with compelling religious credentials based on views that have been acquired during this research. Bourdieu's cultural capital is exemplified within these thematic findings.

5.18 Theme 12: Research

The second highest prevalence referenced by in-depth interview parent participants was the extent of their research carried out on various schools when determining which to state as preferences for the Admissions process. Given that professional Admissions Managers stated:

> *'Having sat in many appeals last year many parents haven't even visited the school they were offered and believed everything that the other parents said' (*Admissions Manager 1*)* and:
>
> *'Some parents are able to rank and work out what the likelihood of getting a place is.' (*Admissions Manager 3*)*

it is reasonable to suggest that success in securing a preferred place is based on being '*realistic'* and researching what might be realistic.

Parent participants referred to research undertaken in the follow terms:

> *"I did everything blind…I did what my friend told me…I had no idea…I didn't look at the website or visit because my English is very bad." (*Magda*)*

*"I didn't know I could look or apply anywhere else…I don't look at the OFSTED report or exam results…Not much, just sent him to closest school, it was easiest." (*Gemma*)*

*"I didn't know you got as many as 6 choices…Reputation…We went for one school." (*James*)*

*"Only made one application…I read all the OFSTED reports…I'm not a teacher, what do you look for? Thought I'd interview the Head, but she interviewed me." (*Nina*)*

*"(My friends) we spoke about the best school…My friend says it's good…One had an Outstanding OFSTED banner outside…Reputation in the community most important." (*Anne*)*

*"I go to open days…I find out about exam results…I researched everything." (*Sasi*)*

There is compelling disparity between the expectations of Admissions Managers (see Figure 4.8) and politicians viewing parents as informed researchers and consumers (Wilkins 2010) and the reality of the parents interviewed for this thesis. Only two of the six interview participants were thorough and systematic in conducting the type of research assumed as necessary by Admissions Managers. Reference to Burgess *et al.* and Goldring's' findings on varying parental research methods have been cited above. Haidt's foundation of fairness/cheating and authority/subversion may arguably apply to research opportunities, equally available to all parents regardless of agency, transparently accessible from the institutions seeking to attract or deter applications for admission.

5.19. Synopsis

Highlights from the thematic analysis of parent participant in-depth semi-structured interviews reveal the importance and value of belonging when considering School Admissions applications. From belonging to a friendship group, faith group (Catholic)

and belonging to a group based on immigrant nationality and shared language (Polish). Inclusion is key to parents when considering School Admissions. "*I got a really warm welcome when I went into reception. I liked that vibe and that welcome"* (Anne). Bagley et al. refer in the negative to what Anne suggests as "*working class were made to feel unwelcome and unwanted*" (2010: 317).

This is also evidenced by what has been implied in terms of exclusion from the fee paying sector: "*I knew fees would be out of the question so I found a house that I wouldn't ordinarily have looked at, but it was in the right catchment"* (James) and "*I couldn't afford private"* (Nina). Moving to inclusion within the parents' groups at the school gate: " *I'm not part of their group*" (Gemma). Insecurity about ability to influence the admissions process based on accommodation address is evident: *"I don't know what we'd have done if we had to apply from her address*" (James); "*they gave you a list of the closest schools. The catchment is very tight*" (Anne). Further parental insecurity is shown regarding having sufficient spoken and written English language skills to access the admissions process fully: "*I didn't look at any website or visit because my English is very bad*" (Magda). This revealed a lack of confidence, articulated as "*shyness*" (Magda), or perceived need to "*fight*" (Nina). The fifty percent of participants who are speakers of other languages before English all referred to 'help' when arriving in England regarding accessing the School Admissions and education system. Whilst there were some contradictions about not receiving help, or not wanting help due to "*pride*" (Nina), there were also comments favourably stated about help available with English Speaking of Other Languages: "*the ESOL team at Bxxxx were fantastic…..I really appreciate them.*" (Sasi) . Feelings of guilt were evident from two participants about inability to help their children as they perceived poor English to be a barrier to most effectively accessing the School Admissions process.

A third of the interview participants explicitly referred to pretence of preference when considering School Admissions, and how this pretence should cease. "*Well, get rid of the pretence that parents get a choice for starters. It's simply not the case*" (James). "*Stop pretending there's a choice"* (Gemma). Outside of the interview parent participant cohort, this theme was also evident from the parental questionnaire respondents and online survey, mindful that these cohorts are not proved to be of economically limited means:

"*More emphasis is needed to explain that parents express a preference not a choice. The two are often interchanged particularly in the media. I've a "preference" to drive a Ferrari – but it's not going to happen.'* (GY pilot).

"*Stop pretending there's a choice. The whole process of School Admissions were particularly stressful times and my experience of both Reception and Year 7 has led me to believe that there is absolutely no choice in the process. At the time of the Year 7 process there was evidence to suggest that the school was actually influencing the intake by areas"* (CY pilot).

"*No choice if you don't live close to good schools"* (Anon. survey respondent 3)

Themes one to eighteen offer detailed insight into factors encountered and experienced by parents of limited economic means when seeking their preferred school place. These themes have been identified and offered as drawn from parents own descriptions of their experiences. This answers the question – how is the School Admissions experience described by parents of limited social and economic capital? which emerged from the Literature Review in Chapter Two.

5.20. Final word from parents

As befits the purpose of this thesis, to hear parents' lived experiences of their School Admissions encounters, the final word must be theirs – having given so generously of their time and openness when sharing their personal life experiences and the emotional impact on them in seeking to secure their preferred school place.

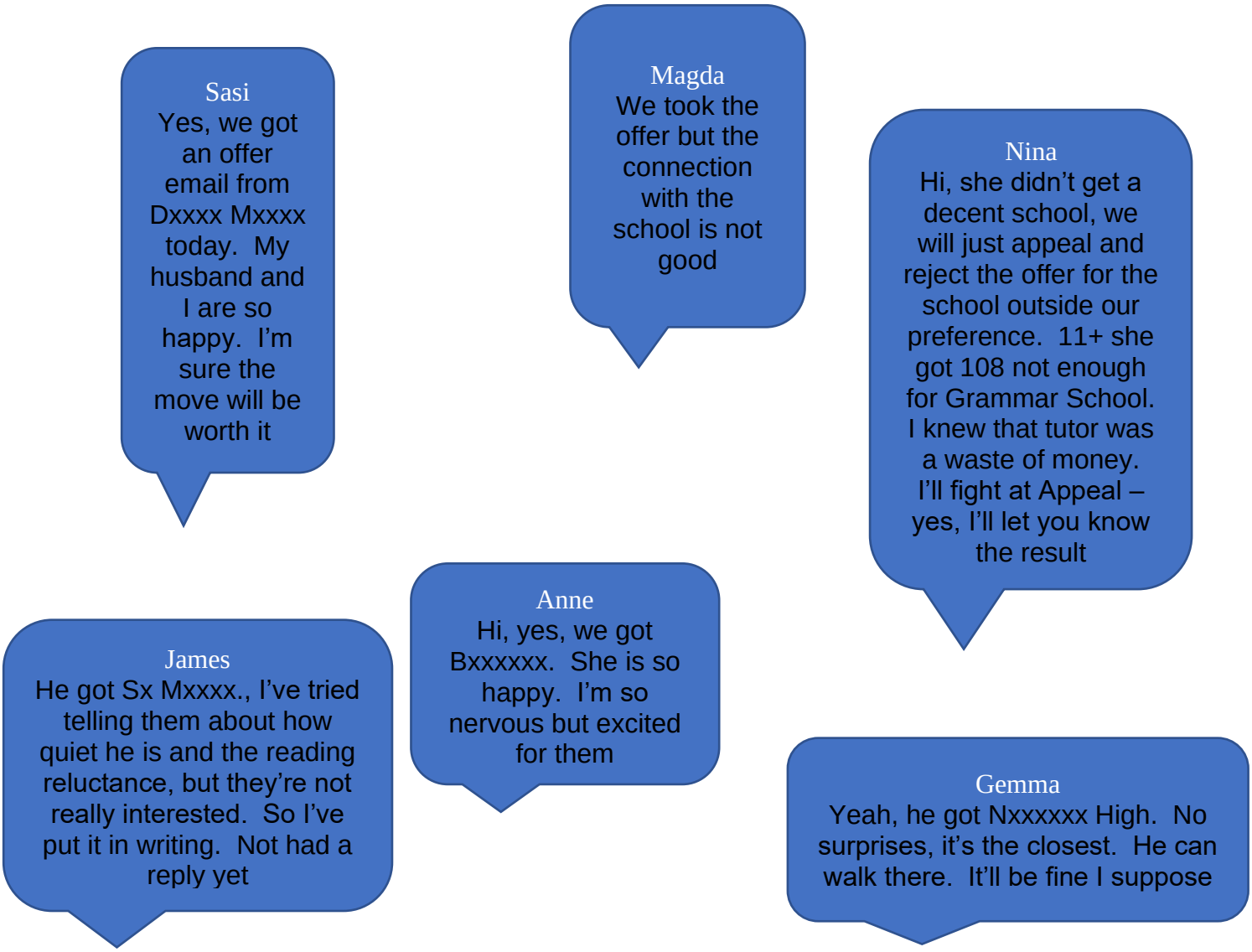

Figure 5.9 Parental participants' outcomes of their preferred school place applications

Having become immersed in the individual experiences of each parent participant, a postscript to Nina's experience is offered by way of concluding her admissions experience. Nina was successful in appealing for an alternative place to a preferred Grammar School place for her daughter. She believes that her appeal was successful

because the school place that she ‘won’ was at a non-oversubscribed school. Before readers can reflect on a satisfactory ending for Nina and her daughter, Nina also shared that, because she will be sending her daughter to a school of (second) preference beyond the prescribed five-mile reasonable travel distance radius, not her closest school, she is not entitled to financial help with travel costs. Nina explained that her Local Authority is ‘bankrupt’, as reported to her. She is seeking another private cleaning job to cover the costs of her daughter’s rail fares.

Chapter Six Discussion, new knowledge, recommendations and conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers summary conclusions from the qualitative and quantitative findings presented in Chapters Four and Five with discussion and recommendations for future School Admissions legislation iterations. This is for politicians and those who administer that process as intended receivers and critics of the thesis. This is based on new knowledge from parent research participants that captures their lived experiences and the emotive nature of those experiences.

The further issues that have emerged throughout this thesis are reflected in this chapter with new insight offered against each

- What, if any, are the barriers to admission to preferred schools for children and parents of limited social and economic capital? (Section 5.19)
- Are there recommendations to be drawn from this thesis' findings to inform policy and practice? (Section 6.3)
- How is the School Admissions experience described by parents of limited social and economic capital? (Section 4.6)

What is indisputable is that not one of the in-depth semi-structured interview parent participants had an easy, stress-free and entirely satisfactory experience when engaging with the School Admissions process. The work of Bourdieu and Haidt has been extensively drawn upon to identify human capital and moral foundations enacted through research participants' School Admissions experiences. Their work has informed the following recommendations which are offered on behalf of parents who engage with the School Admissions process in the future.

6.2 Discussion

It can be stated that the neoliberal society that has developed in England iteratively through successive governments since the election in 1979 of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative majority has seen the reduction of the State as an entity. This political direction of travel is thought to address "*educational inequality and social immobility …. tackled through effective parenting*" (Hartas, 2015: 32) and as referred to by

political leaders in sections 1.3 and 27. Drawing on Lareau (2003), parents with a secure range of capitals to draw upon approach parenting and education in a highly planned, deliberate, organised and structured way. The promotion of the individual as master or mistress of their own destiny has taken precedence over universal State duty to care, include and guide all citizens. Whilst this approach to societal constructs seems to work sufficiently well for the majority, based on repeated elections of (differing) political parties promoting policies that support the diminution of the State, there are some losers in the race for social mobility – which could also be described as financial security and independence from State aid. Promotion of the concept of self-determination as a platform for success in educational terms (and therefore financial terms based on access to the most lucrative and respected employment outcomes following achievement of good exam results) is predicated on a common starting point for all parents when seeking a school place for their child. What has been shown, through parent voice captured within this thesis, is that this common starting point for all parents does not exist, based on varying access to economic and social capital with which to lever and influence admissions outcomes. Again drawing on Lareau, parents with limited economic and social capital seek happiness for their children over and above any other aspirations. This too has been shown from the parent research cohort interview analysis in Chapter Five. If politicians seek improved outcomes for future generations and parents of economically limited means seek happiness, using education as a vehicle for both, consideration must be given to whether both aspirations are exclusive or can be mutually satisfied and achieved.

This thesis could have sought to analyse the available School Admissions numerical data using a positivist methodology or seek the voice of parents from minority groups that do not have English as their first language or common ethnicity or that have learning difficulties or mental health difficulties or substance difficulties – the list could go on. I suggest that the findings might look similar to those shown through this adopted lens of economic disadvantage. That finding is that economically disadvantaged parents experience heightened emotional stress and anxiety when seeking their preferred school place within a policy structure that they have little control of or ability to influence; within a system whereby the State has promoted a concept of parental preference. These findings show that those children from economically disadvantaged families are less likely to succeed in securing a preferred place, even

assuming that they attempt this in the first place. The reasons are not purely administrative, they are more wide ranging systematically. Evidence of financial constraints to accessing preferred schools, confidence and language barriers have all been described by parent participants. Regardless, "*many of the parents…exhibited significant drive and agency to support their children in the (alternative) ways they felt best*" (Wilson and Worsley 2021: 781).

Regarding intersectionality, economic disadvantage is not in competition with any identified protected characteristic as defined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation). But no legal remedy to economic disadvantage discrimination, albeit unwitting discrimination, currently exists. Equalities legislation is currently blind to economic disadvantage discrimination. Section Fourteen of the Human Rights Act 1998 could accommodate poverty discrimination:

> *'Prohibition of Discrimination – the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status' (1998)*

It currently does not explicitly. 'Other' could imply economic disadvantage, only if those experiencing discrimination can prove that and those judging discrimination rule thus. However, economically disadvantaged parents can be said to be discriminated against within the Schools Admissions process, unable to meaningfully and confidently exercise their right of preference based on financial constraints thematically identified in Chapter Five from parent participants such as, where they live, the cost of transport to school, digital poverty and real or perceived need for private tuition to access selective schools.

In 2020 the government had the opportunity to address these inequalities radically during its review of the School Admissions Code in England and Wales. This opportunity was bypassed. A revised School Admissions Code became operationally active in September 2021. Disappointed parents remain at 'fault' for not being

sufficiently skilled and savvy to compete for favoured school places against parents with greater social and economic capital through lack of 'realistic' research and expectations. As cited in Wilson and Worsley:

> *"We need to shift from the individualist deficit construction – where the gap in achievement between children from different socioeconomic groups is based on differences in child-rearing preferences (Crozier et al, 2011; Goodall 2017) – to a model which respects and understands the social, economic and political contexts of families" (2021: 782)*

It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that if economically disadvantaged parents are more likely to have to resign themselves to what they are offered as non-preferred school places, they are less wedded to supporting their child's school. Using Goldring and others term 'resigned', Magda offers an example of this when she accepted a place at a school where "*the relationship is not good"*. A consequence of this may be interpreted through the lens of higher exclusion rates, high absence rates, and lower attainment rates of children eligible for FSMs. The permanent exclusion rate for FSM eligible pupils is 0.27 percent compared to 0.06 percent not eligible of the school aged population (Department for Education 2020). Pupils eligible for FSMs had an overall absence rate of 7.6 percent compared to 4.3 percent of non-eligible pupils. Pupils eligible for FSMs had a persistent absence rate of 23.8 percent compared to non-eligible pupils at 10.5 percent (Department for Education 2020). 34 percent of FSM eligible pupils achieved average attainment eight levels (measures of pupils' average grades across eight subjects) compared to 48.6 percent of the non-eligible cohort (Department for Education 2019). This data, coupled with parental voice captured for this thesis, offers an opportunity for future research to establish or dismiss the impact of economically disadvantaged parents having to settle for a non-preferred school place for their child, whilst aspiring to happiness as an outcome. This can be linked to Goldring's findings on the positive impact of home school relationships when parents achieve their choice of school in section 4.4.

Having examined politicians aspirations in sections 1.3 and 2.7 pertaining to School Admissions, empowering parents and championing education as a vehicle for social mobility – then comparing politicians' position to the emotive experiences of parents

having engaged with the admissions process – it is fair to say that there is a disparity between the principles of the School Admissions system and these parents' stated reality. The English democratic process has supported the rights of parents to express a preference through the existing School Admissions framework on behalf of their children when seeking a school place, which could also be interpreted as the State being blind to its responsibility for considering the least economically advantaged in being able to optimise and succeed in securing their right of first preference. From the research participants' experiences, those who 'won' made significant changes in their lives to do so. Reference was made to manipulating the system and what was reported clearly was the emotional nature of engaging with the School Admissions process.

Following the introduction of parental entitlement to preference regarding School Admissions in 1988, Wright states that:

> *"with these new powers and responsibilities offered to parents, the government gave no indication of how this builds up 'shared values' in the community or more insipid forms of cooperation between parents and the school. This coupled parental involvement with individual choices rather than collective interests , spreading the kind of selfish, individualistic values of market rationality that the government tried to offset with communitarian discourse…there has been a tendency for parental empowerment to have adverse effects on the relationships between parents, schools and Local Authorities" (2012: 285)*

The findings from Chapters Four and Five from capturing parental voice on their School Admissions experiences when facing economic disadvantage cannot be described as 'selfish'. However, they might be described as a response to an expectation of preference, in the context of personal constructs and supporting numerical data that shows preference cannot be guaranteed. Wright may have been accurate when he refers to "*adverse effects"* on parent/school relationships. For example, researcher participant James expected a personal response regarding his child's needs from a school yet to meet the child. Magda referred to the connection with her son's school not being good, and Nina continued to feel the need to "*fight"*.

Parent voice has identified a need to prefer schools based on their individual considerations of practical matters and aspirations for their individual children. It can be argued that this is not selfish, but a response to the context in which they seek a school place for their child. For policy makers to genuinely hand State power to parents regarding school preference, the State would need to relinquish responsibility for setting the statutory Admissions Code, by which it manages oversubscription to popular schools. It would also have to relieve schools of Published Admissions Numbers. In other words, it would have to remove the cap on pupil numbers at each school, thereby accommodating as many pupils as are applications received. This is unrealistic. School sites and buildings are finite. Transport route capacities and availability of qualified teachers in any one area are also finite. Children must be distributed across all schools available to prevent the creation of 'mega-schools' (based on ephemeral popularity), which would in turn, reduce school choice options from which parents have to draw upon to express a preference.

The recommendations in this thesis are offered based on research findings. Goldthorpe's work has accorded with many of these research findings and suggest:

> *"If the aim is to increase mobility, both upward and downward, by creating a greater equality in relative rates, the main implication is that what can be achieved through educational policy alone is limited—far more so than politicians find it convenient to suppose. The basic source of inequality of educational opportunity lies in the inequality of condition—the inequality in resources of various kinds—that exists among families with different locations within the class structure. Policies can of course be developed to try to offset the educational consequences of this inequality, from pre-school programmes for more disadvantaged children to measures aimed at creating a more socially balanced entry into elite universities. And these policies have much to commend them on educational grounds alone—in enabling children to develop their educational potential to the full…to look to the educational system itself to provide a solution to the problem of inequality of opportunity is to impose an undue—and, I would say, an unfair—burden upon it." (2016: 107)*

In terms of levelling across, should there be a political appetite to do so, the following recommendations could be considered to ensure that no child is disadvantaged in terms of securing their preferred school place, based on their parents lack of confidence, lack of financial security, lack of religious leader support or lack of motivation. These recommendations are offered in response to research questions that emerged from the Literature Review in section 2.14 - are there recommendations to be drawn from this thesis' findings to inform policy and practice? These are also foregrounded by the findings in Chapters Four and Five

6.3 Contribution to new knowledge

Having drawn from Bourdieu and Haidt throughout this research, it can be argued that their ideas have been applicable throughout through the lens of School Admissions. Evidence from research participants has been shown to reflect both human capitals and moral foundations extensively.

Findings from this thesis strongly suggest that a review of funding for all schools would go some way to prevent the phenomenon of "*poor schools in poor areas*" that Admissions Manager 1 referred to. As Burgess et al. state "*the dominant over-subscription criteria for schools, straight line distance, is likely to induce strategic school choices, residential segregation and unequal access to the highest quality schools*" (2019: 703). To clarify the current mixed status of publicly funded schools would support parental understanding of the nuances, similarities and differences in ethos', governance and consequential accountabilities of all schools available to their children. Local schools for local children would enhance community cohesion and remove the high stakes preference based allocation process. The 2021 OFSTED inspection framework for assessing school effectiveness is wedded to focussing on qualifications achieved by pupils. A wider ranging inspection framework would offer clarity to parents on pupils' whole experience, wrapping in elements that are important to parents (as they state) such as happiness, and friendship. This would also address the perception of schools' reputations within their communities, whether fair or not, if measures of effectiveness in supporting the well-being and education of children are more widely defined.

Findings also suggest that greater investment in early years provision for children would enhance parental confidence and security in engagement with the School Admissions process. It would identify children's additional needs earlier, such as English language difficulties and SEN. This would better prepare parents for children's educational journey to ameliorate the parental perception of needing to 'fight'. It would also facilitate schools' preparation to meet children's learning and well-being needs, be it through vocational or academic provision. Requiring a change in the current legislation on School Admissions, legislators could reserve a proportion of school places for children entitled to FSMs as an obligation. This would remove social sorting risks. More radically, a lottery based Admissions process within geographically defined areas would offer real prospects for equal access to preferred schools regardless of economic background. Legislators would have to require this approach of all schools, removing an opt-out option. Perhaps less radically, a banded Admissions process could be introduced, again, removing any opt-out option by schools. Whilst families with secure economic capital could acquire additional tutoring, those unable to do this would not be disadvantaged if the banding was designed to equally accommodate children of all academic levels.

Findings derived from this thesis will be available to all Admissions Managers. Once they have the opportunity to hear of the emotional responses that engagement with the School Admissions process triggered in parents of limited economic means, they may wish to adopt a greater degree of reflection on the impact of their work. Each application comes with a back story, more than an administrative function. This research may also be used as a vehicle for greater investment by Local Authorities into investigating manipulation of the Admissions process that disadvantages parents of economically limited means (such as parents of greater economic capital be able to rent a property short term from which to base their application near to a preferred school). The reinstatement of individual Parent Choice officers (a role established in each Local Authority through the 2006 Education and Inspections Act then removed during the austerity measures from 2010) who meet with every parent to guide and support their school applications could enhance parental confidence and realism when engaging with School Admissions, particularly those of limited economic and social capital (especially parents with communication difficulties, be it their own mental health, digital or language barriers). However, these are summary recommendations

based on practical measures to improve equal access to preferred schools for all children and parents, regardless of economic means.

The greatest learning from this thesis is from parent voice and is the highly emotional nature of their School Admissions experience. Drawing from the themes identified in sections 5.7 to 5.18, some, such as home address and transport costs are not new to the field of research into School Admissions. What is new is the importance of happiness, often equated to friendships, to parents on behalf of their children. Additionally, digital and language barriers emerged as prominent themes. Perhaps the key learning to be taken from this research is the role of adult friends and community influence on school preference and application decisions – influences that far override OFSTED reports and attainment data. What is also clear is that parents of limited economic means do not articulate that they consider education as a vehicle for social mobility which politicians do.

As stated throughout the thesis, future research opportunities may include

- Increase in elective home education in England as a consequence of non-preferred school place allocation
- Impact of rural/urban family residence on preferred school place allocation, building on Burgess et al. (2011)
- Impact of Brexit and Covid 19 pandemic on access to preferred school places
- Greater access to parents' voice as Head Teacher gatekeepers to parent cohorts have greater capacity to support research in the post pandemic era, building on Bagley et al. (2010)
- Longitudinal research into educational outcomes (and consequential further and higher education leading to employment outcomes) for children of limited economic means allocated and accepted a non-preferred school place

6.4 Recommendations

A. Local schools for local children.

The impact on School Admissions of home address is consistently referenced by Admissions Managers and parents throughout Chapters Four and Five. In large conurbations across England, Lee, Sissons and Jones (2015) have shown that

residential areas are often highly mixed in terms of economic capital. All children attending their local school would aid enhanced inclusion of economically disadvantaged children within their own communities. The same can be asserted for rural schools, mindful of the additional travel costs across wider geographical areas and distribution of schools, coupled with prescient concerns to reduce carbon footprints in light of the global climate crisis. As stated by Burgess et al., "*school choice may be a myth if parents can only access schools that they live very close to*" (2011: 532).

Bonal, Zancajo and Scandurra (2021) sought to offer, using a counter factual quantitative model, opportunities to demonstrate that the School Admissions process in Barcelona Spain offers greater pupil mobility and less segregation based on economic disadvantage. However, they concluded that higher levels of segregation emerged in Barcelona, and internationally, with greater levels of preference available to all parents.

Local children attending their local school may arguably enhance social and economic peer mixing to solidify local communities and better prepare pupils for adult life. A re-review of catchment areas for local schools may well reduce the emotional impact of School Admissions experiences described by parent participants. It may well reduce the cost of the administrative processes involved in sorting applications by preference.

B. Equality of funding for all schools

Should local schools for local children be reconsidered by policy makers, equal funding for schools will need attending to. Pupil Premium and SEND funding is currently available to meet the needs of certain cohorts. However, base funding remains variable. If all schools were sufficiently funded, and leadership sufficiently effective, the desire of some parents to seek schools outside their local community may diminish.

There is financial inequality in the funding arrangements for State education in England, based on cohort characteristics and location. Schools with a greater number of economically disadvantaged children receive more funding through Pupil Premium

arrangements. Schools with more children that have Education, Health and Care Plans receive more funding to meet their SEN. These income streams to schools offer some counter-balance to disadvantaged cohorts and communities. However, schools' basic funding arrangements are inconsistent across the country, with disparity across Local Authority regions based on staff salaries and premises costs as calculated by the Department for Education (2021).

A levelling up of funding settlements for schools would better support equality of opportunity for all children regardless of their home addresses, as all schools would have the opportunity to perform on an equal playing field based on equal funding.

Having heard from parent participants how financial security, or lack thereof, impacts on access to additional tuition and the ability to move to an address more favourable for admissions success to the most popular and successful schools, the inevitable impact must be that access to the top professions and leadership roles through high educational attainment facilitated by effective schools, will be limited for children from economically disadvantaged families. Consequently, the cycle will be less likely to change as policy makers are less aware of the limitations of economic disadvantage when accessing the best education available. A contemporary example of this is Marcus Rashford's exposure of child food poverty during the pandemic 2020-21– a lived experience which was alien to politicians initially when called upon to extend food funding during school closure periods.

Whilst education may offer aspirational opportunities to those who can access the most effective schools, schooling cannot be assumed to be the only means of aspiring to improved family circumstances that the State provides. There is digital poverty to consider, income poverty, language poverty and health poverty too, to name but a few.

For as long as schools stand or fall on their attainment outcomes, opportunities to measure character development in terms of confidence and happiness are limited by the current inspection regime. The 2021 OFSTED inspection framework, whilst assessing character development opportunities for pupils, still emphasises academic attainment as the principle measure of success of a school. The fee-paying independent school system traditionally offers a wide range of extra-curricular

activities that allows for individuals to excel in non-academic fields (such as sport, music, art, drama, public speaking) other than examined academic subjects. These extra-curricular activities could offer enhanced opportunities for all if equal funding was a reality and if measured by the State inspection system.

As stated by Burgess et al. *"academic standards may not necessarily be of prime concern to parents*" (2011: 532). To offer a range of school options to meet all families aspirations and all children's needs, the focus on traditional academic subjects as measures of school and pupil successes could be revised. Mathematics and English need not always be taught in the traditional way and examined to secure proficiency in adult life. Functional Mathematics and English that allow children to operate effectively ultimately as adults do not need a certificate to evidence these skills, in my professional experience as a manager of services for young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). For the academically insecure, vocational skills to prepare for trades which remain much in demand, can be delivered practically, creatively and effectively outside the traditional classroom. This would require respect for trades on an equal footing to those professions that require traditional exam success, offer opportunities for all and enhance employment prospects for all. A revision of measures that assess the effectiveness of publicly funded schools would better capture the whole experience of the child as preparation for citizenship as an adult. A more differentiated academic and vocational curriculum requires financial investment. Extra-curricular opportunities, too, come at a cost that many schools' budgets cannot manage.

C. Early investment

Investing in early years education and teachers' continuous professional development may enhance parental confidence with engaging early with education professionals which would lead to enhanced home-school relationships to support all pupils, regardless of family circumstances.

Investment in early years education would aid with early intervention and prevention of additional pupil needs and equip parents to confidently support the education of their children, working in respectful partnership with teachers. This would need to be

coupled with investment in early years, Primary and Secondary new teacher education (and continuous career professional development) to focus on the whole child as opposed to their attainment abilities as the sole measurable outcome of a successful education. As Goodman and Sianesi have shown:

> *Our research has found that investments in human capital before the age of 5 appear to have had long-lasting and positive effects... We find that early education leads to improvements in cognitive tests, including both maths and reading at age 7;... We have also presented evidence that there are gains from early education in adulthood, both on educational attainment and labour market performance, through a higher probability of obtaining qualifications, and in turn marginally higher employment probabilities and wages at age 33. (2005: 23)*

Investment in Early Years provision for all children can enhance readiness to learn for all children. Therefore, all children have a chance to thrive by being able to better access the curriculum from Reception, regardless of their allocated school. Inability to fully access the curriculum from the outset may leave some pupils more vulnerable to educational disengagement. This, in turn, may reduce subsequent exclusion and poor attendance of those children who do not have access to a wide range of pre-school experiences and opportunities currently.

D. Different allocation methods

Consideration of using random ballots as a means of allocating school places has been tried (see Brighton & Hove experience in section 2.12). It was not successful there because some schools were able to opt out. Ballot allocation would be most effective in terms of fairness to counter the current influence of home address if all schools in England were obliged to participate. The current range of quasi-independent State funded faith and selective schools (mainly Grammar Schools) render this unlikely currently. However, if society, through democratically elected representatives, is serious about genuine equality of opportunity, ballots as a method for school place allocation cannot be dismissed. This is echoed by Allen et al. (2010) and Hausman (2010).

Prioritisation of places for pupils eligible for Pupil Premium (including FSMs) due to limited economic means was referenced in the Department for Education 2014 Admissions guidance. However, this was stated as guidance in the following ambivalent terms:

> *"The School Admissions Code 2014 provides freedom for admissions authorities of all schools, not just academies, to give admissions priority within their oversubscription criteria to children eligible for a pupil premium. This is not a requirement – schools do not have to give admissions priority to these children" (Department for Education, 2014).*

The issue with this non-statutory and subsequently revised guidance is that not all families who are eligible apply for FSMs due to pride, unawareness or sufficient access to working English skills. This has been acknowledged by the Department for Education by the creation of a form - "*We have developed a model registration form to help schools encourage parents to sign up for free school meals"* (Department for Education 4: 2018). Additionally, not all the families that participated in the in-depth interviews are eligible to apply for FSMs, despite working low paid, sometimes multiple, and insecure jobs. Therefore, using Pupil Premium priority as an admissions tool would potentially add another layer of disadvantage to an already flawed system. However, amending the wording, or alternatively changing it from guidance to a requirement, may go some way to removing some of the barriers to securing school preference for economically disadvantaged families.

A banded admissions system could be trialled. A standard admission test could be introduced with equal admission numbers offered across all levels of performance. This would need to be introduced across all schools in England to secure equality of access.

<u>E. Personal experience not public administrative function</u>

Drawing on Admissions Managers interviews, a greater degree of empathy for parents without the capital or agency to research current School Admissions arrangements when seeking their school of preference in realistic terms, would be helpful in reducing

the emotional aspect of this process, as described by all parent participants in the in-depth interviews:

> *"The biggest issue is that the more you try to root out the one or two who try to game the system the more complex the system becomes to administer and then the more appeals you get. Parents think they will get into the school of their choice no matter what. The majority pay little attention to admissions criteria and believe that they will get in. Middle class parents are able to make the system work for them to the detriment of other parents."*
>
> (Admissions Manager 1)

One proposed solution to deliver this would be a face to face meeting with each parent (with an interpreter when necessary) to explain the process and realistic options available based on home address. This could happen at the child's Primary school for Secondary admission and at the family home or early years setting for Primary admission. This would need to be a supportive experience for parents to reduce their anxiety about potential allocation outcomes, manage parental expectations and reduce the risk of children missing education. It would also need significant financial investment by local and national politicians.

Stephen Ball wrote in 2013 that the education system has been fragmented by successive governments since 1988:

> *"All of this means that some parents have the choices they want, some have choices they don't want, and some have no choice at all. But the disarticulated system is also increasingly difficult to navigate. Not all families have the skills, time or resources to decode or work the system; and some are simply unable to afford to move their children long distances to school. Bluntly, this fuzzy system of unclear and uneven provision offers the opportunity for well-informed, well-resourced, confident and persistent parents, many of whom are middle class, to seek social advantage for their children" (Ball in The Guardian 2013)*

Ball went on to expand:

> *"as John Major put it…. he believes in 'trusting headmasters, teachers and governing bodies to run their schools and in trusting parents to make the right choice for their children' (The Times April 1995) …. the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts had already made moves in the direction of choice for parents, which were extended by the Education Reform Act in 1988. The 'Parents Charter', published in 1991, gave parents the right to information about schools and their performance (it was updated in 1994)" (Ball 2017).*

Clarity on the existing Admissions system would also support parental understanding of what is available and not available. The current fractured educational landscape of Local Authority maintained, grammar, free, academy, university technical colleges, studio schools and faith schools offer a complex picture that compounds parental responsibility to differentiate what the educational offers for their children might be. Goldring and Hausman identify the benefit of "*Parent Information Centres to notify families of the choices they have and assist them with the choice process*". (2010:474)

Nick Gibb, then Minister of State for School Standards, stated in April 2021, when introducing new legislation that:

> *"school uniforms are important in establishing the right ethos in a school. They also help to improve behaviour and a sense of belonging and identity. But we want to be sure they are affordable for parents." (Department for Education 2021).*

The legislation that Nick Gibb introduced requires schools to follow new statutory guidance on uniform costs, instructing them to keep prices down. The cross-party support for the Bill recognised the costs parents face for school uniform, particularly for branded items, and the statutory guidance tells schools to consider high street alternatives. It also includes measures on encouraging second-hand uniform availability, schools' arrangements with suppliers, and ensuring parents have access to clear information about uniform policies. (Department for Education 2021). This is an indication from United Kingdom politicians that limited economic means does have a real and tangible impact on parents access to every State funded school (when assessing their preferred school options and/or during their children's time on roll), at

the least based on the variable costs of uniform. Whilst this recognition of the limiting impact of economic disadvantage in accessing every school that is theoretically available for parents to consider is welcome, it is suggested that uniform is but one limiting factor. What has not been politically acknowledged is the impact on realistic preference for admission on transport costs, potential pre-admission tuition fees, housing costs, school trips and lunches, when family economic means are limited. Bagley et al. share this finding when they recommend that:

> "*senior managers are unable to change the location of their school but could provide free, or low-cost transport to and from it, thus overcoming barriers associated with time, cost, convenience and safety."* (2010:322)

6.5 Conclusion

The reality is, real equality to access preferred school places for all children, regardless of economic background, comes at a cost. Additional funds to all schools to level up, additional funds to support the economically disadvantaged with transport and I.T costs and additional funds to support children and families well-being outside of traditional classroom settings (for vocational education and extra-curricular activities) are required if real opportunity through education is to be more than an aspiration for all children, regardless of their family backgrounds. Coupling this with a fundamental reform of how school effectiveness is measured and evaluated, education as a vehicle for social mobility for all may move to becoming a reality. Until policy makers are made aware of, and really listen to parental voice from all members of society, it is suggested that improved circumstances for all children through education will remain an aspiration. Using the vehicle of Schools Admissions to achieve a levelling up of opportunity for all children, regardless of existing characteristics including economic disadvantage, must be viewed through the experiences of those parents and children who do not achieve a preferred school place, and the consequential impact of this. As a postscript to the analysis of national preference data outlined in section 4.2, Department for Education data released in June 2021 for applications received during academic year 2020-21, Primary first

preference rates have reduced further by 1.1 percent and Secondary first preference rates have reduced by five percent across England.

Keeping true to the original intention of this thesis as stated in Chapter One and throughout, this research is interested in how far political aspirations in 'trusting' parents with 'choice' have worked for all, or just for those parents who have the capital to navigate the information emerging from a fragmented education system only, by capturing parents' voices and hearing their lived experiences – in other words, how effective has policy enactment been, as theorized by Ball (2018), Allen (2013) and others.

Have politicians' aspirations been '*cruel hope'* (Freire 1997) raised with parents? In reality, for 388,036 families (see section 4.2) between 2016-18, their '*right to dream of a future that is not your present'* (Giroux 2015) was '*cruel optimism'* (Berlant 2011) as their children were not offered any preferred school place. Their stories have not been heard and not understood from their personal perspectives. As a future longitudinal study, capturing parents and children's voices, children's attainment outcomes and destinations of those 388,036 families allocated a non-preferred school place may offer further new learning to politicians and those that enact policy. This could potentially revolutionise future iterations of the School Admissions process to facilitate real and meaningful social mobility, for those that seek it, as a secure reality for all parents, including the economically disadvantaged, as opposed to solely a stated aspiration of politicians.

Gewirtz identified that the neo-liberal political approach to social mobility through the lever of education assumes that working class parents adopt the values of those deemed middle class:

> *"Middle class parents possess a good deal of social capital – i.e. the social contacts, networks and self-confidence that enable them to exploit the education system to their children's best advantage" (2001: 367).*

The existing admissions system cannot facilitate first preference for all parents based on a mixed economy of schools without all schools being deemed as 'outstanding' or

well placed to meet the ubiquitous and bespoke understanding of 'happiness'. It can be suggested that a society made up of self-serving 'tiger' parents (section 2.8) solely, unmindful of wider societal impact of their manipulative actions, impoverishes us all. Hoskins and Barker refer to this as "*social solidarity"* (2014: 36) which can be interpreted as cohesive and supportive communities, respectful of diversity. In the context of this thesis' findings, diminishing "*social solidarity*" can be argued as a consequence of the current School Admissions arrangements. Cantle showed that:

> *"the top ten percent most socially selective primary schools had a proportion of disadvantaged pupils that are at least 9.2 percentage points different from the communities they serve" (2017:3).*

He went on to state that:

> *"emerging trends show that school segregation is becoming independent of residential patterns, probably due to the impact of most variable school admissions policies and parental choice….school policy over the last twenty years or so has created more institutional divisions…all of which have developed their own admissions policies" (ibid.)*

As Hoskins and Barker wrote:

> *"do observed patterns of social mobility constitute an expected phenomenon, …or do they demonstrate the failure of state institutions to provide genuinely equal opportunities that enable children to fulfil their potential through education?" (2014:7)*

Based on what has been learnt from parents in this thesis, the "*puzzle"* (*ibid.)* seems clearer. Not all (in fact, none from the parent interview cohort, online survey or questionnaire cohorts) parents describe social mobility explicitly as a motivation for their children. They aspire to happiness for their children. What can also be shown is that the State institution of the admissions process fails in part to deliver equitable access to preferred schools, unless significant agency and sacrifice is enacted to good effect by parents. Findings have shown to hold true to Bourdieu and Haidt's theories of human capital and moral foundations throughout research participants' School Admissions experiences. This thesis extends their theories into a new arena.

The reality of school place preference – economically disadvantaged parents' views, as laid out in this thesis, does allow us "*to put the 'poverty of aspiration' myth to bed now*" (2017:4), drawing on Treanor's phrase. This is based on the efforts and sacrifices demonstrated by five of the six parents who participated in in-depth interviews for this thesis. What has emerged is a disconnect between economically disadvantaged parents' experiences, politicians' aspirations and policy enactors assumptions. Unless and until this disconnect is more widely understood, education cannot be championed as the best lever of aspiration and improved circumstances for all. Start with the admissions process, leading to the creation of respectful and secure home-school partnerships, drive down disproportionate absence, exclusions and poorer attainment of the economically disadvantaged pupil cohort – and then we may see a real levelling across of genuine opportunity for all in England.

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Thesis appendices

Appendix One

Online Survey Question Posed to Parents	Yes (or Very)	No (or Not at All)	Somewhat
1.Children entitled to free school meals?	46%	54%	0
2.When applying for a Reception place, how convinced were you that your preferences would be considered?	69%	0	31%
3. When applying for a Year 7 place, how convinced were you that your preferences would be considered?	40%	40%	20%
4. Did you consider moving home to secure your first preference of Reception place?	23%	77%	0
5. Did you consider moving home to secure your first preference of Year 7 place?	50%	50%	0
6. Did you alter or amend your religious habits to influence your Reception application?	8%	84%	8%
7.Did you alter or amend your religious habits to influence your Year 7 application?	20%	80%	0
8.Did you consider using the Appeals process if you did not secure your first preference Reception place?	80%	20%	0
9.Did you consider using the Appeals process if you did not secure your first preference Year 7 place?	40%	60%	0
10.How import was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Reception place?	34%	33%	33%
11. How important was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Year 7 place?	50%	40%	10%

12. How import were your preferred schools' exam results to you when applying for a Reception place?	33%	67%	0
13. How important were your preferred schools' exam results to you when applying for a Year 7 place?	60%	10%	30%
14. How important was the local reputation of your preferred schools when applying for a Reception place?	59%	8%	33%
15. How important was the local reputation of your preferred schools when applying for a Year 7 place?	70%	30%	0
16. How important was distance from home when identifying your preferred schools for Reception application?	66%	17%	17%
17. How important was distance from home when identifying your preferred schools for Year 7 application?	60%	30%	10%
18. How satisfied were you with your Reception application experience?	92%	0	8%
19.How satisfied were you with your Year 7 application experience?	45%	22%	33%
20. What did you consider when applying for a Reception place for your child?	*Will my child be happy and make friends* *Breakfast and after-care, class size, location* *Catholic school, good ethos and consistent staff who stay at the school for many years* *Local school to walk to and build up friendships* *A local school with a local community feel* *The welcome*		

21. What did you consider when applying for a Year 7 place for your child?	*Good school, Catholic ethos, discipline, exam results, location* *Exam result Class size Location* *Catholic school, good holistic care and positive reputation* *The school that would suit personality of daughter. We were lucky has had a little choice but generally just which one you can get to in our area* *Results, school ethos, reputation, co-Ed, distance and behaviour* *Travel costs*
22. What were your aspirations for your child from their Primary education?	*To be put on a good footing to progress* *That they were happy, formed positive friendships, felt safe and secure and were happy to go to school.* *A happy school and learn through play* *Good friends, quality teaching and to be happy* *Friendships, fun and enjoying learning* *Just that my child was happy* *Happiness*
23. What were your aspirations for your child from their Secondary education?	*That they were happy, formed positive friendships, they were well supported in their learning and also emotionally supported, felt safe and secure and are happy to go to school.* *Help identify their potential and interest* *Good quality teaching, good holistic supportive care and a school which will nurture my child's aspirations* *Direction for future* *Work hard and be the best you can be* *Not getting bullied*
24. Please offer any other comment that you wish to about your School Admissions experience?	*People cheat the system by renting closer to schools and then moving back when they get a place at the secondary school* *No choice if you don't live close to good schools*

Appendix Two

Freedom of Information Local Authority data request

The data requested followed the following questions posed

- What percentage of total LA home applications for Primary School reception for September 2018, September 2017 and September 2016 received an offer for their first preference? Same question with actual numbers.
- What percentage of total LA home applications for Secondary School Year 7 for September 2018, September 2017 and September 2016 received an offer for their first preference? Same question with actual numbers.
- What percentage of total LA home applications for Primary School reception received an offer for September 2018, September 2017 and September 2016 for any of their preferences? Same question with actual numbers.
- What percentage of total LA home applications for Secondary School Year 7 received an offer for September 2018, September 2017 and September 2016 for any of their preferences? Same question with actual numbers.
- What were the total number of applications made for (a) Reception places in the 3 years 2016, 2017 and 2018 and (b) Year 7 places in the 3 years 2016, 2017 and 2018.

Appendix Three

Questionnaire questions posed in the questionnaire study were

- When applying for a Reception place, how convinced were you that your preferences would be considered?
- When applying for a Year 7 place, how convinced were you that your preferences would be considered?
- How seriously did you consider moving home to secure your first preference of Reception place?
- How seriously did you consider moving home to secure your first preference of Year 7 place?
- Did you alter or amend your religious habits to influence your Reception application?
- Did you alter or amend your religious habits to influence your Year 7 application?
- How seriously did you consider using the Appeals process if you did not secure your first preference Reception place?
- How seriously did you consider using the Appeals process if you did not secure your first preference Year 7 place?
- How import was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Reception place?
- How important was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Year 7 place?
- How seriously did you consider electively home educating if you did not secure your first preference Reception place?
- How seriously did you consider electively home educating if you did not secure your first preference Year 7 place?
- How import was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Reception place?
- How important was the school OFSTED report to you when considering your preferences for a Year 7 place?
- How import were your preferred schools' exam results to you when applying for a Reception place?

- How important were your preferred schools' exam results to you when applying for a Year 7 place?
- How important was the local reputation of your preferred schools when applying for a Reception place?
- How important was the local reputation of your preferred schools when applying for a Year 7 place?
- How important was distance from home when identifying your preferred schools for Reception application?
- How important was distance from home when identifying your preferred schools for Year 7 application?
- How satisfied were you with your Reception application experience?
- How satisfied were you with your Year 7 application experience?

Appendix Four

Semi-structured in-depth parent interview protocol

- Introductions and description of research. Check on consent and participant information sheet.
- Parents educational biographies – tell me about your own education and how it has affected your adult working life.
- Demographic information including economic status – ethnicity, gender, family make-up and age.
- Parental views on aspirations for their children through education – what are your child's strengths and what does he/she need more help and encouragement with in terms of schooling? What would you like for them through school and beyond in terms of hopes and ambitions?
- Knowledge of school admissions process in England - what did you know about the process at the outset?
- Where did you get your information from? E.g. school, websites, word-of mouth, other family members, own experience etc.
- Research into schools to inform preferential decision making – where did you get your information from e.g. word of mouth, OFSTED, websites, visits etc.
- Experience of the admissions process, ease of access, simplicity or complexity – how was it for you?
- Outcome of the admissions process, fully satisfied, reservedly satisfied or dissatisfied and consequences of dissatisfaction – can I get back in touch after offer day?
- How did the whole experience feel for you?
- Views on improvement measures to the admissions process – what would have made the experience better for you, if anything?

Appendix Five

Admissions Managers Interview Protocol

How likely are parents to secure their preferred school place?

What, if anything, can parents do to influence their school place allocation?

What would you describe as your key performance indicators as a Local Authority Admissions Manager?

Which parts of the Admissions Code do you consider most challenging for Local Authorities to meet?

What would you change about the Admissions system if you could?

Which parents, if any, miss out on preferred school places?

Appendix Six

Examples of media messages about school admissions

School admission policies in England 'favour certain sections of society'
Leaving blank spaces on application forms leads to risk of being assigned least popular school in area, experts say

Parents should avoid leaving blanks on their children's school application forms since they risk being assigned to the least popular school in the area, according to experts.

Calling for an overhaul to simplify the system, the Good Schools Guide said parents were forced to conduct labour-intensive research and fill in reams of paperwork during a process that "no doubt favours certain sections of society".

It notes that there is significant variation in school admission policies, with individual schools demanding different information and using different criteria for admitting pupils. The Local Government Association (LGA) has called for a review to make the system more inclusive.

Elizabeth Coatman, state education specialist at the Good Schools Guide, said parents should provide the total number of choices including any school they are in the catchment area for – even if it is as their final choice – to avoid local authorities inevitably filling in blank spaces with the least popular schools.

Schools with good results and reputations are most likely to be oversubscribed, the Good Schools Guide said, but can also have complicated policies setting out how they will decide which pupils will be given places – known as oversubscription criteria.

"The variation in admissions policies is incredible," Coatman said. "What one school demands of an applicant may be very different from the requirements of an apparently similar school down the road.

"I have every sympathy for parents who find getting to grips with the complexity of some state school admissions policies gives them a headache. We have seen one that runs to 12 pages.

"Setting aside time to research options and work out the likelihood of a successful application, not to mention fathoming the further obligations and paperwork as required by some schools, is labour-intensive and no doubt favours certain sections of society."

The Guardian Newspaper Mattha Busby 26th October 2019

Children split up by York's school admissions policy

FIVE York children who were looking forward to joining their older brothers and sisters at a city primary school have had their hopes dashed.

City of York Council has told their parents the five cannot go to Acomb Primary School because there are not enough places, and they will have to be separated from their siblings and attend schools elsewhere.

The parents today called for a shake-up of York's admissions policy, telling how the decision had left their younger and older children deeply upset. It has also left them facing severe practical problems, such as how to pick up two children at the same time from two different schools situated more than a mile from each other.

The Press Mike Laycock 7th May 2010

When do parents hear about school places on 2021 admissions day, and what to do if you miss out

Parents of children going to primary school should receive a letter on Friday 16th April.

Pupils across the UK are approaching the end of a school year like no other.

For some it will be the final few months before they move onto secondary school.

Parents of those children should have received a letter on 1st March informing them whether they have been accepted into their chosen school.

iNews Alex Finnis 16th April 2021

The 15 schools that are hardest to get into in Kingston because they are so popular with parents

Secondary school choices need to be submitted before the deadline on October 31

Get London Sian Bayley 12TH October 2020

"Thousands of parents in England have been denied a place for their child at their first choice of primary school. Evidence suggests, however, that pressure on reception classes is easing in some areas, including London, where applications were down 2.3% on last year.

After an anxious wait documented by many parents on social media, more than half a million families across England were informed on Monday which school their child will be attending in September.

Early analysis of local authority data suggests that, in many areas, higher proportions of children gained places at their first choice of school this year.

In most areas, about 90% of parents had an offer from their hoped-for school. But thousands were still disappointed, with some failing to secure a place at any of their preferred primaries.

Many disappointed parents will now be considering an appeal; others will be wondering how to negotiate new challenges. One father tweeted: "So our littlest has been given a place at primary school. It would have been a lot easier had it been the same primary school as her sister. Looking forward to working out how to be in two different places at the same time."

In London where demand for places remains high, 86.5% of families were offered their first choice of school, up 0.61% on 2017, while 96% were accepted by one of their three favourites. But 2,314 four-year-olds did not get into any of their chosen schools, down 0.14% on last year." (The Guardian newspaper 16th April 2018)

"Parents across the UK will today discover if their child has been given a place at their first choice primary school.

On what has become known as National Offer Day, about half a million families will receive emails confirming their child's allotted primary school.

But thousands are likely to face disappointment due to the high demand on schools in some areas of the country, particularly in London. Last year, just 86 per cent of children in the capital got into their first choice school.

But unhappy parents can appeal the decision." (Evening Standard 16th April 2018)

"With the closing date for secondary school applications drawing in (October 31), the pressure is building for parents across west London to get their child a place into their first-choice school.

However, places at top schools are becoming increasingly hard to get hold of, with one west London school attracting more than 14 applications for every place." (Get West London 6th October 2015)

"The annual scramble for places in reception is likely to become more intense this year, as top-rated schools across the country struggle to accommodate the growing number of applicants.

For the vast majority, relief will replace anxiety as they secure a place at the school of their choosing.

However, for the remainder, the only real option is to try and secure a place through the independent appeals process. For some, the waiting list may result in a place being offered following rejection by other parents." (The Telegraph newspaper 13th April 2018)

Appendix Seven

Ethical Consent

College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Brunel University London

6 March 2020

LETTER OF CONDITIONAL APPROVAL

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN
07/03/2020AND 31/12/2022

Applicant (s): Mrs Deborah Bell

Project Title: Ed.Doc The Reality of School Place

Preference, A Parent's ViewReference: 21016-

LR-Feb/2020- 24753-1

Dear Mrs Deborah Bell

The Research Ethics Committee has considered the above application recently submitted by you.

The Chair, acting under delegated authority has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. Approval is given on theunderstanding that the conditions of approval set out below are followed:

- **A16 - The Committee will accept a BREO application to be submitted with a letter/email that shows the researcher explaining theproject clearly and asking for permission from the relevant organisation. When you receive actual permission, email a copy to cbass-ethics@brunel.ac.uk quoting your project ID number.**
- **A18.1 – Consent - For your interviews, you must use the full consent form appropriately adapted for your project in order to obtain informed consent from your participants - see "Consent Form Guidance" and "Consent Form Template" available in 'Templates' under the Help link at the top of the BREO form.**
- The agreed protocol must be followed. Any changes to the protocol will require prior approval from the Committee by way of an application for an amendment.

Please note that:

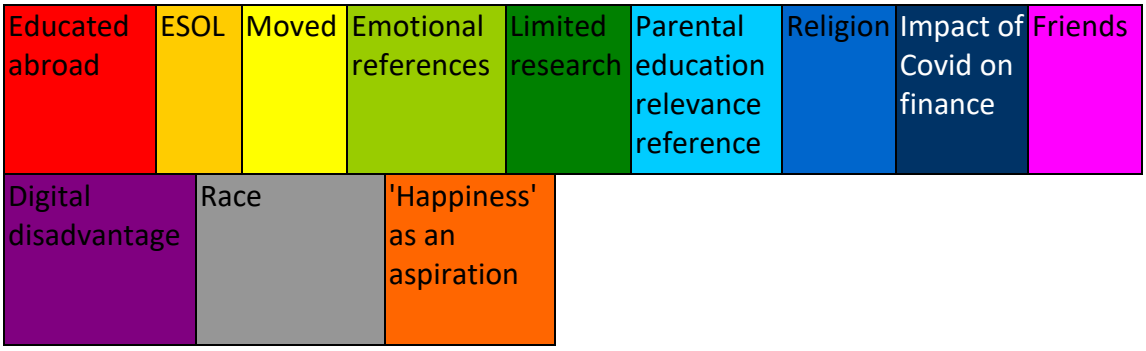
- Research Participant Information Sheets and (where relevant) flyers, posters, and consent forms should include a clear statement that researchethics approval has been obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- The Research Participant Information Sheets should include a clear statement that queries should be directed, in the first instance, to the Supervisor (where relevant), or the researcher. Complaints, on the other hand, should be directed, in the first instance, to the Chair of the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- Approval to proceed with the study is granted subject to receipt by the Committee of satisfactory responses to any conditions that may appear above,in addition to any subsequent changes to the protocol.
- The Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to sample and review documentation, including raw data, relevant to the study.
- You may not undertake any research activity if you are not a registered student of Brunel University or if you cease to become registered, including abeyance or temporary withdrawal. As a deregistered student you would not be insured to undertake research activity. Research activity includes therecruitment of participants, undertaking consent procedures and collection of data. Breach of this requirement constitutes research misconduct andis a disciplinary offence.

Professor David Gallear Chair of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Appendix Eight

Exemplar Coded Interview Transcript

Theme coding



Interview 1 (MK)

Thank you for agreeing to help with my research. This is the ethical approval from Brunel (shown). Let me go through the consent form and research summary so you know what you're agreeing to.

Tell me about your own educational experience first.

My son was 3 when we came here from Poland and my daughter was 10. In our village there was no choice of school in the area, you go to the Government school. I went to the Government village school. Then when I was older I went to secondary college and did a course in working in shops. That was my choice but now I have been cleaning for 15 years and my shop course is no good.

Tell me about your experience of school admissions for your children.

We arrived in England in 2004. My husband came a few years earlier. I had no idea of the system to get my daughter into school. My husband asked friends how to do it. I met a lady who spoke Polish and English when I arrived. She was very helpful, but I did everything blind. I did what she told me to. I didn't know what I was doing. My friend took me to the Catholic school in the next road to where our room was. They were very good, they helped me. They had a Polish lady who worked in the school and taught my daughter some English. She filled the form in for me. I didn't know I could look or apply anywhere else. But I was happy because the Polish lady did the form for me and could speak to me and my daughter. I arrived in August and only had one week to apply. My friend knew the Polish lady in the school who said there was one space so be very quick. I was very lucky. She is still my friend. My son followed when he was old enough because his sister had been there. It was easy for him.

How did you research your options?

I didn't look at any website or visit because my English is very bad and I am shy.

I feel bad because I speak very bad English and can't help my daughter – because it was my choice to come here. A. was in a very bad position. We put her from home into a strange place. It was not a good time.

What happened next?

For her next school, we looked for a Catholic school. I spoke with my friends. We went for one school. My daughter likes painting and our choice was a school that is good for painting. Our best school was a problem. We needed agreement of the church. The priest said he didn't know us but knew we are Christian. She didn't get C.W school because of the priest. The Head Teacher from St J's (her primary school) helped us find another school. The Government offered us a bad school, the Head Teacher said no and helped us. It was bad because it was violent and she is shy like me. My friends said it was bad. He helped us with a better school but not Catholic. She liked it. It is very close to our room. But she couldn't do painting there. Then C.W school offered her a place but she didn't go in the end because she had friends and would have to pay train fares. My husband's work was little then so she stayed where she was given.

For T. my son, I only made one application to my daughter's school because we knew them and they had helped me and A. I had same support from Polish lady who filled in the online form and Head Teacher. Head Teacher I like very much, Mr.C. I remember his name. T is quicker at speaking English than me and my daughter. We are shy. It's a problem. He had no problems there. The school never said he was bad or good. He's in the middle.

For his next school my friends showed me websites and we spoke about the best schools. He wanted a Catholic school, just boys, I wasn't so sure. The school told you what to do. Online with a password. My friend did it. We don't have a computer. Not too much to do. Only later we were waiting and waiting for the results. It was very stressful. He got first choice but now it is going wrong. He wants Biology, Science and History and they are making him do Business. My English might be the problem. They said he's not good enough for Science and History. The connection with the school is not good.

How could the experience have been improved for you?

I tried to find local Polish people to help me and asked them. They helped at primary but not at secondary. Maybe have information in other languages and Polish? I always think this is my fault. I don't speak very good English. Sometimes England doesn't know how hard it is in a new country and doesn't know how to help. You are the first person who has asked. When I find a good person, they help me, but that's not in every school.

It's easier for Polish people coming now. In my school the only other language was Russian. Now English is taught in almost every school, even in village schools like mine – and German and French. I don't hear of Russian now. This language helps us with nothing. It's communism of course. When my daughter started school in Poland, it was the first year they taught English.