Making the spoons last longer: Parents' views on flexischooling with their child with SEN

Abstract

Flexischooling – the sharing of a child's education between home and school through formal agreement – is one of a range of 'alternative' education approaches that may adapt education to meet a child's Special Educational Needs (SEN). This study considers qualitative data from an online survey conducted during November and December 2023 regarding parents' reasons for undertaking flexischooling with their child, and the activities they describe their children undertaking during school hours. Findings suggest that parents are concerned about the challenges that they feel their child faces in full-time school, but that they also perceive advantages, both social and academic, to the 'not-school' element of the educational approach they are undertaking. Consideration of the potential for flexischooling to support parents as they learn about their child's ever-changing needs is discussed.

Keywords

Alternative education; Special Educational Needs (SEN); parental voice; flexible education

Key Points

- Some parents of children with SEN perceive that full-time schooling does not meet their child's needs and may be more than the child can positively access.
- These parents may still value elements of formal schooling and seek to support their child to continue to access these.
- Parents of children with SEN may be learning about their child's developing needs and be in a period of exploration with their child.
- Research remains sparse regarding the provision of flexischooling; greater understanding of it may widen discussion of its potential – both positive and negative – as an approach by both professionals and parents.

Introduction

Flexischooling in the United Kingdom is a recognised arrangement where children attend school on some agreed days or parts of days and are educated elsewhere for the remainer of their full-time education, either at home or through alternative provision arranged by the parents (Poultney and Anderson 2021). Flexischooling is not a legal right, but rather a

negotiated formal arrangement that is made between the family and the headteacher of the school, at the request of the parents (Carnie 2017). In his latest report (Ofsted, 2024), Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills Martyn Oliver drew attention to the practice, recognising that 'we cannot be sure how many children are flexi-schooled' but that these children are part of a 'very significant' cohort who have 'been opted out of more orthodox patterns of education' (Ofsted, 2024, n.p.). Flexischooling is one of a range of 'alternative' education approaches designed to adapt education to meet the specific needs of a child. Whilst there are no eligibility criteria for flexischooling, the literature suggests that a significant proportion of children with such arrangements may have Special Educational Needs (SEN) (for example, Kendall and Taylor 2016; Parsons and Lewis 2010; O'Hagan et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2020).

This study considers data from a survey conducted between November 13 and December 15 2023 with parents and carers of flexischooled children with SEN. It uses qualitative data from the survey to draw together two elements of the participants' responses: their reasons for undertaking flexischooling, and their description of activities their children undertake outside of school during normal school hours. This article aims to give parents who participated in the study a 'voice' to articulate the issues that they feel their children are facing, together with their rationale for undertaking the solution of flexischooling that they have chosen.

Literature

Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) may struggle with full-time, mainstream education and account, for example, for nearly half of fixed term or permanent exclusions from school in the UK (DfE 2018). Pupils who are autistic are reported as struggling with full-time schooling (Lawrence 2018; Goodall 2018) with only a quarter in a recent survey indicating that they feel happy or included at school (NAS 2021a). Some parents feel that regardless of the SEN support that a school may provide for their child, the full-time school environment will remain a challenge due to specific unmet needs (Lawrence 2012; Lawrence 2018). Parents who choose to flexischool their children, therefore, may not be making the decision because they are unhappy with the quality of education that their child is receiving,

but because they perceive that the experience of receiving that education is making their child unhappy (Adamson 2022).

In some cases, the formal arrangement to flexischool may be made in response to the child's absenteeism or on-going Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Persistent non-attendance at school was found in 43% of autistic pupils in a recent UK study (Totsika et al. 2020). Parents may fear that non-attendance at school means the child's education is being undermined, with the resulting lack of stability placing considerable strain on their families (Gill et al., 2017; Stromberg et al., 2022). Further, when a child with SEN does access school, this may involve a perceived need to 'mask' to appear integrated into the school system. Masking 'derives from wanting to be accepted by others … is a suppression and a fake expression of both internal and external authenticity, and most commonly occurs in school' (Smitten 2022, p.6). Masking is reported to cause mental exhaustion (Pearson and Rose 2021), with disruptive behaviour, meltdown and burnout frequently following when the child returns to the safety of the home environment (Smitten 2022).

Autism is heterogeneous and effectively meeting the varying and various needs of autistic pupils is a challenge for mainstream schools that is recognised internationally (for example, Roberts, 2015; Bazuń and Kwiatkowski, 2022; Li et al., 2022). Autistic pupils may have an academically 'spiky' profile, being strong in some areas and subjects but struggling in others (Ashburner, et al., 2010), defying school categorisation. Roberts and Simpson (2016) identify in-school factors that may affect autistic pupils, including noise, crowding, contradictory subject demands, and changes in routine, with Jabery and Arabiat (2024) arguing for the need to foster greater autistic wellbeing. Autistic pupils suffer disproportionately from anxiety (MacNeil et al., 2009) and the growing evidence of poor mental health in many autistic pupils is a further concern for both schools and parents (Williams and Roberts, 2018). Despite considerable work to make mainstream schools more accessible for autistic pupils (for example, Roberts and Webster, 2022; White et al., 2023), outcomes for this cohort remain poor (Burgess and Cimera, 2014; Wittemeyer et al., 2011).

Parents' awareness of the negative impact of schooling on their children with SEN may have been brought into sharper focus during the school closures of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although a challenging time for many, the potential for at-home education led to a

recognised reduction in anxiety amongst some children (Aberdeenshire Council 2020a) with some parents finding ways to provide positive home-learning environments built on knowledge of their child's needs (Hill, Keville, and Ludlow 2023). English (2021) describes this as a 'risk-free trial' at home education, where parents had an opportunity to experience taking responsibility for their child's schooling due to the external factors of the pandemic.

Flexischooling is seen by some as a viable and even preferable alternative to home education (Lawrence 2018; Parsons and Lewis 2010). Some parents have expressed that, while they recognise that full-time attendance at school is a challenge for their child, they nonetheless feel that there is a need for formal schooling that they feel unable to provide (Lawrence 2018). These parents describe a lack of confidence in their ability to fully support their child with the academic curriculum (English, 2012; Parczewska, 2021), together with a need to widen their child's social experience beyond family and immediate communities (Lawrence 2018). A small study in Fife, Scotland, further identified flexischooling challenges, including home/school communications and the pressures to keep up with schoolwork on home-based days (Robertson and McHardy 2020). As early as 2012, English identified the economic challenge for parents of educating children fully or partially at home, and more recently Taylor and Thompson (2023) suggest that for the young people involved, although their wellbeing may be prioritised by flexible provision this may be at the expense of their learning. However, limited research on outcomes for children who experience flexischooling suggests that the provision does have its merits. Parents describe flexidays spent out of school with their child as opportunities to build relationships, to support their child's motivation to engage through personalised learning, and as enhanced opportunities to build self-esteem and self-confidence (Lawrence 2018; Robertson and McHardy 2020).

Materials and methods

Ethics approval was obtained from Bishop Grosseteste University's Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study. The survey ran from November 13 to December 15, 2023 using Polinode, a secure online survey platform..Survey information and links were posted each week on two closed Facebook groups (one specific to flexischooling and the other to home education) with further coverage of the study made by *Disability Rights UK* and the *Autism Education Trust*. The survey used a mixed methods approach

featuring a combination of closed questions and open questions as considered in this paper. Of a total of 33 surveys submitted, 31 corresponded to flexischooled children with identified SEN from England, Scotland and Wales.

This current study reports on the 'free text' responses to just two items, with analysis of the responses to the other quantitative data responses collected to be reported elsewhere. The two sets of free text responses were to items included in the survey at the request of this researcher specifically to gain understanding of parents' reasons for flexischooling and of how their child's flexischooling is managed. The two items read: '*Please briefly describe your reasons for requesting flexischooling*' and '*Please briefly describe what your child does on flexidays'.* The analytical approach to these two free text responses in the survey is inductive content analysis, the aim of which is 'to attain a condensed and broad description of [a] phenomenon' through the creation of 'concepts or categories describing the phenomenon' (Elo and Kyngäs 2008, 108). The purpose of inductive content analysis is to bring into focus a phenomenon about which little is known already, or where that knowledge is fragmented (Lauri and Kyngäs 2005). The data are scrutinised, meanings are induced from it and the researcher 'strives to make sense of the data' (Elo and Kyngäs 2008, p.109) through repeated reading and organisation of the material.

The data from the two free-text boxes considered in this study were read repeatedly, during which a process of open coding was undertaken to begin to organise the content into categories. Initially, each of the two questions was considered separately, resulting in separate lists of categories. These initial categories were then grouped under 'higher order headings' (McCain 1988; Burnard 1991) and these compared across the two subject questions. At this stage, observations or comments that were similar or related could be classified as 'belonging' with each other (Dey 1993), creating categories that had the potential to increase understanding of the participants' shared experiences.

The categories that were identified in the data of this study were:

- *Category one: Challenges of full-time school*
- *Category two: Advantages of 'not-school'*
- *Category three: Enhanced learning opportunities.*

Findings

Category one: Challenges of full-time school

The majority of concerns reported by parents/carers in this study were regarding the experience of school for their child with SEN. Parents expressed their belief that their child was 'unable to cope with [the] mainstream classroom' and stated that their child found school 'exhausting', was 'completely anxious and overwhelmed', was exhibiting 'distressed behaviour' and was 'clearly unable to cope'. On occasion this was manifested in specific behaviours such as the child reporting physical symptoms for which medical investigation ruled out other causes, or as presenting in 'daily episodes of extended meltdowns'.

Respondents reported that school was a challenge because their child needed to be 'moving all the time' and was unable to 'sit still', or that school was a challenge for their child because of a 'struggle with changes and transition'. One reported specific concern regarding the subject matter of school:

> *[T]he school powerpoint files are full of horror - including joke gothic horror and really nasty post-watershed material … He can't bear it and has been having paralysing panic attacks.*

More commonly, it was not the content of the curriculum but rather its scale and the quantity of schooling that was identified as a major concern.

Children were reported as being 'unable to cope with the full week' with indication that full-time attendance was causing 'burnout' in some young people. Full-time school was felt to be 'too overwhelming', with parents suggesting that their child could not manage 'the whole curriculum', or the 'busy-ness of a school'. Some respondents reported 'detrimental effects on mental health' for their child when attending school full-time, suggesting it was 'severely impacting their … wellbeing'. One parent suggested that it was the 'idea of school, all day, every day' that was causing their child distress, with another reporting the negative impact of 'masking' by their child at school, the hiding of autistic presentation in order to conform to neurotypical behaviours. Parents explained that the school setting was simply

'too much' for their child, with one suggesting that this resulted in 'extreme tiredness by Friday leading to increased dysregulation'.

Many respondents described aspects of their child's at home time from flexischooling in terms of recovery time. One described the need for 'low demand time', another for a 'quiet at home day', and another that home learning 'suited … [her child's] sensory needs very well'. Parents indicated that during at home time their child 'relaxes', 'rests, or 'needs to de-stress'. There was clarity that many parents felt that 'the quiet and processing time', time to 'unwind', to 'rest' and 'go with the flow' was essential for their child's wellbeing, describing that they keep this time 'as low demand as possible', to provide 'downtime to help … decompress from the demands of school'. Parents repeatedly described their child's need to 'rest' – one as needing the extra time at home to sleep – articulating the need for this as being because the intensity of school 'fills up the bucket' of the child's capacity.

Category two: Advantages of 'not school'

Beyond mere recovery, however, many parents described significant perceived positives of the child's flexischooling through the additional time spent at home. Many used the time to undertake trips, including visits to museums, libraries, an aquarium, 'public places of interest', galleries, castles, beaches and 'educational venues'. The value of doing this during regular school hours was access to venues at quieter times for children who 'do not cope well with noisy busy environments'. This use of flexischooled 'downtime' was also described in terms of facilitating greater access to activities out of traditional school hours:

> *He will then have enough energy to participate in activities in the evening and weekends eg cooking, clubs, exercise. If he is at school full-time then he isn't able to do anything outside of school hours.*

One child was reported as being supported to cook dinner, with the parents counting this 'as our home-ed as this wouldn't happen if he was in school all day'.

This use of flexitime to enhance social interaction was indicated by a number of respondents. Parents described some sense of the child being part of a community, suggesting that home days enabled their child to meet 'a diverse range of home educated

peers', to have 'playdates with other flexi or home-ed kids', to 'access the community' and to experience 'social meet ups with home educated peers [with whom] they formed good friendships' or being when their child 'sees family'.

There were implications in the responses that the child's distress from full-time school had been impacting family life away from school, and that flexischool gave an advantage in protecting against this. One parent indicated that 'the stress of school comes out at home', reporting that 'meltdowns and violence' had been escalating after full-time attendance. It was reported that the child in full-time school had 'barely functioned after school', with weekends becoming periods of 'recuperation'. One respondent reported that their child 'struggles separating from parents', suggesting increased emotional distress at that time. Further, reports of the child being 'ill every couple of weeks affecting attendance', and of 'refusal to go to school' have clear implications regarding impact on the parents' lives, including child-care responsibilities, with potentially disrupted access to employment. One parent reported, with apparent weariness, that they had experienced 'years of struggling' and another admitted that the only reason their child attended school at all was because they as parent 'needed a respite'. For this parent, flexischooling was a partial solution for them although they were left feeling 'guilty for being too tired to home educate'.

Many of the children who are the subject of this research have communication differences, and the parents' responses suggest that the additional 1:1 time facilitated by flexischooling supported parents to build communicative bonds with their child. They described a range of activities undertaken: playing board games, reading together, doing arts and crafts, drawing, cooking, baking, 'time with me'. Much of the activity described takes place outside, including outdoor play, 'time in nature', swimming, gardening, cycling, football and going for walks.

Category three: Enhanced learning opportunities

There were indications in the data that parents felt that the arrangement met their child's individual needs. This might be because they felt that their child was 'bright', 'needs extra stimulation' or is 'academically advanced', or that learning could 'be more active and fitting'. One parent suggested that learning at home could provide 'learning that was more focused

on our son's interests'. There was a clear impression that parents felt that they knew their child's needs individually, whether that was because they had 'already done speech therapy with him', that they 'had good knowledge of the evidence' for effective teaching regarding the child's specific need, or because they saw that their child was 'learning more with her mother at home on a 1:1 basis that her peers in a full-time education'.

Flexischooling hours varied, and parents appeared pleased when this could be arranged to meet the varying needs of their child. For one child the school attendance element was 'built up … slowly over the years', for another it was seen more as a way of meeting the need to take a 'break, to reset' or to reduce their child's 'pressure of masking all day'. For some parents, though, flexischooling was a more pragmatic arrangement. Parents found their children were already 'struggling to attend school regularly', resulting in 'multiple school absences', with one respondent indicating that, when supposedly at school full-time, their child's levels of attendance 'fell to around 50%', resulting in flexischooling in actuality if not in name. For some respondents, reducing time in school was seen as a 'way to stay in mainstream' for their child; indeed, one respondent described the arrangement as a way to 'avoid her being expelled'.

A great deal of the time spent away from school was described in terms of accessing academic work. Some learning activities reported by parents were child-centred with the children able to 'have a lot of freedom' for 'whatever they want to learn about'. Other parents reported activities linked to formal learning, including that they '[do] stuff linked to school topics eg. watching videos, reading books' or that they undertake 'science experiments'. Some parents openly valued the opportunity for their child to have continued access to the educational element of school, with one respondent articulating that they had 'deliberately chosen a [home] day that minimises him missing core subjects'. Children were described as undertaking 'maths/problem solving' 'reading and writing practice', 'Phonics …tailored to her level', 'Handwriting, working on correct letter formation', 'workbooks' and 'worksheets'. In most instances this was facilitated by the parent. One respondent indicated that, 'we follow the National Curriculum in more depth and on 1:1 basis' on their at home days; another that she helps her daughter to 'access her learning due to learning difficulties, helping her to study'. One parent and child 'work from CGP text books' with the mother '[working] alongside … teaching him all day', and father supporting with 'maths and physics

and computer science'. There is a sense that the parents are acting as an interface to facilitate access to the curriculum for their child. One parent reported acting as 'scribe and reader', another helping her child 'substantially with his English written work', and 'catching her [child] up on the learning she has missed due to being off school because of her chronic health conditions', adding that 'school don't do this'. Some of the academic work described had been set by the school, with parents describing at home time spent 'often [in] homework, like Maths', or 'on work that school provide … for him to do at home [which] if regulated sufficiently he will do'.

There is some frustration evident. One child is described as doing 'some school work if she's able to', with one parent indicating that they are 'supposed to home learn in afternoon which doesn't always work out as she refuses to do anything'. Another parent shares how they manage potential frustrations, indicating that 'we have an agreement not to complete homework when it's overwhelming or just unsuitable for him', and another that, 'as he is ahead at maths I don't think it would be the best idea to drill him on worksheets'. Parents also recognised a perceived need in their children for autonomy. 'He has he own ideas about what he wants to write', one parent expresses, and 'I encourage through following his interests'. Many parents indicate that they support 'self-directed autonomous learning' or learning that is 'child led', that they 'focus on comprehension', and support 'writing, on whatever our son is interested in' and 'project work he wants [to complete], related to a current topic'.

Many of the activities undertaken during these periods link to external agencies, with parents expressing that through these they were able to 'provide opportunities he can't access through school'. These included access to on-line learning, a virtual IGCSE, maths programmes such as *Ronit Bird* and *Numicon*, programmes to support language development such as the *Visualizing and Verbalizing* programme, and the Home Educators' group *World School*. Additionally, parents reported their child attending a range of outside activities during at-home education days, including forest schools, art classes, gymnastics, swimming lessons, horse riding, a coding-mentoring class, and *Shakespeare's junior club*. Some activities are disability-specific, including a 'half day at a local carriage driving centre for people with disabilities', the '*Changing Lives through Horses* programme from the British Horse Society,' and attendance at 'sports coaching with a local charity that trains young

people with additional needs'. One young man attends a '1 day work placement at a local cafe that specialises in supporting young people with learning disabilities', with the respondent adding that they hope that this will lead to a more permanent placement 'when he leaves school'.

Parents reported that some of the additional time spent with their child was to access support and therapy unavailable through schools. These include *Rebound Therapy*, occupational therapy and speech therapy, with parents reporting that the at-home time created through flexischooling also enables 'practice between therapy sessions' and to work on tasks 'worked out in collaboration with the … therapist'. Parents reported working on articulation, narrative programmes and social comic strips and 'playing strategy games that require [the child] to … think/make decisions'. More generally, parents reported using the time to 'work through things [the child] doesn't understand'.

Discussion

The data suggest that there appears to be a strong relationship between parents' reported concerns regarding the effects of school on their children's wellbeing and their belief in the need for recovery time during flexischooling home time. Of the children reported on in the study, 64.5% (n.20) had attended school full-time before the flexischooling arrangement had been put in place. This data, therefore, suggested that flexischooling may not be an effective provision in its own right, but more a response by parents to the perceived trauma of full time schooling for their child in the 'extraordinary circumstances that school environments present to many children and young people' (Thomas and Loxley, 2022 p.238). In this context, flexischooling may be understood as a further extension of the segregative, exclusionary systems identified by some researchers to be the result of supposedly inclusive practices that 'marginalise and exclude' (Thomas and Loxley, 2022, p.227). Were full time schooling to be modified to enable effective inclusion of these pupils, therefore, the need for flexischooling as reported by the parents in this survey might diminish.

Much of the data suggests that flexischooling has been undertaken because of a response to the perceived challenges of school for the children described. One advantage of sharing school and home-based education that emerges from the parents surveyed is simply that

flexischool enables less school and, therefore, more time for the child to recover or reset from the periods of school attendance. Where school is described as 'exhausting', it can be counterbalanced with quiet time at home. Parents are clear in their beliefs about what makes school a challenging environment for their children, not least because of sensory issues (Price and Romualdez 2024) and the mental and emotional tolls of masking. These perceptions are supported in the research literature, with the primary driver for parents' decisions to withdraw their child from school being reported as 'failure to meet the need of children with SEN' (Mitchell 2021, p.551). This driver suggests a response by parents to the perception that schools show 'a declining emphasis on inclusive solutions to children's problems' (Thomas et al., 2023 p.1369). However, flexischooling – like other alternative provisions such as the increased use of private special schools as discussed by Thomas et al. – could be criticised for increased societal costs due to reduced parental productivity and reduced accountability around the welfare of the child.

Were it simply that the parents in this survey felt that school were an unsuitable environment for their child, it is likely that there would be more emphasis on a preferred route of full home-education. This may not be an option for these parents, whether because of financial or other constraints, but there remains an impression from the data in this study that parents feel that *some* school attendance remains advantageous for their child. Many of the respondents shared the wish to support their child to continue to access the formal curriculum as delivered at school. Some took an active role in this as an 'interface' to facilitate their child's learning, and others supported the practice and repetition of skills they consider as key. Parents used a variety of sources for this, including work set by school, materials accessed from the internet, workbooks and computer games. Other parents focused more on individualised learning, supporting their child to follow their own interests, to write about what they wanted, to read around their passions. Especially regarding pupils who are autistic, monotropic interest – the 'ability to focus heavily on a few interests, rather than focusing more lightly on a higher number of interests' (Grant and Kara 2021, 593) – can be a particular strength, leading to intense focus and attention which can be a powerful facilitator for learning (Wood 2021; Grant and Kara 2021; O'Neil and Kenny 2023). The parents in this survey seemed keen to work with this factor of their child's presentation rather than fighting against it, and to use the child's interests as a way of facilitating

communication and co-engagement. This instinctive adherence to a strength-based approach for their children resonates with importance identified in the literature (for example, Clark and Adams, 2020; White et al., 2023), but remains stubbornly difficult to replicate in schools.

For some of the parents taking part in this study it emerged that flexischooling has occurred through default, as their child was already unable to attend school for much of the time, or the child had been threatened with expulsion. Concerns regarding the use of 'informal' exclusions by schools and the use of 'off-rolling' to remove children from schools has been highlighted in a recent government report (Timpson 2019); for these parents it can be understood that they do not undertake an element of home education that is 'elective' at all (Badman 2009; Pearson and Lewis 2010). There is understandable distress caused to the parents in these positions, and a feeling that this situation is not of their making. Even when flexischooling has been at parental request, it can sometimes be seen as stemming from despair and a feeling of not having any other option if the child is to be protected. One parent reports flexischooling as the only way to support her child to make up for work missed at school due to illness; another indicates that she has to collect her child from school after just one and a half hours each day and has then to take the child with her to work where she 'will do some schoolwork if she's able to' as the only way to keep her child in school at all.

For other parents it seems that the provision of flexischooling may be felt to be a protection for themselves and wider family as well as for the child under discussion. The reports of their child being distressed, of experiencing meltdowns or being unable to function in the evenings or at weekends suggest disruption to normal family life. The incidents of the child being ill and unable to attend school – whether because of physical symptoms that cannot be explained otherwise, or because of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) – suggest further strain on the family. For these parents, the formal provision of flexischool may enable more ordered, timetabled lives with reduced distress and disharmony. Literature by autistic adults, as well as recent research reports, confirms not only the stress that 'masking' can put on the individual but also the wider impact that this can have when the 'mask' is allowed to fall (Smitten 2022; Pearson and Rose 2021). Planned and predictable reduced time in school may minimise the negative impact of this, facilitating time for the child to 'be

themselves', without the strain of needing to conform to neurotypical norms (Kapp et al. 2019). A corresponding concept is that the young person may have more capacity to undertake other activities and opportunities if not exhausted by the demands of full-time schooling. The concept of 'spoon theory', developed by Christine Miserandino (2003; 2017), suggests that living with a disability may mean that tasks that non-disabled individuals undertake with ease take more energy and effort for the disabled individual, resulting in 'running out of spoons' or burnout. There is strong indication of this idea in respondents who suggest that their child was able to access activities such as cooking, going to clubs and socialising in the evenings and at weekends because they are not exhausted by the demands of full-time schooling.

The physical challenges of schools as sensory environments (for example, McAllister and Sloan, 2016; Mostafa, 2014) was reflected by some parents in their suggestion that flexischooling gave their child access to wider educational experiences at times when these were less busy. Respondents contextualised this greater access as an important element for some parents. It is not merely that they perceive that their child is able to access museums, libraries and aquariums at less busy times, but that this means that they are able to access them at all. By definition, and despite recommendations and attempts to make venues more accessible (see, for example, NAS n.d.), many venues will be busiest at weekends and during school holidays, and this may rule these out as unsuitable for some children. Whilst some proponents may argue for an 'immersion' approach, where autistic children are exposed to sensorily stimulating environments in order to 'encourage adaptation to the over-stimulation so typical of the disorder and to replicate the level of stimulation found in the real world' (Mostafa, 2014 p. 144), many parents (and Mostafa themself in the literature) understand that overstimulation of this kind can be exclusionary. Respondents were keen to share that they enjoyed visiting these wider educational venues with their child and felt that this access was valuable.

Further access was to home-education groups, where some parents felt that their child was able to forge social contacts not as available in school. This emphasis on the social advantages of flexischooling runs counter to some public perception of home-education as socially isolating (but supports advocates of home education who indicate that children educated out of school experience increased socialisation opportunities - see, for example,

Kunzman and Gaither (2013) for a summary of these arguments). In the responses in this study, it was the out-of-school time that was most usually identified as supporting social interaction, as an opportunity to connect with community and with the parents and wider family.

Many responses suggested the increased time spent with their flexischooled child supported the parent/child relationship, and this came across as an important element in the data. The parents contextualised this in terms of both opportunities to interact with their child's learning, and through many reported elements of time spent together in other activities, such as walking, talking, gardening, cooking, doing crafts. The reduction in their child's distress was reported to facilitate this enhanced relationship building, and additional time written into the week, both for the child and for the parent, was clearly valued in the responses.

Much of the data collected in this study suggests an exploration by parents of the individualised needs of their children. Parents spoke frequently of being able to respond to the child's lead, of supporting autonomous learning, of following the child's interests. There is evidence of the parent valuing the opportunity to learn more about their 'different' child. There is an emerging confidence in many of the respondents that they are the ones who may be able to support their child best. This is articulated in practical terms when provision is reported to be accessible because of a flexischooling model, and in the descriptions of the 1:1 supports that parents report providing. Many respondents include elements of time for their child to 'be happy' as part of what they feel the flexischooling model offers. There is an element of guilt evident in some that they do not protect their child from the challenges of school by home-educating full-time, but in many responses, there is an impression that the models of flexischooling described provide appropriately for their child's needs at this stage of their development.

Conclusion

It should not be a surprise that the parents who took part in this survey report positive outcomes for their children due to flexischooling, since this is the provision that they are undertaking with their child. It is interesting that for some it was the Covid-19 pandemic,

when schools were closed, that had helped them to identify what they see as the advantages to this way of working. They indicated that their child's 'curricular achievement improved significantly' during this time, that 'behaviour … improved dramatically during lockdown' and that the 'Covid lockdown helped us realise her potential was not being met by school'. According to some research (for example, English 2021) shutting of schools because of the global pandemic 'provided a unique opportunity to explore contrasts and adaptations between school and home-learning environments' (Hill, Keville, and Ludlow 2023,p. 547), with the limited research yet available on parental report of this time suggesting that for some parents of children with SEN it was seen as a time of learning, growth and opportunity (O'Hagan 2021; Hill, Keville, and Ludlow 2023).

Although there is anger and unhappiness evident in the data from this study that schools are failing to meet the needs of these children there is also considerable optimism and positivity shown by respondents. Anger regarding what is perceived as distress caused by an unsuitable school environment comes across strongly, as does a determination to intervene, now, to protect their child and to 'not waste' the valuable time of childhood as their child develops. In this, the participants are articulate and adamant. Although research and suggestions for making schools more inclusive for autistic children continue to be articulated (see, for example, Robert and Webster, 2022; Rajotte et al., 2023), the parents who took part in this research are unable to wait for these changes to be introduced. There is also a suggestion that many of the parents who have taken part in this study are in an exploratory phase as they shadow their child's ever-changing learning and progress. Flexischooling emerges for them as a 'workable' model at this time whilst they continue to learn – together – what their child's needs are now and will become as that child continues to develop and mature.

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