

# Pupil referral units (PRUs) and alternative education provision; a think piece on making a case for parental choice for children with SEND

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## Abstract

Parental choice remains a central theme in education policy in England. Parents have the right to choose how their children are educated. For some families this choice is surrendered, with volition and intention, to their local authority which allocates school places after parents, statutory guardians and families have made their decisions. Where applicable, after parents have selected mainstream education for children with SEND, their child might be evaluated, and a recommendation made for their child to undergo a managed move; typically to join a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) or Alternative Provision (AP). In this think piece, we advocate for PRUs and APs to sit alongside mainstream and special education schools to offer a more balanced first choice for parents. This means PRUs and APs are not 'othered' in this choice offer for parents. There are academic, psycho-social, emotional, well-being and self-affirming complexities which could, and quite frankly, tend to result in the pupils and students accessing settings such as these which appear to be othered in this way.

## KEYWORDS

alternative education, managed move, parental choice, pupil referral units, SEND

## Key Points

- PRUs or APs should be granted equal school choice status as mainstream and special schools.
- Parental school choice options need to be widened.
- Call for a more holistic review of the concept of managed moves.
- Exploration of the impact on pupils of managed moves.

## INTRODUCTION

Our contribution here offers the space for education professionals, practitioners and policymakers to review the place of PRUs and APs in the schooling system in England. The areas we think about in this paper address the following: parental choice of school, the place of PRUs and APs in the schooling system, and finally the impact of the managed move on the pupils or students and their families. While we aim to think about and bring attention to this under-researched sector of schooling in England (see Jalali & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2019; Murphy, 2022), our intention is not to critique the excellent work which professionals in these settings do on a daily basis. DfE (2014) states 'Pupil referral units (PRUs) teach children who aren't able to attend school and may not otherwise receive suitable education.

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This could be because they have a short or long-term illness, have been excluded or are a new starter waiting for a mainstream school place’.

Our purpose is really to ask whether parents of children with SEND or children who are neurodivergent could be offered PRUs and APs as first or equal choice in school place offers, rather than post-school place offer as an alternative after mainstream has been found not to be suitable. Recent SEND policy documents highlight the importance of providing a wide range of educational settings, including PRUs and APs, to meet diverse student needs. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (DfE, 2020; DfE, SEND review 2023b) underscores the need for schools to be flexible and responsive to individual needs, suggesting a shift towards more inclusive practices that integrate PRUs and APs as viable first-choice options for parents.

## PARENTAL CHOICE FOR CHILDREN WITH SEND

There is ongoing research to understand SEND and neurodivergence, and for a significant proportion of pupils and students there are immense benefits on their schooling experience, their academic progress and overall well-being. For a small group of children, SEND, neurodivergent and related social complexities mean they straddle the space between mainstream schooling and being educated in special schools. With the rising numbers (see Trotman et al., 2019) of this small group nationwide and more specifically post-pandemic, it is becoming increasingly urgent to explore ways in which PRUs and APs contribute to normalising formal educational spaces for children. Consultation for the SEND review (2022b), has led to an improved outlook for co-ordination of SEND and alternative provision with a designated guidance document; SEND and AP improvement plan, with the proposed introduction of a national system; ‘a national system must give greater clarity to parents about the timely and accurate identification of needs, and how decisions around support are made from early years to post-16’ (See SEND and AP improvement plan, 2023b, p. 7). Although there are commendable recommendations for skills improvement of the practitioners in alternative education provision in this guidance document, and forward planning for an implementation board to guarantee application of the recommendations from the improvement plan, the language of transition is quite prominent in this document which only goes to evidence the rationale for our call for alternative education becoming a stable choice rather than a transitory option.

Some families have exercised their right to choose by opting out of the formal school system and embracing non-formal Elective Home Education (DfE, 2019). However, for families with strong beliefs in the value of formal education or school-based education, a review of what the schooling system has to offer is imperative. Courtney (2015) for example explores UK school's typology demonstrating the range of schools available for parents to choose from. We question whether it is now time for parents who know their children best, to make an informed decision on the type of school suitable for their children's needs without the aggravation of the child being perceived as unsuitable at one setting and moved to another. We believe policymakers should listen to parents as this facilitates policy changes and subsequent policy implementation by practitioners and by leadership in PRUs and APs.

## THE PLACE OF PRUS AND APS IN THE SCHOOLING SYSTEM

It is all in the name; a referral unit and an alternative. In the section above, we advocate for parental choice but the name of most of the PRUs and APs place a strong emphasis on ‘othering’. For parents, statutory guardians and families, naming in this way carries undertones of potential lack of equality in terms of the standard, quality and experience of education at these settings. We must emphasise successes of PRUs and APs; for example, Bagley and Hallam (2016), which are transformational for the young people through the joy of learning and enhanced feeling of belonging which the managed move ignites. The Schools White Paper (DfE, 2022a) emphasises a holistic approach to education, advocating for a system that values all forms of educational provision equally. This policy direction aims to dismantle the stigmatisation associated with PRUs and APs, promoting them as integral components of the educational landscape. Conversely, it is not uncommon to find parental resistance during the referral process, resigned agreement from some pupils and students, and celebratory comments from mainstream schools on finding a suitable alternative place for a child.

The place of PRUs and APs is not clear-cut in the schooling system, at least here in England. West (2023) captures the UK educational landscape with reference to parental choice, and it is quite a picture of complexity. Returning to educational alternatives, it seems there is a disconnect between what policymakers envisioned, what mainstream schools hope for and plan for their pupils and students (who most often remain in their roll), and what PRUs and APs aspire and do. Power and Taylor (2020) examine the complexities of exclusion and location of exclusion spaces within and outside of schools which tend to impact on reporting the data for children who are not accessing their education

in their chosen school. No one is at fault here, but the education landscape is changing and we as educationalists must start thinking actively about how our education system in England caters for all children and how we must make sure that there is inclusion in policy, practice and parental choice for children with SEND.

Across the four nations, exclusion in all the various forms is quite high in England (Power & Taylor, 2020) and this must be addressed. There are children out there who would benefit from the excellence of PRUs and APs, and families who need to be offered real choice from the very onset of a child's formal education journey. We think that parents are choosing schooling, but the types of schools offered are limited particularly in how PRUs and APs are designed to function.

## MANAGED MOVES

Mainstream schools are adept at evaluating what works for their pupils and children. Families trust the judgement and expertise of the relevant assessors and professionals. There are however only a limited number of places available in PRUs and APs due to the extensive and complex needs of the pupils and students. What we argue for is an equitable allocation of places, with equity here mainly addressed towards equal status of PRUs and APs to mainstream schools and special schools. This can be achieved, we believe, through listening to parents, statutory guardians and families, working collaboratively with all stakeholders, and strong unified advocacy for a policy review. The terms managed move and in-year transfers (Hulme et al., 2024), and off-rolling (Black, 2022) are used to enact the process of offering a suitable provision for a pupil or student outside of mainstream schools. The latest guidance on managed moves (DfE, 2023a) highlights the importance of transparent processes and collaborative decision-making involving parents, students, and educational professionals. This approach aims to ensure that moves are in the best interests of the child, supporting a seamless transition and continuous educational engagement. Messeter and Soni (2018) highlight the paucity of research in this area of education which needs more attention by researchers.

At least initially, the plan is for the pupil or student to return to mainstream at some point in future. As most, not all, pupils and students identify within the SEND and/or neurodivergent range, it is indeed rare to find that they have overcome their challenges and are ready to return to mainstream. The long-term outcome of the managed move is that the PRU or AP becomes their destination educational setting. Hence, our advocacy in this think piece for a review of our current alternative offer in England. It will be inclusive if pupils and students do not move away from mainstream with a self-perception of not fitting in, not suitable, not successful in any way; rather accessing a provision which is right for them in their fullness of childhood and their growing understanding of who they are and are becoming.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. *Re-evaluation of terminology:* The terms Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provisions (APs) inherently imply a sense of 'otherness' and secondary status within the education system. Therefore, this terminology could contribute to stigmatisation and a perception of inferiority, which may deter parents from considering these options initially. Renaming these provisions to emphasise their value and equality with mainstream and special schools could be a critical step towards enhancing parental choice and reducing stigma. Indeed, a reconceptualisation of APs and PRUs is integral to a stable educational offer which is not perceived to be transitory.
2. *Benefits of early integration:* There is evidence suggesting that early integration of children with SEND into PRUs and APs as first-choice options can have positive outcomes on their academic, social, and emotional development. For example, studies such as Bagley and Hallam (2016) showcase the transformational impact of PRUs and APs on students' well-being and sense of belonging. Additionally, as educators we have had first-hand experience of parents asking for this to be an option for them when reflecting on their child's difficult journey in mainstream schooling and knowing they will have to navigate the same issues with other children who face the same or similar challenges accessing mainstream schooling.
3. *Parental trust and involvement:* Trust in the system is pivotal. Parents' ability to choose PRUs and APs from the outset, rather than as a last resort, could foster greater trust in the education system. This aligns with Courtney's (2015) findings on the diverse typology of schools and the need for policymakers to listen to parents, who are often the best judges of their children's needs.
4. *Policy recommendations:* Policymakers need to review and possibly revise the criteria and processes involved in school placements for children with SEND. Current policies often result in managed moves, where students are placed in PRUs or APs after mainstream settings are deemed unsuitable. A proactive approach, offering these alternatives from the beginning, could alleviate the negative impacts associated with mid-year transfers

and exclusions. As the recent SEND and alternative provision improvement plan (2023b) states there is a ‘right time’ as well as a ‘right place’, alongside the ‘right support’. In this paper we advocate for the right time to be at the start of the educational journey, for some pupils and students, not a transition after this journey has begun. Closer collaboration between parents and specialist alternative provision practitioners will strengthen informed parental choice.

5. *Stakeholder collaboration*: Strong collaboration between parents, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders is essential for successful implementation of our conceptualisation of the revised alternative education and PRUs as first choice offer for parents. Advocacy for policy changes should focus on creating a more inclusive and equitable education system where PRUs and APs are valued equally alongside mainstream and special schools.

## CONCLUSION

Our contribution is driven by three core areas, all unified by the central theme of SEND. These are parental choice, the emerging role of PRUs and APs, and the concept of managed move in England. At the centre of these is a child who just wants to enjoy their childhood with their family and their peers. By prioritising the needs of children and young people with SEND, we advocate for an inclusive educational system that offers true parental choice and supports the holistic development of every student. Murphy (2022) highlights the lack of research in understanding how children make sense of their own exclusion, bringing to the surface the contribution of prohibiting contexts from which stem the behavioural resistance of some children. The SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023b) sets out clear goals for enhancing the quality and accessibility of PRUs and APs. We challenge the language of transition which this improvement plan uses as we propose a change in school choice offer for parents. We think it is unfair that for some children their educational experience is positioned as a transition with very limited stability. A stable educational experience is required for each child to be supported to achieve their potential and first choice for AP or PRU is definitely a fair choice for some families and their children. We must also challenge policy makers to review the current conceptualisation of APs and PRUs for this parental choice to be meaningful, and not necessarily an alternative option or a referral point. Additionally, in our position as educators, we advocate for the simplification of childhood, the inclusion of the whole child, and a review of policy which opens real parental choice and supports relevant decision-making. Equity, social class (see Hulme et al., 2024) and inclusivity could be examined in future research and thinking in this area.

A successful outcome to resolve the issues we have raised will be for policymakers to undertake an urgent review of educational alternatives, educationalists to examine the concept of educational alternatives with a view of new terminologies emerging, and for parents to be granted true choice in the decision-making regarding the right provision for their child. As educators, we urge policymakers to review educational alternatives, educators to consider new terminologies, and parents to be granted true choice in school placements. We believe that strong stakeholder collaboration and proactive policies are essential for an inclusive and equitable education system.

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**How to cite this article:** Enow, L.O. & Kapcia, S. (2024) Pupil referral units (PRUs) and alternative education provision; a think piece on making a case for parental choice for children with SEND. *Support for Learning*, 39, 198–202. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12504>