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RECEIVED 21 February 2024
ACCEPTED 09 September 2024
PUBLISHED 19 September 2024

CITATION
Norwich B and Webster R (2024) Enhancing
public dialogue about inclusion in school
education: a citizens' panel pilot.
Front. Educ. 9:1389462.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1389462

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Enhancing public dialogue about inclusion in school education: a citizens' panel pilot

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Introduction: This paper reports on a small-scale Citizens' Panel pilot project using deliberative democratic methods to produce policy ideas about inclusion in school education of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D) in England. The project had two aims: (i) to obtain information about modifying a Citizens' Panel process to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D; and (ii) to generate more nuanced, grounded and integrated policy ideas about inclusion than can be found in recent English school education policy.

Methods: The Citizens' Panel was a two phase deliberative process. Phase 1 involved working with six young people with SEN/D and their parents/carers to shape the Citizens' Panel agenda, and to obtain information about how they could participate and communicate their perspectives during the events. Phase 2 involved the delivery of the Citizens' Panel itself, which comprised 28 people: the six young people from phase 1, plus four young people without SEN/D, 13 parents/carers, and five education professionals.

Results: The process evaluation revealed the need for and impact of meticulous planning using a differentiated and strengths-based approach to design. While participants reported that taking part in the Citizens' Panel was overall, a positive and worthwhile experience, the differentiated approach involved trade-offs that affected the experiences of some participants without SEN/D, though not detrimentally. The panel produced distinctive ideas about more inclusive schools, where almost all of the themes were about general school changes for everyone. Most general themes involved some specific SEN/D aspects, with only one theme being SEN/D specific. This paper illustrates how these ideas are more *nuanced*, grounded and integrated than those in current national policy.

Discussion: This paper provides evidence of how deliberative approaches can be used within and between schools, groups of schools (e.g., multi academy trusts), local networks (including local authorities), as well as at the national level. Lessons drawn show how deliberative methods used by advocacy groups, protest movements and non-governmental organisations in support of more transformational change can be developed in ways that enable young people with SEN/D to participate and have their voices heard.

KEYWORDS

inclusive schools, special educational needs, disability, deliberative democracy, public dialogue

Introduction

This paper reports on a deliberative public dialogue project undertaken in England, over 2022/23, concerning the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities in schools. The project was one of nine pilots, funded by the UK Research and Innovation¹ and managed by the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce², as part of the 'Rethinking Public Dialogue' programme³. The programme involved developing and testing novel approaches and innovations for public dialogue.

The project reported here is believed to be the first to use a deliberative democratic approach, that involves public dialogue, on improving the English school education system. The project not only addressed valuable policy questions about how the English school education system could be designed to be more inclusive for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities (SEN/D). Consistent with the aims of the 'Rethinking Public Dialogue' programme, it also piloted approaches to including young people with SEN/D in the policymaking/decision-influencing process, in the format of a Citizens' Panel.

The project was timely, as it took place during the period when the government had published a new improvement plan for SEN/D policy and practice in England (DfE, 2023), which was itself a response to its own 2022 SEN/D Green Paper (DfE, 2022a; DfE, 2022b). Findings from the project could therefore be compared with contemporary national policies. In addition, the project intended to add value to the planning and delivery of Citizens' Panels and other deliberative public dialogue approaches, by providing fresh insight into the effective and efficient ways that young people with SEN/D can fully participate in them.

The project, therefore, had two main aims: (i) to obtain information about modifying a Citizens' Panel process to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D; and (ii) to generate, via the modified Citizens' Panel process, more nuanced, grounded and integrated policy ideas about inclusion than can be found in recent English school education policy.

The idea for the project emerged from the work of the SEN Policy Research Forum (SENPRF)⁴, an influential multi-disciplinary and stakeholder national network, which has run public policy dialogue in the form of participative policy seminars in the SEN/D and inclusive education field for 30 years. The authors and project leads are members of the SENPRF's strategic lead group, and one has written previously about the potential of deliberative democratic approaches for policymaking, as a way of addressing democratic deficits in education policymaking, especially in relation to pupils with SEN/D (Norwich, 2019).

This paper continues by outlining three concepts and principles central to the project, before provides the rationale and context to the Citizens' Panel pilot. Next, we detail the methods, sample and procedures relating to the two strands of the project, which address the two aims stated above. We then move to the project findings, which are again presented in two parts: first, the outcomes from the Citizens' Panel; and second, the findings from the parallel process evaluation. Finally, we discuss the strengths, limitation and implications of the findings in terms of school SEN/D policy and how future public dialogue processes involving young people with additional needs might be enhanced and advanced.

Key concepts

Central to this project are three concepts and principles, each of which have a background of thinking and practice. These are: inclusion and inclusive education; deliberative democracy; and learners' voice.

Inclusive education

Despite being contested and difficult to define (UNESCO, 2020), inclusion in education, or Inclusive education, is widely recognised as a cherished value. It has been argued that inclusion is both a process and a state of affairs. As a process, it embraces and forms a sense of belonging based on beliefs that each individual has value and is to be respected. As a state of affairs, it involves several dimensions, such as physical placement, academic and social participation, and achievement in a common curriculum. Its complexity derives from this multi-dimensionality (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018). Furthermore, inclusion in education goes beyond disability to encompass other vulnerable or marginalised pupils, and indeed, applies to all pupils (Ainscow, 2020).

One way of examining this complexity is to consider two influential and divergent perspectives on inclusive education. The first, associated with Warnock (2005), positions inclusive education as being about everyone learning what is personally relevant, wherever this takes place. This perspective focusses on the learner engagement aspect of inclusion (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011), and has two implications: (i) it can be used to justify some separate provision settings; and (ii) it overlooks the social significance of any separation. It is a perspective, especially as advocated by Warnock (2005), associated with a strong focus on an academic cognitive curriculum.

The second perspective is associated with the Inclusion Index (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). It assumes that the onus is on mainstream or general schools to accommodate the diversity of pupils to participate academically and socially 'under the same roof'. This perspective focusses on learning together, and raises questions about: (i) how much diversity can be accommodated at general school and classroom levels; (ii) the extent to which some internal school separation for those with SEN/D is justifiable.

The difference between these two perspectives is captured by the difference between a focus on learning what is personally relevant (Warnock, 2005), and a focus on increased participation in the culture, community and curricula of the one's local school (Inclusion Index; Booth and Ainscow, 2011). The latter does not connect to a personal curriculum relevance, while the former does not address questions about shared and common curricula. A coherent perspective on

1 UKRI: UK public body that provides investment and support for researchers and businesses. <https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/about-uk-research-and-innovation/https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/about-uk-research-and-innovation/>

2 RSA: Charity with Royal Charter to encourage the arts, manufactures and commerce; where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions. <https://www.thersa.org>

3 UKRI-RSA Rethinking public dialogue programme: <https://www.thersa.org/rethinking-public-dialogue>

4 SEN Policy Research Forum: <https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk>

inclusion has to address deep questions about what to learn, with whom and where.

Norwich (2024) suggests that there is tendency to prevarication (avoiding saying what you really mean) about full inclusion, which is also found in Article 24 of the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD: UN, 2006; UNCPRD, 2016; UNESCO, 2020) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). For example, the Salamanca Statement refers to 'all children learning together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or difference they have', which implies a potential limitation to togetherness.

Inclusion has often been defined as the opposite of exclusion and segregation, with separate settings, such as special classes and special schools, and the language of SEN, deficits and difficulties seen as excluding or stigmatising. So, inclusion as a cherished value, can come to be treated as the opposed to, and so split off from, anything that can be distinguished from it, such as special educational needs. Cigman (2007) has called this style of thinking, *universal inclusion*, in which the purity of inclusion is protected from anything 'special' or 'separate'. She proposes a *moderate inclusion*, open to the potential benefits of practices labelled 'special' and 'separate'. In a similar way, Norwich (2024) recognises that inclusive education calls for some ideological impurity, where the purposes of education involve settling for a balance between different values, of which inclusion is one. This calls for a more nuanced perspective, where inclusive education can involve some specialised adaptations.

It is notable that in his recognition of the importance and challenges associated with inclusion in education, Ainscow (2020) claims that moving in a more inclusive direction requires seeking to involve all stakeholders at every level in the policy process. Everybody's experience and expertise needs to be involved, he argues, to build a consensus about inclusive values in school communities. This can be seen as an implicit call for a more democratic approach to policymaking, an approach which Norwich (2019) has advocated in arguing for a more deliberative approach to making policies that drive schools to be more inclusive for children and young people with SEN/D.

Deliberative democracy

The growing dissatisfaction with democracy in the UK and elsewhere has led to increased interest in more deliberative approaches to policymaking and politics (Taylor, 2019). Liberal democracies involve the election of representatives, with citizens having a limited involvement in discussion, debate and decision-making, sometimes called a 'democratic deficit' (Marquand, 1979). Deliberation is the careful thought and discussion of various aspects of a topic or issue. When linked to democracy, it brings together three criteria: inclusivity, deliberation and citizenship.

Deliberative democracy covers a range of approaches that bring together a representative group of citizens and experts from diverse backgrounds in order to exchange perspectives on a complex issue. Opportunity for inclusive democratic deliberation, it is claimed, can educate citizens, stimulate awareness of complex issues, and produce enlightened bottom-up and legitimate policy ideas (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Deliberative democracy is an umbrella term covering different models of public deliberations, often called 'mini-publics'; for example, Citizens' Assemblies and Citizens' Panels.

Research shows that these approaches can enhance empathy and solidarity between generations and different social groups, and

decrease the risk of polarisation (Bulling et al., 2013). However, these approaches have also been criticised for reproducing prevailing imbalances of power and wealth (Azmanova, 2010), which threaten the inclusion of those at risk of being marginalised in these mini-publics. These groups include young people, disabled people, and ethnic minorities. In addition to ensuring the proportional representation of minorities in public deliberations, organisers can use *enclave deliberation* in order to prepare these groups before they enter the wider process (Karpowitz et al., 2009). Enclave deliberation has been advocated for young people in various forms (Bulling et al., 2013), and is relevant to the pilot Citizens' Panel reported in this paper.

There are criticisms of deliberative democratic approaches that are important to consider. One criticism concerns whether mini-publics can achieve consensus through deliberation. This is partly about power imbalances between participants, but also linked to the participants' emotions and how the mini-publics connect to existing institutions. The agonistic view of democracy (Machin, 2023) raises questions about whether deliberation can represent the 'public voice', suggesting that it is instead a setting where social conflict can be enacted (Azmanova, 2010). However, as Taylor (2019) claims, even if consensus is not achieved, deliberative democracy can help people develop a respectful understanding of their differences in an agreeable way.

Another critique from Hammond (2020) sees deliberation as having links to the policy process in an advisory role, on one hand, and to protest movements through critical disruptive deliberation, on the other. Though her analysis relates to climate change and radical environmental movements, it has relevance to deliberative approaches in other policy areas. Viewed as a system-supporting role, deliberation is framed as supplementary, decision-oriented, and top-down, influenced, perhaps owned, by authorities. As a system-disruptor, deliberation is seen as being open-ended, discussion-oriented, and bottom-up, initiated and owned by movements.

An alternative criticism is that deliberative democracy is unrealistic, as government is complex and people lack the interest to participate and the abilities to contribute (Posner, 2003). Posner argues for a kind of marketplace democracy, where voters, as consumers, have sovereignty and express their political preferences for different parties and their policies. Talisse (2005) has questioned this 'realist' model, drawing on Dewey's ideas of democracy as collective problem-solving, at both the state and other levels of society, being experimental and on-going. Deliberative democracy can in this model co-exist with representative democracy (Fishkin, 2018). Talisse (2005) contended that research shows citizens are capable of reasoned discussion of important issues, and that opinions and voting match their level of being informed (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

Learner voice in school education

Though we have found no literature on the inclusion of school-aged children and young people in democratic deliberation activities, there is much international research and development work on learner voice. Much of this is influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UN, 1989), with Article 12 declaring a child's right to express their views on matters that affect them (when 'capable of forming' their own views) and that 'due weight' be given to these views according to the age and maturity of the child.

There is a tradition of individual and group interviews of children and young people about their lives, including their school

experiences (e.g., Lewis et al., 2006; Messiou and Hope, 2015) consistent with the UNCRC. There is also participative action research, such as Byers et al.'s (2008) project to promote the emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties in inclusive English secondary schools and colleges. Learners and staff in nine varied mainstream secondary settings worked together to develop improved policies, practices and responses initiated by the young people themselves. Several of this project's main conclusions and their implications are relevant to this paper. First, young people with learning difficulties have new, different and important ideas that can contribute to school/college improvement. Secondly, school/college leaders could do more to enable young people, including those with learning difficulties, to communicate their ideas and have an active role in the democratic processes in school/college. Thirdly, leaders could also ensure that young people enjoy a sense of safety and security throughout the school/college day, including during non-teaching times. This means creating, maintaining and staffing safe places, support or activities for young people to use when needed.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) has organised four hearings to listen to the voices of young people, and to empower them by promoting their involvement in inclusive education policy debates. The hearings took place across Europe between 2003 and 2015, with over 300 young people (15–28 years old with an without a SEN/disability) from member countries, including the UK (Mangiaracina et al., 2021). Themes arising from these hearings covered the principles of inclusive education (e.g., rights to non-discrimination and respect), and its implementation, which was summarised in terms of slogans, such as: 'everything about us, with us', 'barrier-free schools', 'breaking down stereotypes', and 'becoming a full citizen' (Mangiaracina et al., 2021). Following Talisse (2005), the EASNIE researchers show how learner voices can be included in inclusive education policy debates, be key agents in this and other decision-making processes. However, there was not enough detail in the European Agency's reports about how communication mode was adapted to the needs of some participants.

Rationale and context

The review above shows the connection between the principles and practices of inclusive education, deliberative democracy and learner voice. It also reveals gaps in current thinking and practice. There is contention and uncertainty about inclusion as a value, few examples of involving all stakeholders in inclusive policymaking, and weak connections between education policymaking and deliberative democracy.

Reviews of school education in the UK, for example, use stakeholder consultations. Some rely fully or predominantly on learner perspectives, for example, the 'Big Ask' survey administered by the Children Commissioner's Office for England (2021). Others mostly involve experts, but not citizens in their deliberative processes (e.g., Times Education Commission, 2022). A key aim of the pilot study reported in this paper was, therefore, to obtain knowledge about how to design and modify a deliberative public dialogue process to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D.

Public deliberative dialogue is often designed to be inclusive of people with disabilities, in terms of physical accessibility to spaces and

providing materials in a range of different formats (Involve, 2023). It is not typical for them to be designed with the specific needs that people with SEN/D can have with communication and engagement. This pilot used the principle of enclave deliberation to plan and deliver a dedicated preparatory phase involving young people with SEN/D, before the deliberative public dialogue with a wider group of stakeholders. The young people with SEN/D who took part in the project were consulted on how to make the mini-public events as inclusive, as engaging, and as productive as possible. This required working with the project team to learn how the dialogue process needed to be modified or augmented in order for them to contribute to the discussion and deliberations, and prepare for the experience of taking part in a public dialogue.

The original intention was to pilot a Citizens' Assembly (about 50 participants), but as this was beyond the project's resources, a smaller Citizens' Panel (about 30 participants) was used. These group sizes reflect current UK deliberative democratic practices. The advantage of this smaller group was that the social, emotional and cognitive demands on young people with SEN/D could be planned for more sensitively. The project ran over the 2023/23 academic year, involving participants drawn from the city of Portsmouth and the surrounding county of Hampshire.

To reiterate, the pilot had two objectives: (i) to obtain information about how to modify a Citizens' Panel process to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D; and (ii) to generate, via the modified Citizens' Panel process, more nuanced, grounded and integrated policy ideas about inclusion in school education than current policy.

Methods, sample and procedures (1): the citizens' panel

The Citizens' Panel was set up to address the question: "How do we make schools more inclusive for children and young people with SEN/D?" (In public dialogue parlance, this is the 'calling question'). The framing of the question gave primacy to provision for, and the lived experiences of, children and young people with SEN/D. It provided a lens for exploring how inclusion could be made integral to the general purposes and objectives of schooling.

In the following section, we provide details on the methods, sample and procedures relating to the process evaluation, but first, we describe, in chronological order, the methods, sample and procedures relating to the Citizens' Panel. The delivery of the Citizens' Panel was led by the organisation Involve⁵ which carried the ethical responsibility for the Citizen Panel. However, the project leads ensured that good practice procedures and data processing and protection procedures were consistent with ethical and data handling research practices.

In summary, this was a two phase deliberative process. Phase 1 involved shaping the Citizens' Panel agenda and obtaining information about how the young people with SEN/D could participate and

⁵ Involve is a leading public participation charity in the UK that develops and supports new ways to involve people in decisions that affect their lives: <http://involve.org.uk/>

communicate their perspectives during the events. This phase involved only the young people with SEN/D and their parents/carers. Phase 2 was the delivery of the Citizens' Panel itself, which involved all participants taking part in two events, one online and one in-person. Below we set out in detail what these phases involved, but begin by describing the process of participant recruitment and selection.

Recruiting participants

The Sortition Foundation was commissioned to support the recruitment through representative sampling to select participants. Recruitment was more challenging compared to most public dialogues, as it involved mediation by third party actors. The project team asked contacts in the education department of the unitary (Portsmouth) and county (Hampshire) authorities to email headteachers with a request to forward an online expression of interest form and information sheet to pupils' parents/carers and school staff. The team also contacted a number of local SEN/D-related advocacy groups and associations to share the expression of interest with their members, clients and contacts.

The people targeted for participation in this project (parents/carers and practitioners) was, therefore, heavily dependent on whether headteachers, third sector leads and administrators noticed and forwarded the expression of interest email. This is at variance to the standard way of recruiting participants for public dialogue, which involves targeting households and individuals directly by email and/or post. This systematic approach makes it possible to collect data on how many prospective participants received and responded to the invitation to participate. The drawback of the recruitment process deployed in this pilot project meant that the project team were unable to track responses to the expression of interest, and so cannot know whether there were systematic differences between those who did and not choose to respond. The interviews with some of the participants conducted for the process evaluation, however, confirmed that most of them were made aware of the Citizens' Panel via school and/or local authority communications.

A total of 76 expressions of interest were received: 54 from parents/carers (34 had a child with SEN/D; 20 had a child without SEN/D) and 22 from education professionals. The response rate was low, given that the sign-up information was potentially available to families and staff in over 700 schools. The reliance on third parties to share information and the fact that recruitment took place during the weeks leading up to the school Christmas holidays – an especially busy period in schools – are factors in the low response rate.

Selecting participants for the citizens' panel

The Citizens' Panel was to be made up of 30 people:

- 8 young people (aged 12–16) with SEN/D
- 4 young people (aged 12–16) without SEN/D
- 8 parents/carers of the young people with SEN/D
- 4 parents/carers of the young people without SEN/D
- 6 education professionals (i.e., teachers, school leaders).

Given the project's focus on inclusion, young people with SEN/D were over-represented in the Panel's composition, despite making up around 17 per cent of the pupil population in England.

Prior to selection, the young people were stratified according to criteria collected as part of the written expression of interest.

This was to ensure proportional representation of young people across key characteristics, according to national statistical data in 2022. These were: gender; ethnicity; and eligibility for free school meals (FSM). Additional criteria were applied for the young people with SEN/D. These were: type of school attended (e.g., mainstream or special); the level of SEN/D⁶; and type of SEN/D⁷.

It was not possible to represent the full range of SEN/D on the Citizens' Panel. Some types were not represented among the expression of interest responses. These were: moderate learning difficulties; severe learning difficulties; profound and multiple learning difficulties; and sensory impairment. Also, no expressions of interest were received from parents/carers of young people who attended a non-mainstream setting (e.g., a special school or alternative provision). The reasons for this were unclear, but are likely to mirror those for the low expression of interest response rate. A description of the 12 young people who were selected for the Citizens' Panel can be seen in [Table 1](#).

Expressions of interest were received from education professionals in a variety of roles and settings. These people were also stratified before selection, according to their role (e.g., classroom teacher; school leader; SEN/D specialist) and the setting in which they worked (e.g., primary or secondary; mainstream or special school). Only four respondents (18%) identified themselves as either a class teacher or a senior leader. The limited number of places for practitioners overall meant that it was not possible to represent the full range of roles and settings on the Citizens' Panel. Of the six education professionals who were selected to take part, three worked in schools, two people who worked for a third sector organisation, and a trainee educational psychologist. All of these participants were female.

An additional condition of participant selection was put in place to mitigate the outside chance of a young person and a teacher (or other professional) from the same school being chosen for the Citizens' Panel. This was important, as it could have inhibited young people from talking about their school experience in the presence of someone who worked at their school. Postcode data collected as part of the expression of interest were used to avoid this situation.

In the weeks prior to the first Citizens' Panel event, seven participants withdrew from the project. Given the late stage at which this occurred, the project team took a necessarily pragmatic approach to identifying and replacing participants. Two young people with SEN/D (both of whom attended a unit attached to mainstream school), and their parents/carers, withdrew in the week leading up to

6 There are two levels of need in the English system. The majority of children and young people with SEN/D are on SEN Support, and around a fifth of those with the most complex SEN/D have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

7 Parents/carers of young people with SEN/D were asked to identify up to four types of need from the following: autistic spectrum disorder; speech, language and communications need; social, emotional and mental health; moderate learning difficulty; specific learning difficulty; severe learning difficulty; profound and multiple learning difficulties; physical disability; hearing impairment; visual impairment; multi-sensory impairment; other difficulty/disability. These terms are used by the Department for Education, and reflect medical diagnostic categories. The authors recognise that many/most autistic people prefer neurodivergence-affirming language (i.e., 'autistic person' rather than 'person with autism').

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the young people selected for the Citizens' Panel.

Sex	Type of SEN/D	Level of SEN/D	School attended	Ethnicity	FSM eligible
Female	SEMH; PD; Other	SEN/D support	Mainstream	White British/Irish	No
Female	ASD; SEMH; SPLD	EHCP	Mainstream	White British/Irish	Yes
Female	ASD; SEMH; Other	Not recorded	Mainstream	White British/Irish	No
Male	ASD; SLCN; SPLD	EHCP	Mainstream	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	No
Male	ASD; SLCN; MSI	EHCP	Mainstream	White British/Irish	Yes
Male	Other	SEN/D support	Mainstream	White British/Irish	No
*Male	PD	EHCP	Unit attached to mainstream school	White British/Irish	No
*Male	ASD; SLCN; SPLD	EHCP	Unit attached to mainstream school	White British/Irish	Yes
Female	N/A	N/A	Mainstream	White British/Irish	No
Female	N/A	N/A	Mainstream	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	No
Male	N/A	N/A	Mainstream	White British/Irish	No
†Male	N/A	N/A	Mainstream	White Other	Yes

*Withdrew and did not take part in the Citizens' Panel. †Withdrew and replaced at short notice by sibling of one of the young people with SEN/D. ASD, autistic spectrum disorder; MSI, multi-sensory impairment; PD, physical disability; SEMH, social, emotional and mental health; SLCN, speech, language and communications need; SPLD, specific learning difficulty; Other, other difficulty/disability.

the first preparatory event. In one case, this was due to other commitments, while in the other, the parent explained that their child felt anxious about taking part in an unfamiliar process with strangers.

Replacements were recruited, including two parents/carers of children with SEN/D (SLCN & MSI; ASD, SEMH & moderate learning difficulties) who had indicated that they would be willing to take part without their child. However, two places could not be filled. The final Citizens' Panel, therefore, comprised 28 participants:

- 6 young people with SEN/D
- 4 young people without SEN/D
- 13 parents/carers (11 females; 2 males)
- 5 education professionals.

All participants attended both Citizens' Panel events, with the exception of one young person without SEN/D who only attended the second in-person event.

Onboarding participants

The onboarding phase involved providing participants with information, where all participants receive the same information in the same way. All participants received information outlining the purpose and agenda for the Citizens' Panel events, including logistical details (venue, times, etc.). However, there was additional on-boarding for the young people with SEN/D and their parents/carers. It was more detailed, incremental, informal, personalised and also highly responsive. There was a member of the team with extensive professional experience of working with young people with SEN/D who.

scheduled introductory video calls to meet with and get to know these participants. Onboarding incorporated ongoing communications by text, which meant that parents / carers of the young people with SEN/D could ask and receive answers to questions about the Citizens' Panel. The process of onboarding the young people with SEN/D had a dual function in terms of enabling the team to begin building a picture of their capabilities and preferences. This

information was critical to informing the strengths-based approach to designing the events and activities.

Phase 1: preliminary sessions to inform design

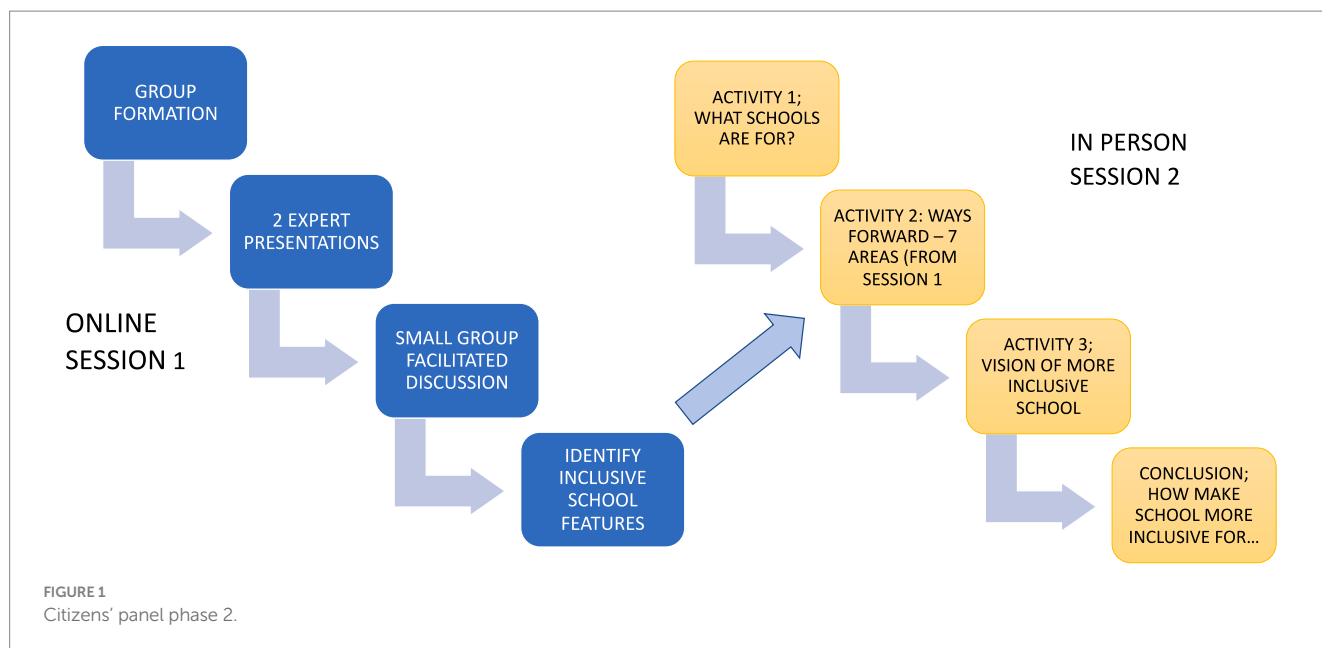
The key purpose of the preliminary sessions was to elicit more information on how to design an inclusive Citizens' Panel and to maximise the participation of young people with SEN/D, in line with our strengths-based approach. Both sessions lasted 3 h and were hosted via Zoom on two Saturday mornings, 2 weeks apart, before the first Citizens' Panel event. Only the young people with SEN/D and their parents/carers (who provided support where required) took part.

The sessions had a deliberately friendly and informal feel in order to maximise accessibility and reduce anxiety, and to build trust and confidence. The session activities were designed to test the accessibility principles that were designed to give the young people a taster experience of the first Citizens' Panel session. The young people with SEN/D practised using an online voting app (Menti) to anonymously respond to questions, and listen to and critique a short presentation from an expert.

The first session consisted of: providing an orientation to the project, and the Citizens' Panel process (covering key concepts, etc); collecting information about how the young people with SEN/D can fully participate in Citizens' Panel activities; and refining the calling question about school inclusion. The second session involved: walking through the draft Citizens' Panel agenda; gathering their experiences of and views about school and topics to cover regarding school inclusion; obtaining detailed information about how the day and the environment should be structured and adapted to the needs and requirements of the young people with SEN/D; and agreeing some 'golden rules' for participation.

Phase 2: the citizens' panel on school inclusion

Though the project proposal envisaged four Citizens' Panel sessions, the available budget allowed for only two events. The first event was held online to reduce hosting costs (venue hire, etc), and the second was held in-person. Having one event to bring everybody



together in one place was considered important to bring the agenda to an active conclusion.

The purpose of the first event was to contextualise the calling question, to understand the problem, to hear from experts and discuss ideas with them in small, facilitated groups, and to set out the scope of work that the panellists had been invited to undertake. The second session focused on working towards and making decisions about producing practical recommendations, and imagining and presenting a vision for more inclusive schools (see Figure 1).

The first event was held via Zoom on a Saturday, and lasted 4.5 h. The objective was to create the psychologically safe conditions needed to run a good public dialogue. Participants were arranged into small, carefully chosen groups of five or six participants, with particular attention to the needs and wishes of young people with SEN/D. In separate breakout spaces, the groups took part in an informal ice-breaker activity and facilitated discussions in which they shared their experiences of school and their thoughts about education and inclusion. Two external experts gave short presentations: an academic presented research findings about future thinking about inclusive schools; and an ex-head teacher, adviser and author talked about provision for learners with severe and complex learning difficulties. This was followed by another round of small group discussion, with the experts joining the groups in their breakout spaces to respond to questions. The event concluded with some brief activity in response to the calling question.

Two weeks later, the second Citizens' Panel event took place. This was an in-person event, held over 1 day (a Saturday) at a hotel in central Portsmouth. The day was structured around three activities, which were, once again, conducted in small, carefully chosen groups of five or six participants, and facilitated by a member of the project delivery team. The first activity was a broad-based discussion about the purposes of a school (see Figure 1). In order to stimulate discussion, participants were provided with some possible purposes, which were based on a

mix of contemporary ideas from a review of relevant literature about what schools are for. These were:

- To learn skills and knowledge to live a good life
- To get good exam results; to get a good job
- To learn how to get on with, understand and respect others
- To improve understanding and relationships between diverse people
- To become a confident and independent person
- To help learners become more creative.

In the second activity, participants considered what an inclusive school would be like, and what trade-offs and compromises would be involved in creating it. The group were given prompt cards and asked to discuss several particular dimensions of an inclusive school, which were generated from an analysis of the discussions in the first event. These were:

- How we do things: what pupils wear; how pupils are grouped; where pupils sit
- Learning: the curriculum; what everyone learns, and why
- Relationships and communication: between parents/carers, community and pupils
- Teaching and support: adapting to pupils' different needs; attitudes; special skills
- School environment: design of the site/buildings; moving around the school site
- Bullying, rules and behaviour: dealing with bullying; following rules; rule flexibility
- Outside relationships: the school as part of the community; support from parents/carers; learning from other schools.

The final activity of the day involved building on and prioritising the ideas about the purpose of a school from Activity 1, and the compromises identified from Activity 2, in order to create and capture the Panel's vision of the inclusive school.

Collecting and analysing the panel outputs

The three activities were completed in facilitated groups, and records of the groups' responses and perspectives were captured in the moment on flipchart sheets. There were 39 sheets transcribed overall, which were then analysed thematically using Nvivo software. The text from each of the activities were analysed separately in an inductive style and informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodological approach.

Methods, sample and procedures (2): the process evaluation

The process evaluation described and assessed the effectiveness of the planning, design and delivery of a public dialogue event involving young people with SEN/D. This process evaluation was informed by a theory of change model (details in Norwich et al., 2023), which had been required as part of funding proposal. It involved an exploratory style of qualitative evaluation of context, process and outcome factors (Foster, 2024). The main purpose was to provide information on how and in what ways approaches to participation in deliberative dialogue activities can be adapted and expanded to effectively include people with SEN/D and maximise their contribution to the process. The process evaluation component of the project obtained full ethical approval via the University of Portsmouth's research ethics procedure.

The main source of data informing the evaluation was obtained via semi-structured interviews, and supplemented with data obtained via observations, post-event feedback forms, documentation (e.g., detailed minutes of meetings involving the project team; agendas and materials generated for/during the Citizens' Panel events) and researchers' overall impressions obtained from a deep immersion in the project, from start to finish.

At the second Citizens' Panel event, the project delivery team explained the purpose and process of the project evaluation, and invited participants to take part in a voluntary interview to share their insights on the experience of the Citizens' Panel. Interviews were conducted in the 3 weeks following the second event, and took place via Zoom. Interviews lasted approximately 30 min. A transcript of each interview was generated using Zoom's transcription function. These were then coded and analysed, and where necessary, checked against an audio recording of the interview.

The interview schedule was designed to walk interviewees through the key phases of the project chronologically, with questions and prompts eliciting their views about what worked well, what did not, and what improvements could be made for a future Citizens'

Panel. There was a specific emphasis on the role, effectiveness and impact of the accessibility principles; that is, the design, provisions and adjustments put in place to maximise the inclusion, engagement and participation of young people with SEN/D. Interviewees were also invited to sum up their view on the extent to which the pilot achieved its principal purpose: testing innovative ways for young people with SEN/D to be fully included and participate in public dialogue.

Interviews were conducted with 19 people involved in the project, either as a member of the Citizens' Panel or a member of the project delivery team. Table 2 shows the breakdown of interviewees by group.

A note on the presentation of findings

In the following sections, we first summarise the findings from the analysis of transcribed data collected during the Citizens' Panel events, and then the findings from the analysis of data collected for the process evaluation. The summaries of findings presented in this paper are necessarily brief. A more expansive exposition of the findings from this project can be found in the full project report (Norwich et al., 2023).

Findings (1): the Citizens' Panel

Our summary of findings from the Citizens' Panel is organised in terms of the three activities completed in the second, in-person event (see Figure 1).

Activity 1: what school is for?

The first activity asked participants to address the question: 'what is school for?' Eleven themes emerged from the analysis of data, covering broadly the same areas as the stimulus list of purposes (see methods section). The most referenced themes were about learning personal and life skills, personal relationships and broadening perspectives compared to the other presented ones. It was clear from the thematic analysis that the emphasis of the Citizens' Panel was more on personal and social skills than on knowledge skills and examination results. Society-focussed purposes were also recognised; both social and economic purposes. But the Panel's social integration sub-theme did not quite capture the presented purpose of improving understanding and relationships between diverse people, which might have been expected given the focus of this Citizens' Panel.

Activity 2: ways forward

The second activity concerned identifying ways of addressing the challenges associated with making schools more inclusive. The starting points for this activity originated from an exercise in the first Citizens' Panel event held online, and were re-presented to the participants to stimulate the group discussions. The analysis of the data from this activity was organised under seven themes [see details about topics covered, themes and sub-themes and wording used in Norwich et al., 2023].

School environment

Participants emphasised the improvement of current spaces and the provision of quiet dignified spaces. Linked to this was the suggestion to ensure spaces are less busy and easier to move through, which in turn was connected to views about school size and pupil

TABLE 2 Citizens' panel participants interviewed for the process evaluation.

Young people with SEN/D	1
Young people without SEN/D	1
Parents/carers of children with SEN/D	4
Parents/carers of children without SEN/D	4
Education professionals	4
Members of the project delivery team	5
Total participants	19

numbers. Quiet dignified spaces reflects the recognition of the need for separate spaces for some, but used in positive and supportive ways (not stigmatising and punitive). Sub-themes concerning changes to canteens, the learning equipment provided, and the use and design of technology additionally indicate how participants saw the physical design of a school as important for inclusion.

Learning and curriculum

Challenges relating to learning and curriculum were referenced with less frequency compared with other themes. Consistent with the picture that emerged through Activity 1, participants emphasised personal relevance and needs, personal, social and life skills, and personal choice as prominent ways forward. There were a few references to traditional ideas about knowledge and understanding. Assessment was also framed as personally relevant and continuous, with national testing seen to take time away from other activities. There was one reference to a SEN/D aspect in the form of adding learning about disabilities to the curriculum. And despite being one of the discussion prompts, there were no references to sharing a common curriculum.

Teaching and support

Participants identified another SEN/D aspect – understanding needs and having relevant information about needs – as important under this theme. They drew distinctions between this happening proactively and pre-emptively, rather than late and reactively. Also, they recognised the pressures facing teachers in achieving this, in terms of being short of time and training. Teachers were not cast as uncaring. Participants mentioned teachers having their training needs met and the importance of job satisfaction, wellbeing and working in satisfactory and flexible conditions.

How we do things

The most prevalent sub-theme to emerge in this area concerned the use of, and alternatives to, ability setting. Participants said ability setting was ‘not working’, stigmatising and was associated with poorer quality learning opportunities. Flexible grouping was suggested as an alternative, allowing pupils with SEN to choose the level of their own learning and to avoid them ‘standing out’. There was a recognition that learning can have progressive levels, with the implications that stigmatisation needs to be prevented and managed by trying some alternative arrangements.

Outside relationships

The only sub-theme that emerged in relation to outside relationship was about how a school connects with its local community. This was expressed in various ways, including acting as a community centre and provider.

Relationships and communications

Several sub-themes were identified in this area, though none had a high frequency of reference. The centrality of relationships between learners, teachers and parents was seen as important, and were characterised by notion of listening to others and disagreeing respectfully. There was a particular emphasis on school-parent relationships, and the overarching need to prioritise relationships in the development of more inclusive schools.

Rules, bullying and behavior

This final area generated sub-themes concerning pupils having more independence and more agency. Specific examples were given in relation to options for uniform, and doing certain things without permission. In terms of behavior, suggestions were put forward regarding co-producing behaviour management and the use of conflict management and restorative approaches.

Activity 3: visioning

The third and final activity of the Citizens’ Panel was an exercise in visioning and identifying the elements of an authentically inclusive school. The themes that emerged in this activity, summarised in Figure 2, overlapped those from Activity 2. Four themes spoke to making general improvements that would benefit all pupils: promoting positive well-being; curriculum coverage (i.e., what is taught and learned); behaviour policy and bullying; and community relations and activities.

Several themes were also of general relevance to school improvement, but also relate to feature of specialist SEN/D. These overlapping aspects were staff training (participants called for all staff to be trained in SEN/D and neurodiversity); learners’ participation and contribution to how elements of school and school life are managed and implemented (e.g., around curriculum adaptation); the use of a communication system (e.g., Makaton); and the physical environment and accessibility. Only one theme referred directly to specialist provision for those with SEN/D, and encompassed specialist staff, specialist spaces, and the identification of needs.

Findings (2): the process evaluation

The presentation of the key findings from the process evaluation of the Citizens’ Panel is arranged in terms of three themes, and illustrated with indicative comments from the interviews.

A positive and worthwhile experience

The first theme summarises participants’ views of the overall experience of taking part in the Citizens’ Panel, and the extent to which the project was successful in achieving its principal aim of meaningfully including young people with SEN/D in a public dialogue.

The broad consensus across participants and the delivery team was that the Citizens’ Panel was successful in achieving its aim of meaningfully including young people with SEN/D in a deliberative public dialogue. Comments from participants described it being a positive and worthwhile experience.

“We’ve really enjoyed the whole process, and it’s nice to have a voice,”

Parent/carer of young person with SEN/D.

The Citizens’ Panel format provided a safe space for respectful and constructive dialogue, in which participants ‘feel safe to say what I was thinking’ and to ‘agree to disagree’ with one another. Framing the process as constructive and respectful, which included outlining the golden rules at the start, was key to creating the optimal conditions for civil and productive discussion, and helping everyone to, as one participant put it, ‘feel emotionally safe to contribute honestly’.

HIGH-LEVEL THEMES	GENERAL LOWER-LEVEL THEMES	SEN/D SPECIFIC ASPECTS IN LOWER-LEVEL THEMES	
Promote positive wellbeing	Enjoyment & happiness; school community, relationships		General improvements for all
What learn: curriculum	More informed choice, changes to current curriculum		
Behaviour policy	bullying		
Community relations and activities	Community relations, community activities		
Teachers	Training, number and kinds, pay and conditions	training: all staff trained in SEND and neurodiversity	General improvements for all Some aspects specific to SEN/D
Provision	Resources	resources: resources labelled but available to all	
Manage school	Student participation, adaptable, policy implementation	time to build relationships, adapt curriculum, recognise needs	
Teaching		use communication system, e.g. PECS, social stories	
Environment	School size, learning class environment, toilet, places to go	easy accessibility, ramps, lifts.	
Specialist provision		Specialist staff, specialist spaces, Inter-school links; need identification	Specific to SEN/D

FIGURE 2 Themes emerging from activity 3: visioning an inclusive school.

Panelists valued the opportunity to talk with, listen to and learn from people that they encountered infrequently in their everyday lives, reporting that it helped them develop empathy and obtain new insights.

“We had very different opinions on various different things, and could see where the other person was coming from and had more of an understanding... I think that is great on a community level.”

Parent/carer of young person with SEN/D.

In several cases, it transpired that some of the young people attended the same school. The parents/carers of children without SEN/D reported how their children had, as a result of this project, begun to view their peers with SEN/D in a new and positive light.

“One of the [young people with SEN/D] on our table goes to [young person without SEN/D’s] school. [They] never recognised [them]. I think [the Citizens’ Panel] has opened [my child’s] eyes to just how other children cope in that school environment.”

Parent/carer of young person without SEN/D.

Attention to detail and a differentiated approach

The second theme concerns the essential need to differentiate the processes and approaches to public dialogue in non-standard ways, so that young people with SEN/D were demonstrably and qualitatively included.

Creating a safe and comfortable environment in which people who are new to one another can engage in constructive discussion is an essential part of any public dialogue. In this project, the effort to create such conditions flowed immediately from the recruitment phase. A clear and early success was the differentiated onboarding process. Parents/carers of the young people with SEN/D commented on the thoroughness and value of the individualised approach to onboarding, which was central to building trust and confidence.

Having a single point of contact was highlighted as not only highly practical, given the busyness of their lives, but helpful in terms of personalising and making personable both the project and the unfamiliar process of a public dialogue.

“The communication from [member of project delivery team] was great, and they were really lovely, really friendly, really accommodating throughout. [They were] very careful to make sure that [young person] was happy and comfortable, and everything worked for them.”

Parent/carer of young person with SEN/D.

A key feature of the detailed planning and delivery of the Citizens’ Panel was the differentiated and strengths-based approach to design. The emphasis was on enhancing, and not unsettling or limiting, the participation and contribution of the young people with SEN/D, based on what they said would work best for them.

The phrase ‘little things matter a lot’ summed up the way in which the project team paid particular attention to identifying and

addressing housekeeping issues in the onboarding and preliminary design phases. This included: providing detailed information about car parking facilities at/near the venue, as finding accessible parking is a frequent challenge for SEN/D families; giving young people with SEN/D early sight of the lunchtime menu and having some choice about options, as for some of them, certain tastes and textures could be problematic; and providing a nearby quiet space for young people with SEN/D to retreat at any point during the day.

"I think the principle of doing the preliminary sessions was great, and just worked so well. No way could we have just gone into a Citizens panel without that groundwork being laid."

Member of project delivery team.

Participants remarked that the meticulousness of the planning and preparation was important to the project's overall success, though there was the odd unforeseeable hitch. For example, the sweets supplied by the venue did not, as the ingredients cards showed, include any halal/vegetarian/vegan options. While these incidents did not threaten the project, they drew attention to how organising a public dialogue on the topic of inclusion resulted in inclusion becoming a lens through which its organisation and operationalisation can be assessed. Any element that is *not* inclusive could, therefore, undermine the participant experience in ways that are less obvious, or have less serious consequences, in most other public dialogues.

Trade-offs

The third theme addresses the trade-offs involved in designing and delivering a public dialogue attuned to the needs of young people with SEN/D, and the effect of this on other participants.

The differentiated approach described above, plus the need to manage and mitigate issues that might negatively affect the participation and engagement of the young people with SEN/D, involved making the kind of trade-offs. These trade-offs, less evident in typical public dialogue events, can affect the experience of other participants. Two ways in which this was most noticeable in this project was in the pace of the day and the composition of groups.

While most participants reported that the pace of the Citizens' Panel events acceptable, some participants with and without SEN/D found it a little slow and the event overall too long, particularly the session delivered online. One potential reason for this was the number and frequency of scheduled breaks, which were added to the agenda to manage screentime and concentration. Views on the pace of the in-person event, meanwhile, were roundly positive.

In a typical deliberative dialogue, participants' thinking is challenged by frequent exposure to a range of different views and backgrounds, in order to inform and enrich the overall debate. For some young people with SEN/D, the combination of the social anxiety produced from engaging with new people in fairly rapid succession and the cognitive fatigue exerted by the challenging of preconceptions, can be overwhelming. However, mixing up discussion groups in this project was deliberately avoided, as the young people with SEN/D expressed an early preference for working with the same small group (which included their parent/carer) throughout the Citizens' Panel. This would give them the comfort and confidence they said they needed in order to actively participate. However, providing

consistency and familiarity for this group had the effect of limiting opportunities for others.

While there was a general appreciation of why the groups were largely fixed, some adult participants said that they would have liked more variation in the groupings.

"You could argue whether it would have been more beneficial to mix the groups up so that you have different opinions meeting different opinions, instead of just bumping up against the same opinion. It's a tough one, because you could argue that the familiarity of being with the people you were with before is good because you relax and you get a bit more confident."

Parent/carer of young person with SEN/D.

Interestingly, the education practitioners interviewed for the evaluation had reservations about mixing the groups, but for a different reason. They were concerned that they might have been viewed by parents/carers as representatives of, for example, the local authority. They wanted to avoid finding themselves in the unwelcome position of having to justify policies, processes or decisions outside their sphere of influence.

"We're not the lawmakers. We're not the system. We're just working the other side of it. So, yeah, I think that definitely people need to be kept apart."

Education professional.

This reticence to engage in the disruptive process of public dialogue perhaps suggests that more could have been done to prepare the education professionals for their role in a public dialogue, as citizens and as informed professionals.

Discussion

This project, funded as part of a programme of work to rethink public dialogue, had two objectives: (i) to obtain information about how to modify a Citizens' Panel process to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D; and (ii) to generate, via the modified Citizens' Panel process, more nuanced, grounded and integrated policy ideas about inclusion in school education than current policy. In this section, we summarise and discuss the main findings in terms of these aims, and in relation to the literature on deliberative democracy and inclusive education. In particular, we relate the ideas for more inclusive schools to the development and direction of current SEN/D policy in England. We also consider the project's limitations.

Objective 1: enhancing the participation of young people with SEN/D in public dialogue

A key finding from the process evaluation was the need for and impact of meticulous planning and preparation, which incorporated a differentiated and strengths-based approach to Citizens' Panel

design. The accessibility and engagement needs of the young people with SEN/D, and their comfort and safety, were given the highest priority in order to make the Citizens' Panel as inclusive as possible. The evaluation illustrates how the differentiation of the project into two phases, with phase 1 consistent with the principle of *enclave deliberation* for the young people with SEN/D (Karpowitz et al., 2009; Bulling et al., 2013), before they engaged in the wider Citizens' Panel public deliberation (phase 2), worked well. In addition, paying attention to seemingly 'little things' relating to housekeeping, was also seen as important in the project's overall success.

The flipside of the differentiated approach, however, was that it led to trade-offs, which affected the experience of other participants, though not detrimentally. Two ways in which this was most noticeable was in terms of the pace of the day (slow for some) and the composition of groups, which were more static than is typically the case in public dialogue.

There was a broad view among those involved in the project that the Citizens' Panel was successful in achieving the aim of meaningfully including young people with SEN/D in a deliberative public dialogue. Participants described taking part as a positive and worthwhile experience, and valued the opportunity to interact with people constructively and empathically in ways consistent with the deliberative literature (Bulling et al., 2013; Bächtiger et al., 2018). In line with Talisse (2005)'s position, and contrary to Posner's (2003), the Citizens' Panel demonstrated that citizens, including young people with and without SEN/D are capable of reasoned discussion on important educational matters.

Limitations and learning

This project contributes to learning about both the potential of inclusive methods and procedures in deliberative dialogue involving young people with and without SEN/D. However, there were some limitations worth enumerating before we provide some general advice on how future mini-publics involving young people with SEN/D might proceed.

The central limitations experienced in this project concerned the constraints of funding and timeframe (11 months). The decision, for example, to conduct events online was driven by the cost of hosting in-person events (venue hire, etc.). While this did not have a critical impact on the project outcomes, it did affect to some degree how some members of the Panel participated, notably the young people with SEN/D. More on this can be found in the project report (Norwich et al., 2023).

Another potential limitation is that the composition of the Citizens' Panel was diverse, rather than representative. This arose from the challenges experienced with the recruitment process, as described above. A more representative group of participants would probably have been achieved in a longer timeframe. Relatedly, there was no representation on the Citizens' Panel of young people with severe and complex learning and other difficulties (e.g., intellectual disabilities), and so this remains a gap in understanding. Silvers and Francis (2009) have addressed the issue of including people with cognitive disabilities by recommending a practice of assistive thinking and 'prosthetic practices' mediated by trusted others. Further research in this area might explore developments of *enclave deliberation* for including young people with significant SEN/D.

We note too that the participation in the project was, from the outset, much more likely to appeal to parents/carers and education

professionals with a favourable view of inclusion, rather than people with objections, doubts or no view at all. Further public dialogue projects on SEN/D and inclusion may consider selection criteria based on opinion, as well as key demographics and characteristics.

So, on the basis of this project, we conclude that enhancing the effective participation of young people with SEN/D Citizens' Panels and other mini-publics have several prerequisites. First, ensuring adequate time, especially for the early recruitment and preparatory phases, including any enclave deliberation. Secondly, carefully designing appropriate recruitment strategies. Thirdly, working directly with young people with SEN/D and their families. Fourthly, mindful deployment of a person-centred and strengths-based approach to planning and delivery. Fourthly, mindfulness about the potential need for and impact of trade-offs on the experience of all participants, and wherever possible, minimising their effect. Finally, it is worth noting that neither the authors/project leads were experts in public dialogue, and so the skills and experience of people specialising in public dialogue is another valuable ingredient in delivering a successful project.

Objective 2: more nuanced, grounded and integrated policy ideas about inclusion

The thematic analyses of the qualitative data collected during the Citizens' Panel deliberations illustrated the participants' perspectives in broad terms. A sense of the general direction of participants' positions could be seen in the comparison between the themes from Activity 1 (what school is for) and Activity 3 (visioning a more inclusive school). This indicated that perspectives on more inclusive schools involved the interplay between means and ends, and not just idealised purposes.

The key finding on improving school inclusion was that almost all of the themes were about general school changes, with promoting well-being, changes to the school environment and its management the most frequently referenced. However, most of the general changes also involved some specific SEN/D aspects, including SEN/D training for staff. Only one theme was explicitly SEN/D specific. The summary of themes in Figure 2 (above) can, therefore, be seen as a continuum of SEN/D elements in the various dimensions of the vision of a more inclusive school.

This way of thinking about disability inclusive schools reflects developed ideas about the purposes of more inclusive schooling, and how these purposes can be realised for all, with the assumption of benefits for those with SEN/D too. This integration of SEN/D into the inclusive school dimensions differs from some contemporary ideas about inclusion. The concept of a SEN/D continuum is different from the historic, but still influential continuum of provision model (Rix et al., 2013). This describes a placement continuum in which a pupil with SEN/D is placed at various degrees of separation from and time away from general mainstream classes. It is also different from the Inclusion Index ideas about inclusive schooling (Booth and Ainscow, 2011), discussed above, which are about increasing participation of all in the school culture, curriculum and policies. The Inclusion Index model has no place for the kind of SEN/D labelled element or dimension evident in the Citizens' Panel themes. In this respect, these themes reflect what Cigman (2007) called moderate inclusion, which assumes any separation, differentiation or specialisation is stigmatising and devaluing.

In identifying specialist elements in most general provision dimensions and some specialist provision, the ideas generated through the Citizens' Panel also recognise that specialist elements need to be presented in sensitive and dignified ways, that labels be used in neutral ways and separate settings in inclusive schools can be open to all. While there were a few references to a positive role for specialist SEN/D special schools in the Citizens' Panel transcripts, this important topic was not examined further in deliberations. This might have been due to time limitations and/or it being overlooked by those facilitating group discussions.

One further limitation concerning the analysis of data collected during the Citizens' Panel was that it was based on notes made on flipchart paper, captured in-the-moment during small group discussions. It is possible that some important aspects of these deliberations, such as points of agreement and dispute, conclusions and decisions, are missing, and therefore, not reflected in the analysis. However, the notes that were captured were coherent and consistent across the groups and the discussion activities, suggesting that the reader can have confidence that the analysis presented is a reliable reflection of the discussions that took place.

In terms of the second project objective, the expectation was that the Citizens' Panel would generate more *nuanced, grounded and integrated* policy ideas about inclusion. So, to what extent, do the ideas that emerged connect with the policy directions and proposals regarding SEN/D in England?

Since 2011, government policy about inclusion for SEN/D has been based on an assumed 'bias to inclusion' (DfE, 2011), as a counter to the previous Labour government's adoption of inclusive-oriented policies. Despite some legislative change to the SEN/D framework in 2014/15, there were increasing pressures to review policy and practice, with calls for school policy to recognise and implement 'the principle of inclusion and right to mainstream schooling' (House of Commons, 2019).

Inclusion is now recognised in recent plans for SEN/D in England in terms of a more inclusive society (DfE, 2023), but there is no reference to nor definition of inclusive schools (SENPRF, 2023). Moreover, the broad ambitions of these latest reforms – designing a national set of standards for the SEN/D and alternative provision system; improving early identification of needs and intervention; and clarifying the types of support that should be ordinarily available in mainstream settings – were originally published separately from a wider and more expansive set of proposals to reform the schools system (DfE, 2022a).

This approach by policymakers contrasts with the more *integrated* ideas from the Citizens' Panel, which connect improvements in the general school system with those in the specialist system. The Citizens' Panel's perspectives were arguably more *grounded*, as they involved the experiences of a group of local stakeholders, learning, reflecting and deliberating about inclusion. Their ideas could also be judged as more *nuanced*, as most of them involved making changes that would benefit *all* learners, not just those with SEN/D, while also offering dignified and inclusive specialist provision.

Conclusion

This paper provides evidence that a small-scale Citizens' Panel, using deliberative public dialogue methods, can produce

elaborate policy ideas about inclusion in school education, involving the constituency most affected by such policy. These ways of thinking about more inclusive schools might reflect the 2 phase participatory approach used in this pilot project. Further analysis of the content of these ideas is discussed in another paper to be published. However, the scale and approach used in this project suggests that there might be scope for deliberative approaches to be used within and between schools, groups of schools (e.g., multi academy trusts), local networks (including local authorities), as well as at the national level. These applications would align more with what Hammond (2020) calls the system-supporting uses of deliberative methods, to reinforce and improve the current system of education at the organisational, regional and national levels. In contrast, deliberative methods can also be used by advocacy groups, protest movements and non-governmental organisations campaigning for transformational change, with what Hammond calls the system-disrupting uses of deliberative methods. The proposal for education policymaking to be informed by deliberative democratic methods beyond electoral cycles and outside direct government influence is aligned with this version of deliberative methods (Norwich, 2019). In both uses of deliberative methods, the preparation of young people with and without SEN/D to participate in wider public deliberative dialogue, as evidenced in this project, also connects with the movement for schools to actively prepare all children and young people to participate in democratic processes, as a basic aspect of democratic citizenship (Gutmann, 1999).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics committee, University of Portsmouth. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

BN: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RW: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This research was funded by the UKRI-RSA Rethinking public dialogue programme.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the invaluable contributions of all the Citizens' Panel participants, Paula Black and Sarah Castell from Involve, Tom Lord and Nick Gill from the Sortition Foundation, and the project delivery team, Jen McAnuff and Sophie Hall.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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