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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘The biggest conversation in a generation’? A critical discourse analysis of the UK government's national conversation on England's SEND reform

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Abstract

This study was conducted as a rapid response to the UK government's announcement of a ‘national conversation’ on England's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) reforms, prior to the publication of the English Schools White Paper in early 2026. The announcement of the ‘national conversation’ initiative was met with scepticism from advocacy groups and sector commentators, who questioned both the purpose of the exercise and the conditions under which participation would take place. Using a Critical Policy Discourse Analysis framework, this study analysed a data corpus of the national conversation texts to explore the discursive articulation of the government's intended policy directions, and how the initiative was enacted as a policy process in advance of formal reform consultation. Our analysis resulted in the following findings: (1) The initiative worked to construct legitimacy of policy direction, (2) The National Conversation was discursively constructed as metaphorical rather than reciprocal and (3) Children and young people received only symbolic inclusion in the initiative despite being positioned as central figures in the public engagement process. Taken together, we argue that the national conversation was a quasi-consultation, moving public engagement away from gathering input for policymaking, towards its use as a means of pre-emptively legitimising policy. Through its discursive infrastructure, collective consent was organised and policy authority stabilised in advance of its creation. These findings extend existing scholarship on policy discourse by demonstrating how legitimacy can be constructed, not only through policy texts themselves but through the orchestration of engagement infrastructure surrounding them.

KEYWORDS

disability, disabled children, education policy, public consultation, SEND, SEND reforms

Key points

- This paper examines the UK Government's National Conversation on SEND Reform as a site of policymaking. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper finds that the National Conversation is oriented to establishing the legitimacy of reform prior to formal policy proposals being set out.
- The National Conversation was a conversation in name only. Our analysis shows that the discursive terrain was constructed such that children and young people were only symbolically included as participants in this public engagement exercise.

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- The enactment of the National Conversation operated as a legitimacy-producing policy process that shaped the conditions under which future SEND reforms became intelligible and actionable. Our analysis shows that the design and discourse of public engagement processes, and their subsequent consultations, must be understood as core instruments of policy power, not neutral administrative procedures.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In December 2025, the UK government announced what it described as the ‘biggest national conversation in a generation’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 1) on reform of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England. Positioned as an extensive public engagement exercise, the initiative invited parents, young people, professionals and the wider public to contribute their views ahead of a Schools White Paper, which would formally consult on SEND reforms. However, the announcement of the ‘national conversation’ initiative was met with scepticism from advocacy groups and sector commentators, who questioned the purpose of the exercise, the timeframe, and the conditions under which participation would take place (IPSEA, 2025; Special Needs Jungle, 2025).

This paper examines that initiative, hereafter referred to as the National Conversation, as a site of policymaking in its own right. Rather than treating it as a neutral or preliminary stage prior to formal consultation, we analyse it as a discursive mechanism through which policy direction may be pre-emptively shaped, justified and legitimised in advance of formal proposals.

The National Conversation emerged in a policy environment characterised by constant reform, accelerating consultation cycles, and ongoing discursive re-framing of disabled children and young people. In September 2025, the House of Commons Education Committee (2025) published the findings of its inquiry into the ‘SEND Crisis’. This came more than three years after the SEND Review Green Paper (DfE, 2022) and two and a half years after the independent analysis of responses to that Green Paper (Sinclair & Zaidi, 2023), both of which informed the government's SEND Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023, p. 3).

As with earlier waves of reform, the discursive framing of the National Conversation initiative will shape public understandings of SEND, the future direction of SEND provision, and the priorities embedded in emergent policy proposals. Importantly, this National Conversation was not a formal consultation process guided by the government's principles for consultation (see Cabinet Office, 2018). Instead, it was scheduled to precede the Schools White Paper (February 2026) which set out proposed SEND reforms and opened the official period of public consultation (open until May 2026). This sequencing raises important questions about how participation is constructed, how authority is claimed, and how policy

direction is legitimised *prior* to the presentation of concrete proposals for formal consultation. Our previous research showed that parents of children with SEND are actively engaged in the policy landscape affecting their families, despite feeling that their input is repeatedly ignored or diminished (Pluquailec et al., 2025). This makes it particularly important to interrogate the National Conversation as public engagement, because it sits outside formal consultation protocol but is simultaneously branded as a ‘commitment to make sure parents play a central role in helping shape the future SEND system’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 1).

In this study, we focus on the policy process rather than the outcome, addressing a gap in existing research; while consultation has been widely studied, there has been less attention to the forms of public engagement that precede formal consultation but shape the interpretive terrain on which policy is later debated. This study addresses that gap by analysing how such engagement functions to pre-emptively construct legitimacy in advance of policy reform. Specifically, we analyse how discourse constructs legitimacy, authority, and participation (Fairclough, 2015) in advance of reform proposals being formally articulated.

In terms of discursive practice, SEND policymaking in England can be understood as an ongoing struggle of ideas (Stone, 2022, p. 13), in which competing visions of who should receive support and how it should be delivered are contested through policy narratives. From a critical discourse analysis perspective, such moments may be understood as ‘cruces’ or points of tension (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230), where underlying contradictions in policy become visible. The National Conversation represents one such moment: a unique event ‘where particular voices, ideas, or agendas are brought to the front and acted on’ (Woodside-Jiron, 2004, p. 157).

Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA), we examine a corpus of government-produced texts associated with the National Conversation as a means of examining some of the tensions and their associated stories. Our analysis is guided by two research questions:

1. In what ways did the National Conversation discursively articulate the government's intended policy directions and priorities?
2. How was the National Conversation enacted as a policy process, and what does its discourse reveal about the shaping and legitimisation of future SEND reforms?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline our methodological approach, data corpus and analysis techniques. We then present three interrelated findings: the construction of policy legitimacy, the discursive framing of ‘conversation’ as a form of public engagement, and the symbolic inclusion of children and young people. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for understanding public engagement as a site of policy production rather than a neutral precursor to consultation.

METHODS

The study adopted Hyatt's (2013) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis framework as the primary methodological and analytical structure. A heuristic tool for the critical analysis of policy texts, it allows for contextualisation and deconstruction through specific analytic categories (p. 834). Its application provides a means of exposing what is obscured and revealed in governmental discourse on the education of disabled young people (Pluquailec & O'Connor, 2023). The National Conversation was a site where governmental assumptions, values, and aspirations are discursively produced. It was essential to use an analytical approach capable of revealing these orientations as well as the policy tensions and continuities that are often masked by narratives of consultation, renewal, or system transformation.

In December 2025, we produced a matrix identifying all government-produced texts relating to the National Conversation (Figure 1). This included official government pages and externally hosted sign-up pages for online events (Eventbrite) and in-person events (Council for Disabled Children website). All seven identified texts were converted to PDFs and combined to produce a data corpus totalling 77 pages. Confining the corpus to government texts was a strategy to keep the focus of analysis on institutional discourse rather than broadening the analysis to media coverage or social media commentary.

Data analysis

Following Hyatt (2013), we engaged in detailed textual deconstruction of the documents. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each author independently coded the texts using Hyatt's (2013) categories (Figure 2 left-hand column). Second, we compared and synthesised these coded observations through a series of reflective discussions, identifying recurring patterns and points of convergence across the dataset to reach the revised analytical frame (Figure 2 middle column). Third, these patterns were grouped into broader thematic constructions that addressed the research questions. Through this process, three interrelated findings were developed (Figure 2 right-hand column). This iterative

and collaborative approach enabled us to move from detailed textual analysis to higher-level interpretation, while maintaining close alignment between the data, the analytical framework, and the findings presented.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three distinct but interrelated findings address our research questions: (1) Constructing legitimacy of policy direction, (2) The discursive construction of the National Conversation, and (3) Symbolic inclusion of children and young people. We now present these findings in discussion with the literature.

Constructing legitimacy of policy direction

Legitimacy is constructed through three interrelated discursive strategies: ‘authorisation’, ‘rationalisation’, and ‘moral evaluation’ (Hyatt, 2013, p. 840). We begin our analysis in the warrants and legitimisation that are deployed in the press release (DfE, 2025a) and repeated and recirculated in the six other texts. The press release provided much of the foundational discursive work that permeated the data corpus, with evidentiary, accountability, and political warrants (Hyatt, 2013) to establish the credibility and purpose of the government's initiative. For example, where the document cites the Minister for Schools Standards, ‘For too long families have felt unheard and left to battle a system that simply doesn't deliver for their children’ (DfE, 2025a, online), the accountability warrant is closely entwined with the political warrant (Hyatt, 2013). The intimate, evocative references to the ‘battle’ that families experience, and a system that ‘doesn't deliver for their children’, echo well-established rhetoric in SEND policy discourse. The text also refers to such failings as ‘inherited’ by the current government (DfE, 2025a, para. 2) and thus elides responsibility for them. Through careful linguistic construction, deficiencies of the current situation are distanced from the current government.

Strategic use of pronouns plays a role in legitimisation (Hyatt, 2013). The survey (DfE, 2025f) deploys both the inclusive ‘we’ (intended to encompass the reader) and the exclusive ‘we’ (Fairclough, 2000). Instances of inclusive ‘we’ are used to suggest solidarity and invite respondents into a moral or ethical community with shared responsibility. However, in some sections, ‘we’ becomes exclusive, for example in the question ‘how can we ensure... it happens?’ (DfE, 2025f, question 6), suggesting opposition between groups and creating a subtle contrast to the inclusive ‘we’ elsewhere. Where ‘they’ is used, a ‘What would help early years, school and college staff put support in place quickly when they identify a child has SEN?’ (question 7), it positions the author as possessing authority to represent others

Text Number	Source title	Nature of source
Text 1	Government launches national conversation on SEND - GOV.UK	Press release (DfE, 2025a)
Text 2	SEND Reform National Conversation - Online Series	Online event sign-up (DfE, 2025b)
Text 3	SEND reform national conversation - Department for Education - Citizen Space	Webpage (DfE, 2025c)
Text 4	Explainer for children and young people - SEND reform national conversation	Web document (PDF) (DfE, 2025d)
Text 5	Stakeholder toolkit	Web document (PDF) (DfE, 2025e)
Text 6	SEND Regional Engagement Events with the Department for Education	In-person event sign-up (Council for Disabled Children, 2025)
Text 7	Survey questions	Online survey (DfE, 2025f)

FIGURE 1 Data corpus matrix.

(education staff), and it assumes that the respondent has shared common knowledge. Meanwhile the use of ‘you’ serves to personalise the interaction, giving a sense of more direct contact with the respondent, ‘The Education Select Committee suggests designating some high-quality specialist schools as “Centres of excellence” to share good practice. What do you think about this?’ (DfE, 2025f, question 16).

In the analysis of pronoun use, there is a deeper question: who does ‘we’ genuinely include? Given that the SEND system is widely viewed as adversarial and untrustworthy by key stakeholders (Day, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2022; Pluquailec et al., 2025; Saxton et al., 2025), and the evidence that the system does not function effectively for schools (Lindsay et al., 2020;

Office for National Statistics, 2022), it seems unlikely that people responding to the survey will feel included in the policymakers’ use of ‘we’.

With shifting boundaries of audience and author, the discourse succeeds in foregrounding the government’s agency when it can be heralded as commitment and taking action but diffusing accountability for the negative experiences of children and families. The lexico-grammatical constructions (Hyatt, 2013) relating to families position their actions in contrast to the government’s efforts. The repeated references to ‘fighting’ (e.g. ‘parents having to fight’ (DfE, 2025e, p. 7), ‘parents fighting just to be heard’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 2), ‘families ... left to battle’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 6), and ‘stopping parents fighting’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 4)) are some of the only

Hyatt (2013) analytic categories	Revised analytic frame	Related Findings
Warrants - Evidentiary - Accountability - Political	Warrants - underlying justifications supporting policy using evidence, anticipated outcomes and appeals to social good	1. Constructing legitimacy of policy direction 2. The discursive construction of a National Conversation 3. Symbolic inclusion of children and young people
Modes of legitimation - Authorisation - Rationalisation - Moral evaluation		
- Mythopoesis		
Interdiscursivity - Intertextuality	Intertextuality - referencing and borrowing from other texts to support, reinforce and legitimise position of writer	1. Constructing legitimacy of policy direction 2. The discursive construction of a National Conversation 3. Symbolic inclusion of children and young people
Presuppositions/ implication		
Evaluation - Evoked - Inscribed	Evaluation - expression of attitudes implied through language e.g. 'reform' or made explicit through direct terms e.g. 'excellent')	2. The discursive construction of a National Conversation
Lexico-grammatical construction - Pronouns		
- Voice - Tense		

FIGURE 2 Refining the analytic framework.

linguistic structures that convey that parents have agency. While there is no doubt that parents having to 'fight' for provision is a long-standing theme in their experience of the SEND system (Thomas, 2021, p. 459), it is striking that 'fight' and 'battle' are the only dynamic verbs associated with parents in the National Conversation. This foregrounds a particular story of parents' place within the system, and its reforms. Stone (2022) reminds us that policy actors deploy policy-relevant stories. We argue that parents-as-fighters is a well-worn SEND policy story used to justify governmental actions. For example,

'stopping parents fighting for support' (DfE, 2025a, para. 4) becomes an accountability warrant when situated in a press release to launch an initiative and outline the scope of impending reforms. Likewise, 'parents fighting just to be heard', preceded by the government's statement that it 'inherited' (DfE, 2025a, para. 2) a defective system, becomes a political warrant. Here, the government presents itself as compelled to fix a problem not of its own doing. And yet, the government's intention to 'rebuild the trust and confidence of children, young people, and families' (DfE, 2025e, p. 6) uses similar rhetoric to the previous

government's SEND Review (DfE, 2022), a consultation which left parents unconvinced (Pluquailec et al., 2025).

Next, we interrogate the evidentiary warrants (Hyatt, 2013, p. 839) in the National Conversation texts. As with much policy communication premised on Evidence Based Policy Making, 'evidence' in this case relies heavily on intertextual references to financial spending and/or quantification of success through 'large' numbers. For example, the press release refers to the government's existing commitments, including 10,000 new school places for children with SEND as part of a £740m capital investment, closely followed by this information:

Data published today shows 71% of school leaders enrolled in a programme to support neurodiversity felt better able to meet those children's needs as a result. The £22m Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS) programme is enabling up to 2850 mainstream primary schools to deliver earlier support for neurodiversity (DfE, 2025a, para. 13).

In quick succession, the numbers have the cumulative effect of positioning the proposed reforms being engaged upon, as a continuation of the government's scheme of intervention and investment. Where such intertextuality is used to legitimise (Hyatt, 2013, p. 840), the current initiative relies on the transparency of certain evidence and the notable absence of others. For example, readers are told that the government has carried out 'over 100 listening sessions with families' (DfE, 2025a, para. 6) as part of its narrative of 'building on' (DfE, 2025a, para. 2) and 'continue' 'extensive engagement' (DfE, 2025a, para. 6), but there is no publicly available information about when, where, or with whom such sessions and engagement took place. It is presupposed that the numbers speak for themselves. This finding chimes with Stone's (2022) analysis of the function of numbers:

Numbers impart an aura of expertise and authority to the people who produce and use them. Because numbers have such exalted scientific status in our culture, politicians use them to authenticate their stories. With numbers, an author or speaker tells the audience, in effect, 'the numbers show that my story is true' (p. 191).

Alongside the absence of certain evidence for the claims made, the 'framing by numbers' (Russell & Greenhalgh, 2011, p. 56) has the effect of privileging some kinds of knowledge over others (Stone, 2022). These strategies to construct legitimacy for proposals are operationalised through the central organising metaphor of conversation, to which we now turn.

The discursive construction of a National Conversation

The press release on 2nd December 2025 launched the National Conversation initiative involving both regional in-person 'conversation' and online 'conversation' (and

a 'dedicated online space'), framed as continuing 'extensive engagement' (DfE, 2025a, para. 6). Each in-person event, hosted by the Council for Disabled Children, was expressly targeted at 'the people who matter most— young people and families—alongside teachers and other experts' (Council for Disabled Children, 2025, para. 1). The first in-person event took place the same day as the initiative was publicly launched, at 10am, at an undisclosed location in Bristol (DfE, 2025f). The remaining in-person events took place across the country between that date and 12th January, 2026, all on weekdays, between 10am and 2:30pm. At the time of writing this article, all events showed as 'sold out' and 'venue: TBD'. The logistics of when, where, and with how much advance notice these events were planned are difficult to reconcile with the stated intention to include 'the people who matter most' (DfE, 2025f). After all, young people would (mostly) be at school, teachers would (mostly) be at work, and parents would need to commit to unknown venues in a large possible area (e.g. over 100 square miles for a venue TBD in Birmingham) at short notice. Published evidence shows that parents and carers of disabled young people are having to reduce working hours, or leave the workplace altogether, partly in order to attend engagements with professionals and the SEND system (Sense, 2026; Support SEND Kids, 2024; Working Families, 2018). This public engagement initiative reinforces those challenges to their time.

By contrast, online events broadened potential participation to different times of day, a greater geographical spread, and therefore a wider audience. The advertised 'conversations' were billed as 'an opportunity to ask questions of the Minister and the panel ... as part of a series of events designed to spark the biggest national conversation on SEND in a generation' (DfE, 2025b). Accounts published by attendees (Special Needs Jungle, 2025) suggest that these online events were misadvertised as 'conversations' and that turn-taking interaction was absent. By definition, a conversation involves turn-taking in a multi-directional exchange (Sacks et al., 1974). Interaction in the National Conversation online events was very constrained: participants were unable to turn on cameras or microphones, and their contributions were limited to questions they could type, which may or may not be read out by a panel member. The panel and the participants were not able to converse verbally or through written text. While it is beyond this study's remit to analyse the content of the events themselves, we are interested in highlighting the mismatch between the hyperbole of 'the biggest national conversation in a generation' (DfE, 2025a, para. 1) and the potential for genuine conversation to take place. In short, the form of 'public engagement' offered was closed, not open. This finding resonates with work by O'Connor et al. (2023, p. 271) showing that policy organisations tend to 'limit the authority of publics to advising and consulting on pre-defined issues' and by conducting 'public engagement'

as a means of gaining support for pre-determined policy directions rather than giving publics the power to help set the policy agenda.

It is common for the metaphor of conversation to be mobilised to suggest openness and responsiveness. In this public engagement context, we assert that 'conversation' functions less as a neutral description of communicative practice and more as a strategic narrative of inclusion to legitimise a goal. We analyse how the term 'conversation' is used to signal dialogue, while the procedures of participation actually limit dialogue and reciprocity. The analytical question is therefore not simply whether conversation occurs, but how the *idea* of conversation is constructed, performed, and operationalised within public engagement. The conversation becomes metaphorical while bolstering the government's commitments expressed elsewhere in the data corpus to rebuild lost trust and confidence, but without the move to the operational or interactional.

The bounds of participation are set not only by event design but also the architecture of response, most clearly in the survey instrument (DfE, 2025f). While the survey appears conversational in tone, through the asking of questions and the use of everyday language, the format and phrasing of the questions have the effect of narrowing or closing down the scope of answers. This can be seen through intertextuality (Hyatt, 2013 p. 840), where the text deploys the names of trusted organisations with whom respondents are tacitly invited to agree or disagree:

The Sutton Trust suggests introducing 'SEND Hubs' in settings. What are your views on this?

(Question 14)

The Disabled Children's Partnership and Sutton Trust suggest there is a postcode lottery in effective provision. How can we make sure children and young people get the same high-quality support wherever they live in the country?

(Question 22)

This style of question, projecting a preferred meaning (Hyatt, 2013 p. 841), also positions the author as a bystander, without responsibility or obvious stance.

The survey employs the language of justice as a political warrant (Hyatt, 2013 p. 839) to present governmental oversight and technocratic practices as common-sense routes to better outcomes. It positions itself as a consultation on administrative and procedural reform imbued with a moral dimension, such that the idea of change is presented as a form of universal justice, necessary not only for the good of children with SEND, but for society as a whole. Examining the linguistic choices in the text reveals how phrases such as 'all our children' and

the repeated use of the modal verb 'should' (DfE, 2025f, question 29) contribute to an appearance of moral duty and an obligation on the reader to concur with what is presented as common sense:

Children and young people with SEND should be able to learn at a school close to their home, alongside their peers, rather than travelling long distances from their family and community. Special schools should continue to play a vital role in supporting children with the most complex needs. (DfE, 2025f, Question 13).

This rhetorical strategy conforms to patterns seen in wider public policy that Cairney (2016, p. 6) describes as 'irrational', where governments employ the language of rationality and better outcomes while operating in ways shaped by bounded rationality, selective use of evidence, and symbolic reassurance. A further example of this is the 'evoked evaluation' (Hyatt, 2013, p. 841) of record-keeping as a neutral, rational administrative process that naturally leads, through inscribed evaluation (Hyatt, 2013), to 'excellent long-term outcomes' (DfE, 2025f, question 24). Such evoked and invoked evaluation in policy language reduces identities by 'homogenis[ing] the heterogeneous' (Rivas et al., 2021, p. 1) and regulating them as an identity within a system (Nunkoosing & Haydon-Laurel, 2012).

As the survey progresses, there is a shift in focus from supporting children to monitoring the compliance of those who were assigned as actors in the earlier questions, such as teachers. With Question 11, 'How could we make sure this works in every education setting around the country?' (DfE, 2025f), the government positions itself as an overseer responsible for making sure the proposed actions are realised across different settings. However, the question itself demonstrates a lack of certainty that the government knows how to do this. This symbolic oversight is characteristic of performativity and audit culture (Ball, 2003). It also illustrates Cairney's (2016) view that policymakers adopt such strategies to give an outward image of control within complex systems they cannot entirely manage.

Symbolic inclusion of children and young people

In our data corpus, the Explainer for Children and Young People (DfE, 2025d) stands apart: its content has no signposting to or from other texts in the National Conversation, as depicted in Figure 3.

Although it invites young people to attend the online events, there is no information telling them when or where the events take place or how to sign up, and it states that children's contribution is to 'listen and ask questions' (DfE, 2025d, p. 1) rather than give their thoughts or opinions. Children are also invited to talk about it with their school or community, but there is no detail about how, where, or with whom this should happen; it is nebulous to the point of being empty rhetoric. Without clear

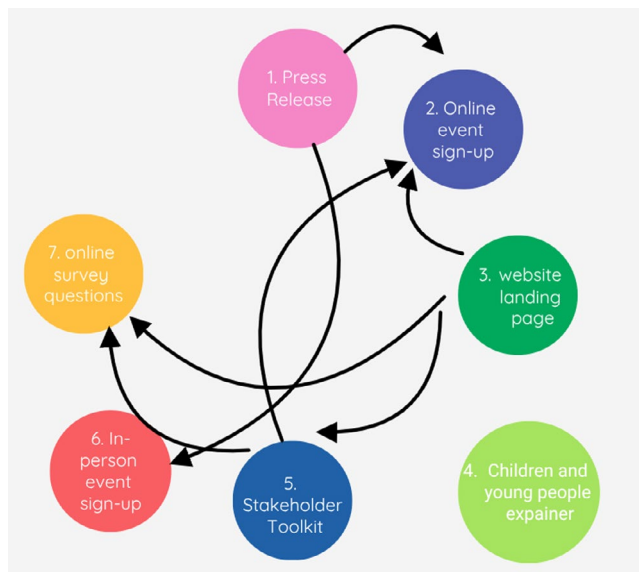


FIGURE 3 Diagram of intertextual references across data corpus.

pathways to be included in the ‘conversation’, children and young people’s voices are unlikely to be heard by the government. It appears that the explainer’s purpose is to provide a ‘political warrant’ (Hyatt, 2013, p. 839), a *symbol* of inclusion rather than actual inclusion. As such, the initiative is not well aligned with Article 12 of the United Nations’ (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides that:

a child capable of forming his or her own views will be given the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, with those views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

The lack of true inclusion and engagement of children in the conversation is particularly striking in a process we are told is meant to include those most impacted by these policy changes. The literature on youth engagement in public policy decision-making paints a similar picture of systemic constraints on the ability of young people to put their right to participation into practice (Crowley, 2015; Mangiaracina et al., 2021; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Nthonto, 2017).

The explainer’s distinctness as a text is also apparent in the dominance of the pronoun ‘you’. This pronoun is largely absent across the rest of the data corpus. Use of ‘you’ constructs an intimacy and directness with the intended audience, the children and young people, in a way not seen in the other texts. The effect is one of personalisation, the author speaking directly to the reader, and perhaps even a sense of responsibility to engage. Given the absence of pathways for children to actually get involved in the conversation, as explained above, the

invitation to participate remains performative. It provides the illusion of children’s agency.

Next, we interrogate the way the discourse constructs who the National Conversation is for. The press release includes a warrant to ‘put parents’ experiences at the heart of SEND reform’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 1), while the explainer emphasises that it is children and young people who the government wants to hear from ‘most of all’ (DfE, 2025d, p. 1). This has the rhetorical effect of centring the views of families and young people: the National Conversation is framed as both for and about them. However, across the data corpus, this centrality is diluted by references to no fewer than 29 different groups of people with stakes and/or views, from whom the initiative invites contributions. These groups range from specific categories like ‘teachers’ through to the nebulous ‘all those with an interest in these issues’ (Council for Disabled Children, 2025, para. 3) and ‘all those with views’ (DfE, 2025a, para. 6). While a broad church of views is certainly necessary, operationalisation does matter. For the most part, people who share their views in the National Conversation are not asked to state their membership of a stakeholder group. ‘Job title’ was the only information collected during sign-up for in-person events, which by itself does not identify a participant’s precise stake. For example, ‘teacher’ would not provide useful context such as type of setting (special school, primary, college, private school, etc.). Crucial detail would also be missed if a parent gave their job title as ‘social worker’ but they wished to share their views as a parent of a disabled child. ‘Job title’ also presupposes status in exclusionary ways. Young people, who do not use occupational titles, are subtly positioned as not the intended participants, and parents who are not in employment are subtly othered. The online events had no such requirement for attendees to provide job titles nor identify themselves as part of a stakeholder group. The survey asks ‘Are you under 18 years of age?’ (DfE, 2025f, Question 37). In fact, this survey question was the only means, anywhere in the National Conversation, of identifying whether views gathered could have been from a young person.

Overall, the failure to collect sufficient data on demographics has a two-fold effect: it dilutes both the central focus on families and young people and the quality of any analysis that can be carried out on the views collected. Each of these issues raises important questions about the quality of the claims to evidence that can be made from the National Conversation exercise. If support or challenge to proposals cannot be attributed to particular groups of stakeholders, least of all young people themselves, the government’s ability to make informed policy decisions stemming from such views is compromised. It is well established that different stakeholders in the SEND system have differing and potentially competing priorities (Saxton et al., 2025). Therefore, evidence based on views that have been homogenised because stakeholder

groups were not differentiated in the data collection can have only limited value in shaping future reforms.

DISCUSSION

The patterns identified across the National Conversation data corpus suggest a form of public engagement that is neither deliberative nor consultative in a conventional sense. Instead, our analysis indicates that the National Conversation is oriented to establishing the legitimacy of reform prior to formal policy proposals being set out. This demonstrates, in relation to research question 1, that the intended policy directions and priorities are discursively articulated through the construction of reform as necessary, urgent, and collectively endorsed, rather than as open questions for deliberation. In terms of research question 2, the enactment of the National Conversation operates as a legitimacy-producing policy process that shapes the conditions under which future SEND reforms become intelligible and actionable.

A discursive analysis establishes reform as morally and empirically unavoidable. This is consistent with analyses of policy narratives as instruments of political justification (Stone, 2022). Participation, in the form of engagement, is symbolically broadened but procedurally structured in ways that limit reciprocal influence: a dynamic long recognised in critical analyses of participatory governance (see, e.g., Arnstein, 1969). The very existence of the public engagement exercise is mobilised as responsiveness, regardless of the degree of policy impact such engagement can have. Participation is transformed from a mechanism of potential influence into a resource of legitimacy.

In these ways, public engagement operates pre-emptively. It shapes the interpretive environment in which policy reform emerges. It becomes somewhat anticipatory governance: a means of creating a veneer of collective consent before proposals are subject to formal scrutiny in public consultation. This process is consistent with accounts of policy authority as discursively produced through representation and framing (Fairclough, 2015), and with accounts of performativity as a mode of governing through symbolic enactment (Ball, 2003).

Understanding public policy engagement in this way shifts the focus of analysis from the question of whether engagement, conversation, or participation occurs, towards how it is staged, narrated, and mobilised as a resource of policy authority. Performative public engagement operates by transforming participation into evidence, and engagement into anticipatory policy consent. Taken together, these findings reposition public engagement from a mechanistic stage of gathering inputs for policymaking to an active site of policy construction. Through its discursive infrastructure, collective consent is organised and policy authority is stabilised in advance.

CONCLUSION

The Schools White Paper has begun a formal public consultation period. Our analysis of the public engagement exercise preceding this public consultation provides important lessons for those engaged in the design of policymaking consultation across the public policy sector and most specifically the SEND policy arena. Successive governments have employed the rhetoric of regaining families' trust in the SEND system (DfE, 2022, 2026). Trust requires transparency, which calls for close attention to the discursive practices of those who craft and communicate consultation with the public. These policy actors must recognise the power imbued in both the language they select and the procedural methods they choose to enact, which can operate either to empower or disempower the people that these policies seek to serve. As our analysis has shown, the National 'Conversation' is a conversation in name only. Where communication, engagement, and conversation are, in practice, unidirectional and top-down, no amount of rhetoric to the contrary will redress families' lack of trust in the government to put children and young people at the heart of its decision making on SEND.

These findings extend existing scholarship on policy discourse by demonstrating how legitimacy can be constructed not only through policy texts themselves but through the orchestration of engagement infrastructure surrounding them. Public engagement becomes a site of policy production rather than a forum for dialogue. More broadly, this analysis suggests that the design and discourse of public engagement processes, and their subsequent consultations, must be understood as core instruments of policy power, not neutral administrative procedures.

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Gill O'Connor: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; data curation; formal analysis. **Jill Pluqualec:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; supervision. **Emma Sadler:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; data curation.

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