Parents choice of education for their young children: lessons for inclusive education

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on aspects of a small-scale, UK-based study that investigated local discourses and practices operating for young children within a global context of commitment to inclusion. The study focused on parents of young children identified as having special educational needs, who opted for a combination of both inclusive and special early years settings to 'get the best of both worlds' for their children (Nind, Flewitt & Johnston, 2005). The paper discusses the implications of the emerging themes for the development of inclusive education.

BACKGROUND

Across Europe provision for children with special educational needs may be conceptualised as placed variously on a segregation-integration continuum (Bayliss, 1997). The UK, like many European countries, has opted for a multi-track system (Brusling & Pepin, 2003) with a variety of mainstream and special needs services within a rhetoric of 'valuing diversity'. The policy ideal is for young children to be placed at the centre of individually created packages of provision and for parents to be at the centre of decision-making (DfES/DH, 2003). The option to combine placements as part of the comprehensive range of services for young children is endorsed at national policy level. But choices are both difficult and circumscribed, not least because there is widespread local variation in the type of provision related to geographical location, age group and funding (Lindsay *et al.*, 2005).

Research suggests that what parents want is facts presented to them by supportive professionals, so they can make informed choices about their child's education (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004), and that they often have to battle for the choice of special and/or inclusive options recommended by professionals (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004). There is a lack, however, of clear evidence regarding the quality of diverse special and inclusive settings (Law *et al.*, 2004) or about how children experience different options (Donnegan*,* Ostrosky & Fowler, 1996).

AIMS

This study (Nind, Flewitt & Johnston, 2005), conducted in the South of England, investigated local discourses and practices operating for young children within the global context of commitment to inclusive education and its UK policy interpretation. It was concerned with finding out how common it was for parents to seek combined placements and why they did so, with a view to having better understandings of models of provision and decision-making. The research objectives were to:

i)   identify parents who had 'opted' for a combination of both special and mainstream services for their child with special educational needs in the early years;

ii)   gain a better understanding of how parents conceptualised the choices available to them and their choice-making process;

iii)   elicit what parents expected from the combined provision and how their expectations were met in practice; and

iv)   explore the attitudes of early years providers to combined placements.

METHODS

Data were collected through a combination of questionnaire and interview. Questionnaires were sent to special and inclusive providers (n=442) of early childhood education and to voluntary groups (n=42). These were focused on eliciting a picture of local patterns of behaviour and perspectives and on identifying parents who had chosen combined placements. Through these 'gatekeepers' and through a process of snowballing out from identified parents we sought to access parents who wished to participate in the study. Parent questionnaires were sent directly to parents already known to us or identified through this process, or to providers, who were asked to forward them. This resulted in 19 responses. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with the parents of 5 children.

The parent sample did not represent a broad spectrum of ethnic diversity, most identifying themselves as white UK/Irish (n=16) with a minority as white European or Turkish. They were mostly in the 30-39 year age bracket (n=14) with none younger. Their educational attainment levels varied from 'no qualification' to 'higher degree' but most were evenly spread in between. Their children were diverse in their special educational needs: seven experienced difficulties mainly in the area of speech and language; seven experienced global learning difficulties; three had difficulties in mobility arising from cerebral palsy; and two were identified as having autistic spectrum disorders.

The interview data and total of 134 provider, 5 voluntary group and 19 parent questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Questionnaire responses were grouped into broad categories, then coded and these codes were used as a basis for the interview schedules. Comparisons were made across the final data sets, leading to the identification of key themes.

FINDINGS

Choice and decision making

Some parents reported they had no real choice about placement, or very limited choice, for a variety of reasons, including geographical location and the approach of the local education authority towards the funding and allocation of places for children with special educational needs. Parents also spoke of conflicting advice received from local authority, education, health and care professionals, and of how they had consulted a wide range of friends, family and professionals to discuss and reflect on the choices available for their child's early education. More choice was reported in urban than rural areas. However, these choices varied according to the special education needs policies and funding practices of the three local education authorities studied.

For all the parents interviewed, the final choice of settings for their child was based on a balance of many different factors. When choosing an inclusive setting, most respondents considered its location in the local community important, so their children could make local friends with whom they might generally develop their social skills and continue on to primary school. Parents with older children who attended the local mainstream early

years or primary school felt that this had influenced their choice of local inclusive setting for their child with special needs, providing continuity of education within their family. The sense of belonging to a community appeared to be particularly important and for some parents this was linked to the rural nature of where they lived:

> We felt a strong commitment to the community, this is a rural setting so there aren't many options – you're either in the community or you're not and we felt we had to give to the community or the community wouldn't give to us.

Many parents reported that the process of choice making had been difficult, partly because there was no ideal path to follow. In parent questionnaire and interview data it was clear that the choices parents made for early years education tended to reflect their aspirations for their child's primary education, and how best to achieve that outcome. Rarely did one setting seem to offer everything parents felt their child needed, and combining mainstream/inclusive and special settings offered the next best solution:

> We had no hesitation about combined placement – it just evolved. The ultimate goal was to go into mainstream (primary) and how to get him in the best position to cope in order for him to have the best life for him to reach his own potential and the best chance to grow and be acceptable and not suffer loneliness and it's all about equipping him for life.

Expectations and realities

Almost half the provider respondents reported they had children with special educational needs in combined placements. Their experiences of combining were reported more often as mixed or positive than negative, though still considerable concerns were expressed about the potential disadvantages for the children of moving between different routines, expectations, people and curricula.

Parental experiences of combining settings were positive (n=13) more than negative (n=2) or mixed (n=4). The most frequently noted advantage for children given by parents was the opportunity for their child to develop social skills in the inclusive environment and to benefit from the special resources of the special setting (n=11): '*getting the special help and still mixing with normal children her age*'. Parents also identified advantages of variety; more comprehensive assessment via two centres; the combination of a good general education in an inclusive setting plus specialist physical help and training in a special setting; and belonging to different communities. They volunteered benefits of combined placements for themselves too, which indirectly affected their children, such as receiving more support and the opportunity to develop parent support networks in the local community via the inclusive setting and with parents of other children with special needs via the special setting. The disadvantage for children of combining settings cited most frequently by parents was the fear that their children might become confused, but for most parents their initial fears about this had been allayed. Some parents were disappointed by the level of support their child had received in the special setting, while others mentioned shortcomings in the inclusive setting.

Parents were explicit about what the individual components of the combined package had to offer. Most important for the inclusive settings was the opportunity they offered for mixing with local children, mentioned by over half the respondents (n=11), both because they were perceived as being positive role models and because they were local peers. A focus on their child's special needs was seen as a major advantage of the special settings (n=11) with mention of highly trained staff (n=6), specialist equipment and resources and favourable staffing ratio in small classes (n=5).

Themes important for future policy and provision

Qualitative analysis of the parent data led to the emergence of a set of common, inter-related themes.

i) The best of both worlds A most apparent perception amongst parents was that it can be difficult for any one setting to provide everything a child needs. By combining placements parents felt they might be able to get the '*best of both worlds*' for their child. This is a phrase that was used frequently by parents (and by providers too) and suggests a pervasive discourse that the combination can offer more than any one placement on its own: '*she would get the best of both worlds. Copying healthy children and mixing with them socially, but also getting the physio, and physical support and exercise she needed to improve her mobility …*'

ii) Seeking an ideal Several parents chose a combination of settings as there had been no single '*ideal solution*' for their child's education. Combining offered the best available support in the absence of the ideal of one setting offering everything their child needed.

iii) Insurance A recurring theme was that the special, or inclusive, placement was in some way making up for the inadequacies in the other, or in some way offering a kind of insurance policy so that '*if one didn't work out at least we still had the other to fall back on*'.

iv) Trial and error Related to this was the desire to try both kinds of placement to see how they worked out. One parent told of testing out the inclusive preschool '*to see how he would cope*' and to '*help decide which types of school he would benefit from most*'. With mainstream and special settings offering differing advantages and disadvantages, combining placements in the early years delayed the ultimate special or mainstream dilemma and helped parents better evaluate their child's performance in each type of setting before making choices for primary education.

v) Belonging There were hints across the data of an awareness of individual children having multiple identities and therefore needing to belong in multiple communities. One parent summed up how she perceived the benefits of a combined placement: '*being a member of the various communities he is growing into - the big wide world, our village, those with special needs.*'

vi) 'Doing the right thing' All the parents seemed to be guided by a desire to '*do the right thing*' for their child, yet many had been anxious about their ability to know what '*the right thing*' was. When asked about the greatest influence on their ultimate choice there were numerous mentions of the child's needs: including reference to their difficulties and happiness and wanting '*what was best for (their child)*'.

vii) Hard choices In the face of uncertainty, several parents stressed how they had had to make hard choices and the inevitability of difficult decisions. One parent summarised what many others had suggested: '*So much depends on individual teachers and who's around. They are hard choices, but one thing that hasn't changed is the fact that hard choices are a constant. Things might change in the future, but there will still be hard choices.*'

viii) Struggle During the process of making choices, many parents mentioned how they had '*struggled*' at various junctures of their young child's educational pathways. In their struggles, parents had sometimes felt powerless and de-skilled, particularly when confronted by bureaucratic processes.

ix) Feeling safe Many parents spoke of the need for reassurance, and the need to trust in the staff in early years settings. '*Feeling safe*' was a recurring theme and several parents spoke of how the special settings had initially made them feel secure as places that *'are nice for parents*' where *'everyone understands you and are very sympathetic*'. Parents felt safe in both special and inclusive settings, however, but for different reasons.

DISCUSSION

It is significant for policy-makers and practitioners that parents choose to combine special and inclusive settings, both with and without the encouragement of health and education professionals, and with and without the financial and practical support provided by local authorities. Combining settings may or may not be ideal for the child, but the fact remains that it is viewed by many parents as the best option in a constrained set of circumstances. Local policy restricting the option to combine may add to what is already a difficult time and process.

It is significant for the development of inclusive education that parents who opt for a mixture of special and inclusive education see this as the 'best of both worlds' - the 'specialist' input and the 'inclusive' social interaction and community belonging. Inclusive education is, in itself, intended to offer these dual benefits but the data indicate that many parents may be unconvinced that one setting can meet all of their child's needs. Inclusive education providers, it seems, need to build trust in their capacity to meet children's specialist as well as general learning needs and be alert to dangers in relation to both the reality and perception regarding this capacity.

Of importance for parents is the knowledge that while combining special and inclusive education for their young children is currently an option endorsed by central government, whether or not it is available or recommended by education professionals will vary enormously from setting to setting and authority to authority; it may be an option that has to be struggled for. Although the felt need to go to different settings to get the best of both worlds should reduce as early years centres (Children's Centres) become more multi-professional, child-centred and inclusive, UK parents may still continue to look for settings that offer the particular benefits that they perceive to be present only in specialist provision.

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave the concept of inclusion and the children themselves? This small study illustrates how discourses of continua of provision and educational choice are played out at the micro level. It indicates that parents are willing to work with these discourses in the context of the educational marketplace, but it tells us little (direct information) about how the children make sense of their mix of educational experiences. Do children experience this as the 'best of both worlds' or as wandering about in the wilderness between the fast lane of the mainstream and the slow lane of the special, nomads who belong to neither world (Bjarnason, 2003). Bjarnason's concept of such a wilderness is not what policy makers and parents envisage, but it does highlight potential dangers in the world of pragmatic compromise. Attending to the special and ordinary in different places may mean children ultimately belonging nowhere - or it may, as these parents hope, enable children to grow up with fluid identities, able to juggle contrasting school and societal cultures - belonging everywhere.

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