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‘Nowhere fits’? How parents choose a school for their children with special needs in England: practice, policies and dilemmas

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VI Brazilian Congress on Special Education

UfSCAR, 1-4 November 2014
Content of the session

• Policy background to parental choice in England
• Inclusion: empowerment, choice and dilemmas
• Parents choosing a school for their children with SEN: the study
• Is there a school that fits? Key findings
• What it takes to make it fit? A conceptual proposal
• Q & A
INTRODUCTION

Parental choice and inclusion: a way forward?
The confused language of parental choice

A ‘Yes’ to choice ....

The current system is outdated and not fit for purpose. Thousands of families have had to battle for months, even years, with different agencies to get the specialist care their children need. It is unacceptable they are forced to go from pillar to post, facing agonising delays and bureaucracy to get support, therapy and equipment.

These reforms will put parents in charge. We trust parents to do the right thing for their own child because they know what is best. The right to a personal budget will give them real choice and control of care, instead of councils and health services dictating how they get support.

Sarah Teather, former Children’s Minister, 2012

But only if ...

The local authority must agree to a requested placement unless the placement would be ‘unsuitable for the age, ability, aptitude or SEN of the child or young person; or the attendance of the child or young person there would be incompatible with the efficient education of others; or the efficient use of resources.’
School ‘choice’ and SEN in England: policy context

1988 Education Act

1993 Education Act

Inclusive Schooling: Children with SEN (DfES, 2001)

Lamb Report (DCFS, 2009)

Children and Families Act 2014

Parents as experts?

Parent as consumers

Parents as experts?
## What is inclusion?

<table>
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<th>The aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello &amp; Mithaug, 1998). As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.</th>
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<td>Education in an ordinary class, in a neighbourhood school which a child would normally attend, with support as needed by the individual. (Mittler, 1995: 105).</td>
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<td>By inclusion, we mean that pupils with SEN should, wherever possible receive their education in a mainstream school, but also that they should join fully with their peers in the curriculum and life of the school. But separate provision may be necessary on occasions for specific purposes. (DfEE 1997: 44)</td>
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<td>Inclusion as an approach to education embodying particular values.....concerned with all learners and with overcoming barriers to all forms of marginalisation, exclusion and underachievement (Ainscow et al, 2006: 5)</td>
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</table>
Dimensions of inclusion

Dimensions

Participation

Access

Outcomes

Underlining rights

In (appropriate learning)

To (placement)

Through (academic success)
Inclusion: empowering and/or disempowering parents?

INCLUSION AS A RIGHT
National and international legislation in favour of inclusion as the right to education (access and mainstream)

INCLUSION AS A DILEMMA
Practical issues in implementing inclusion as a pedagogical, organisation and cultural practice (lack of time, money and knowledge)
Children and Families Act (2014) – a summary

· Giving parents and young people control over the decisions about the support they are given.

· The introduction of Education, Health and Care plans in replacement of Statements.

· Personal budgets for parents and young people to carry out their EHC plans

· A requirement on local authorities to provide a Local Offer which will include the education, health and care service
PARENTAL CHOICE: THE STUDY
Research Questions & Design

How do parents of children who have a SEN Statement make decisions to send their children either to mainstream or special schools?

What are the aspirations of these parents for their children?

In choosing either mainstream or a special school what in-school factors do these parents of children perceive as being important for the support of their children in those schools.

PHASE 1- surveys - used to elicit broad range of, largely quantitative, data across one LA

PHASE 2- Semi-structured interviews – used to add depth to the survey data and explore emerging issues
Experiences of early schooling

**Schools**

**Not understanding, & doing nothing**

- She was continuously in trouble, and she really couldn’t speak. She was terrified of playtimes, but they would force her to go out.

**Schools**

**Schools not understanding but trying to help**

- *they did lots to make him more comfortable, e.g. creating safe havens, but he wasn’t getting anything out of it.*

**Schools**

**Understanding & managing needs effectively**

- Nothing was a problem; it was all understood, because you know they’d got training, they’d got experience and they take your child on – they’re not a problem.
School choice information

Choice? What choice?

Not enough information

Own research based on social capital & research skills

Pushed to go to local school, regardless
Factors affecting school choice

- Facilities
- Fitting in
- Visits
- School staff
- Curriculum
Parents’ views of current schooling

- Spot on – fits needs
- Completely wrong- not sure right school exists
- Not right in some ways but better
## Parents’ views of inclusion

### Doesn’t work in practice
- I don’t actually think that inclusion works in practice because, you know, there’s all these policies and things….but actually they don’t really because they don’t adapt the curriculum for those children; and they do end up being mothered

### Well-intentioned
- I don’t think you should ever not make an effort to include children. But …as a parent, there are limitations. ….as a parent, part of what you’re doing is looking at where your child will best fit in

### Inclusion, what inclusion?
- this idea of inclusion doesn’t include kids with Autism! I think inclusion...didn’t meet his needs, he couldn’t cope with it…..he was in classes that supported inclusion, he was sitting outside the class because he couldn’t cope with what was going on inside the class. So it’s actually exclusion
‘thick detail’

• I feel that we’re not included at all; I think we’re excluded, because our children have this condition (Autism). We can’t do mainstream things; we can’t even, you know ... if we get an invitation to a wedding, I know we can’t go, you know. My kids can’t cope with it. You know, we’re totally excluded.
Parental choice as the ‘capability’ to choose

Parental choice – outcome as capability

Range of substantive opportunities

Basic substantive opportunities

Lack of substantive opportunities

Freedom of process

No freedom of process

PRESENCE OF SUBSTANTIVE OPPORTUNITIES
(in relation to types of schooling and resources available to ensure the outcomes parents wish for their children)

EXTENT TO WHICH PARENTS CAN CHOOSE
(extent to which parents have the required information to choose a) whether the school provides the substantive opportunities they value, and b) whether parents can choose the school they see fit for their children)
In conclusion....

• Educational inclusion schools need to understand that:

• *It’s about making education fit them (children), I think, rather than make them fit education.*
Q & A

• How are England and Brazil similar?
Thank you for listening

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