

Understanding Special School Provision for Children with Severe Learning Difficulties in Relation to Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This study explores independent special school educators' attitudes towards special school provision in relation to efforts towards inclusive education in England. Current policies encourage mainstream schools to be inclusive. This means that if parents wish and it does not affect the efficient learning of other children, all children regardless of ability/disability can attend their neighbourhood mainstream schools. However, this reinforcement of the dominance of mainstream schools might have encouraged the marginalisation of special school provision. In recent years, special schools have been much debated in terms of whether being negatively segregatory vs. positively providing specialised help where the mainstream fails. This research explores this controversy by attempting to give an understanding on special school provision in relation to debates over inclusion from specialised educators' perspectives. Data were collected through a qualitative case study, drawing upon semi-structured interviews and unstructured non-participatory observation, with six specialist educators from an independent special school for children with severe and complex needs. This study aims to provide a different perspective from research done in mainstream settings, and will hopefully be a useful addition to the current debate on special and inclusive education, especially in terms of giving voice to educators who work in special schools closely with the SLD children. The main findings show that the participants are supportive of the philosophy of inclusive education but rather reserved with its current implementation in classrooms. The educators warn that inclusion policy should not be one-size-fits-all or subject to heavy political correctness or financial influence, but rather be individual-oriented and needs-led. The findings suggest that especially for children with severe learning difficulties (SLD)¹, special school provision still plays an important role in the current education system considering its pedagogy expertise, professional staff team, specialised resources, and curriculum flexibility. This paper therefore concludes that specialised educators from independent special schools for SLD children may tend to see special school provision as positively contributing to inclusive education and should hence be regarded as an inseparable part of the current education system.

¹ SLD is at the most severe end along the SEN spectrum. It is a term used in England referring to significantly low cognitive and intellectual functioning with a notable impairment in the adaptation to daily life (WHO, 1985; Lawson et al., 2012).

Keywords: inclusive education, special school provision, severe learning difficulties, specialist educators, attitudes and understanding

1. Background

In recent decades, the role of special schools has been increasingly challenged by what has become a major theme in the field of special education - the notion of inclusive education (e.g., Allan, 1999; Farrell, 2010). Inclusive education means that children identified with special educational needs (SEN)² should be able to attend regular schools alongside their mainstream peers participating in meaningful learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Kershner, 2009). It is primarily driven by concerns for children's rights and school effectiveness (Hornby, 2011; Lindsay, 2007), and is often justified in terms of educational, social and economic benefits (UNESCO, 2009). Nowadays, a number of countries see inclusive education as a key policy (Dolva et al., 2011), which can be reflected in the rate of SEN pupils attending mainstream schools, such as England (57.4 per cent), Norway (85.2 per cent), and Italy (100 per cent; EADSNE, 2010).³

However, statistics as such only indicate pupils' physical attendance rather than their educational involvement. The meaningful participation that is central to the definition and measurement of inclusivity is difficult to judge (Lindsay, 2007). The implementation and practicality of inclusive education hence remains much debated. Shevlin et al. (2008) indicate that inclusive education has made progress, but "certain seemingly intractable difficulties" (p. 143) seem to impede its implementation. Singal (2008) similarly notes that the awareness of the inclusion concept alone is not enough to guarantee the desired practices being put into place. To further investigate the practical challenges of inclusion, the conflicts of interest among various stakeholders such as academics, teachers, and parents need to be recognised.

First, there has been a firm academic stance supporting full inclusion, where the

2 Formalised in the *1981 Education Act*, 'SEN' is the official term used in England in educational settings to refer to children who are involved in special education (Department for Education (DfE), 1981). Children with SEN are those who have "a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for them" (DfE, 2014, p. 6). SEN includes communication and interaction difficulties, cognition and learning difficulties, emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, and sensory and/or physical disabilities (DfE, 2014)

³ European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

mainstream provision is encouraged to be the only option for all children. In Canada, New Brunswick (2006) has been aggressively pursuing a model of full inclusion, claiming that all children must be educated in mainstream schools. In America, some academics (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987; Sailor & Roger, 2005) also assume that full inclusion could successfully address the SEN issues; while in the UK, the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) has been arguing firmly against special schools and pushing unequivocally towards full inclusion since 1989 (CSIE, 1989/2002). Supporting these full-inclusionist claims, Thomas & Loxley (2001) chime in that it is often not the so-called specialist technique that is the key to a successful education for SEN pupils, but rather “more mundanely and prosaically, the amount of help being given and the sensitivity with which it is given” (p. 27), hence negating the necessity of special school provision.

However, many academics (e.g., Farrell, 2000; Hornby, 2002; Lindsay, 2007) would disagree and argue that special school provision has a place in the education system. Lindsay (2007) believes that every child should receive an appropriate education that is most suited to their needs wherever the location is, and posits that the empirical evidence on the benefits of inclusion is rather controversial, especially in terms of academic achievement and socio-emotional development of the SEN children. Bailey (1998) warns that inclusion should not be a “fervent crusade promoting inclusive schooling” (p. 45). Wilson (2000) also echoes that inclusion should not be “passionate intuitions which we then translated uncritically into practice” (p. 297). In this regard, Warnock doubts inclusion as all children “under the same roof” (Terzi, 2010, p. 156), emphasising that special schools are the best and only option for some children, as “what is a manifest good in society, and what it is my right to have ... may not be what is best for me as a schoolchild” (Terzi, 2010, p. 36).

In line with the academic debate, some mainstream teachers also see a necessity for having special school provision. Studies show that despite having supportive attitudes towards the general philosophy of inclusive education, many mainstream teachers may doubt the practicalities of inclusion at the classroom level and show an unwillingness and reservation regarding its implementation (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Lambe & Bones,

2006; Pijl et al., 2011; Ring, 2005). For example, Ainscow et al. (2012) found among mainstream teachers that they sometimes doubted the practicality of inclusive education because they saw themselves as not only having the mainstream students as priorities, but also having to work within the constraints of limited SEN resources and expertise. Similarly, in Scotland, Head et al. (2002) found that the majority of mainstream teachers saw inclusion as a difficult concept that diverted the resources that could otherwise have been used to better support children who were more willing and able to learn. In England and Wales, a survey among professionals from Local Education Authorities (LEAs) conducted by Evans and Lunt (2002) indicated that most respondents felt that due to the lack of resources and inclusive attitude, “total inclusion of all children was idealistic and unrealistic” (p. 11). Thus, one may wonder if inclusion is after all not so much of a practical reality but rather an ideology, especially when its political commitments clash with other educational concerns such as resource allocation, diversity, individual needs, and achievement.

In addition, some SEN children’s parents may also have a preference for special schools. Croll and Moses (2000) identify that despite the favourable professional educational opinions of inclusion and LEAs’ efforts to reduce the number of special schools, for many years the progress of inclusion has been met with “ferocious opposition” (p. 134) especially from parents. This could be due to the fact that special schools are believed to be specialists with suitable environments, resources and expertise that can better support some SEN children (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; O’Keefe, 2004). In this regard, Harriss et al. (2008) found research evidence indicating that for pupils with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties, special schools did have significant beneficial effects on students’ trust, self-esteem, ability to deal with difficult feelings, and behaviour in class and at home.

In recent years, there also appears to be increasing support for ‘inclusion by choice’ and ‘a continuum of provision’ (Lindsay, 2007; Norwich, 2008; Terzi, 2010), which suggests that forms of education should not be one-size-fits-all, and hence should encourage a diverse range of provisions ranging from “residential to special school to special unit to special class to support in an ordinary class to no support, with attendance in each space on a full-time or

part-time basis” (Rix et al., 2013, p. 23).

The above contestation among academics, teachers and parents therefore shows that special schools have been much controversially debated in relation to inclusion, and an overwhelming consensus in the debate regarding how special schools are viewed in relation to inclusive education is lacking. This, together with my own experience of previously working in a special needs setting with people with severe and complex needs, motivates me to further explore and attempt to understand special school provision in relation to inclusive education in England.

Methodologically, this study undertook to understand the perspectives of teachers who work in special schools for children with severe learning difficulties (SLD⁴). I anticipate that an exploration into educators’ attitudes towards special schools and inclusive education may offer valuable insight, as they are at the forefront of the implementation of educational policies and changes (O’Toole & Burke, 2013). Previous studies in a similar vein can be easily found, for example, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) conducted an extensive review of literature regarding teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion, and Pijl et al. (2011) similarly explored primary school teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion through substantial review of literature. However, the foci of these studies have often been on mainstream teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion, and the research evidence regarding special school educators’ views on both inclusion policy and special schools is rather limited — this is especially the case when it comes to teachers from special schools with a residential environment for SLD children (Cole & Visser, 1999; Harriss et al., 2008).

Therefore, by exploring the debates regarding special school provision and inclusive education from the perspectives of educators from special schools for SLD children, this study aims to provide a different perspective from research done in mainstream settings, and will hopefully be a useful addition to the current debate on special and inclusive education, especially in terms of giving voice to teachers who work in special schools closely with SLD children.

⁴ See footnote 1.

2. Method

2.1 The Case

The nature of a case can be understood as a social unit: an individual, a small group, a profession, a condition, a community, or a nation (Stake, 1995). This study's research focus determines that the case is specialist teachers' lived experience working in special schools for SLD students. I chose to invite research participants from one school as opposed to from multiple schools, for the purpose of minimizing the effect of the variables such as school ethos, teaching environment, staff support, student demography, and educational resources that may influence specialist educators' experience and opinions, so as to hold the corroboration of data more accountable. I further chose an independent rather than state maintained special school. This was driven by the concern that school climate may have strong influence on teachers' attitudes, as found in Weisel and Dror's (2006) study. Compared to the closely monitored and controlled special schools, independent schools may have the strength of flexibility, autonomy, proactive response to external changes, and higher likelihood to form their own school ethos (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [OFSTED], 2002). These qualities point to the features of a case study, that is, to investigate the particular rather than the general. Therefore, one independent school was chosen to be the research site of this case study.

When pinpointing the specific research site, bearing in mind that research decisions are essentially made based on "what is 'do-able' considering the resources of the project and the capabilities of the researchers" (Allan & Slee, 2008, p. 71), I first narrowed the scope of my case study to England, for the reason that I am a student researcher based in Cambridge, and the geographical adjacency to my research site is not only cost-effective but also gives me the ease to complete a thorough research without having to travel far. Having selectively contacted special schools within my region, I first received the consent from the X School (pseudo name used for anonymity purpose). Therefore, with the school's permission, I carried out my research with the specialist educators there.

X School, established in the 1950s, is an independent special needs school for pupils

aged 6 to 19 with moderate, severe or complex learning difficulties. The school consists of a lower school for pupils aged from 6 to 15, and an upper school for pupils aged from 16 to 19. It is located in south England. The school currently has approximately 40 students enrolled. All of the pupils have a statement of special educational needs, and are funded by their local authority. Accommodation is provided within the school, but students can choose to be a day pupil. A recent OFSTED inspection report on the school (source undisclosed for anonymity reasons) shows that it scored ‘good’ in the quality of education, ‘outstanding’ in pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, ‘satisfactory’ in welfare, health and safety of pupils, and ‘outstanding’ in the quality of boarding provision.

2.2 Participants

Participants were six educators from X School, strategically selected as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Information of Research Participants

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Position Held in School</i>	<i>Years of Experience</i>	<i>Gender</i>
A	Headteacher	25	Female
B	The house manager of the 52-week residential house/Former TA	5	Male
C	One specialist upper school teacher (for pupils aged 16-19)	12	Female
D	One specialist lower school teacher (for pupils aged 6-15)	9	Female
E	The eurhythmy teacher/therapist	10	Female
F	One onsite speech and language therapist	< 1	Female

2.3 Data Collection

Having gained the headteacher’s permission and the other five participants’ consent, in March 2014 I visited the school where the invited research participants work. I first did eight hours of unstructured non-participatory observation in three interviewees’ classes (the lower school teacher, the upper school teacher, and the eurhythmy teacher). This on one hand helped me to know the interviewees better and build a rapport before our talks. On the other hand it helped to triangulate their talks against their actions. Note-taking was used to record

observation, focusing on teachers' teaching methods that involve learning activities design, use of specialist resources, promotion of classroom inclusion and involvement of pupils, and reaction to challenging behaviours. These observation data were later used in the data analysis process to triangulate against the interview data to increase the credibility of the research.

After the unstructured non-participatory observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the six participants. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. During the interviews, the following two main questions were explored:

- How do you understand inclusive education?
- How do you make sense of special schools in the context of inclusive education?

3. Findings

3.1 Understanding Inclusive Education

Although from a separate special school setting, overall the six participants were supportive regarding the general philosophy of inclusion. Despite their own career interest in separate special schools, participants A, B, E and F (headteacher, house manager, eurhythmy teacher/therapist, and speech language therapist), in particular, expressed wishes to see mainstream schools build up capacities to successfully accommodate more SEN children. Exploring the reason behind such positive attitudes, the participants unanimously identified that the foremost positive aspect of including SEN children in mainstream settings is that mainstream schools have the strength to help the students socialise with their peers, develop friendships, and encourage positive public awareness of SEN. However, all six participants were strongly against full-inclusion. They especially doubted the practicality of including SLD students in mainstream classrooms, and questioned mainstream schools' current capacity to implement inclusion successfully. Their reasons for these negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion can be summarised in the following four parts.

First, participants A, C, D and E (headteacher, upper and lower school teachers, and eurhythmy teacher/therapist) posited that inclusive education should focus on student

experience rather than institutional structure. For them, inclusion means that all the students in a classroom are able to successfully participate in a common learning activity, whether in mainstream or in special schools. They worried that an SEN child physically included in a mainstream classroom may still be educationally excluded because, due to their different ability level, they may not be actively participating in the same learning activity; as a result, they may be excluded and placed into a one-to-one setting with their teaching assistants (TAs). They hence believed that special schools can sometimes be more inclusive than the mainstream.

In this regard, the observation data show that in classes of five to six pupils, the pupils, accompanied by their individual teaching assistants, seemed to participate in the same learning activities at a similar pace. For example, in the lower school class, the pupils were learning to recognise animals by singing songs and showing flashcards. Each pupil had his/her turn to perform with the help of their TAs, and each performing pupil had to walk around the classroom and interact with every other pupil. The upper school class had a similar atmosphere. The pupils learned about family relations by making their own family book with the help of their TAs. In the eurhythm class, the learning activity resembled a team sport where every pupil worked with each other on common tasks. The observation data indicate that every pupil in classes was encouraged to engage in the common learning activities, and may support the participants' claim about special schools being inclusive.

Second, all participants identified that the most eminent implemental issue of inclusion is the one-size-fits-all policy and the negligence of individual cases, reiterating the importance of individual student educational experience. They acknowledged that for some SEN students with milder difficulties and less challenging behaviours, mainstream schools are more likely to be better for them; meanwhile, regarding SLD students, they uniformly expressed a strong preference for special schools. They believed that some SEN students, especially those with SLD, may best benefit in special schools where their best interests are addressed and individual needs met. Therefore, the choice of inclusion placement should be highly dependent upon the best interest of each individual.

This view can be triangulated against the school's practice. Observation data show that the school designs students' individual educational programme depending on individual cases. For example, one upper school pupil, 16 years old, who was said to be more able, would attend a local secondary school for PE classes. A similar student, 19 years old, was doing a part-time apprenticeship at a local mechanics. In contrast, three pupils who were said to be less able would only attend classes for half a day, four days a week maximum. These arrangements may show that the school could be flexible with pupils' individual educational programmes. It can hence be seen that rather than a one-size-fits-all school policy, the school shows efforts to design the most suitable learning plans for their students depending on individual cases.

Third, all six participants noted that the incompatibility of learning environments required for mainstream and SLD students is another factor that makes the practice of inclusion problematic. The SLD students usually need a calm, attentive, flexible and sometimes spacious outdoor environment. Yet this often conflicts with what conventional mainstream settings could offer due to the fact that their resources are often focused on academic training. This may lead to the undesirable result of SLD students disrupting their mainstream peers because they have difficulty coping with the mainstream environment, leaving neither group of students benefiting from such inclusion placements. They argued that inclusion should not be pursued blindly or unconditionally, as one has to realise that due to different individual abilities and needs, some children may be better off in a separate environment that can best address their particular needs. The lower school teacher in particular suggested that in some cases inclusion placements for SEN student only "set them up to fail" with unrealistic expectations. This resonates with other participants' assumptions that out of their experience working with students with complex needs, some of them would very unlikely be able to live independently or be fully included in mainstream settings, and one of the main reasons identified by the participants is that the environment they need is intrinsically incompatible with that of mainstream schools.

In this regard, the observation data show that first, the school is located in a rural area

a few miles outside a busy town, offering a quiet natural environment and adequate outdoor space. Apart from the standard school facilities such as classrooms, auditorium, gym, and craft workshops, the school also has specialised SEN facilities such as therapy rooms and quiet rooms, and the classrooms are usually spacious and equipped with specialised teaching aids such as spelling boards, specially designed chairs, and a variety of visual aids. In the lower school class, two students were using specially designed chairs to help them keep calm; one student was constantly walking across the classroom back and forth, but he did not seem to significantly disrupt the rest of the class as there was adequate space in the classroom; while in the upper school class, a student who was stressed out and lost control during the class was accompanied by his TA to leave the classroom for a walk in the open field in order to calm him down, and when he returned about 15 minutes later, he looked calmer and was able to re-join the class. The observation data may therefore indicate that the environment in the special school seems to be able to play a positive role in assisting the students in improving their educational participation.

Apart from the above identified practical challenges of inclusive education such as non-unified interpretations of inclusion, negligence of individual cases and incompatible learning environments, the real motive behind the inclusion policy was also questioned. Participant C and E (upper school teacher and eurhythm teacher/therapist) in particular expressed financial concerns and worried that the inclusion policy may in fact turn out to be a money-saving exercise rather than a child-centred and educationally beneficial act. The annual fee in this independent special school is £27,570 for day pupils and £73,287 for boarders, which are mostly funded by the local government, whereas for mainstream schools, the average annual fee for independent schools in the UK is approximately £10,200 for day schools and £23,400 for boarding schools (Independent School Fee Advice, n.d.), while for maintained schools, the average funding schools receive per pupil is only around £4000 (Independent Parental Special Education Advice, 2013). Although 'more expensive' is not necessarily better, as the participants questioned, it may still bring a certain degree of doubt as to whether inclusion is really in the best interests of the child or more about value for money for the government.

3.2 Making Sense of Special Schools for SLD Children

Responding to the questions about making sense of special school provision for SLD children, all participants spoke proudly of their school's specialised resources and strong staff team in terms of expertise, ratio and support. They saw themselves as specialists with the expertise of working specifically with SEN children. They believed that mainstream teachers do not have such knowledge to teach SEN children in their class properly, and even with the support of TAs, it would be difficult, as mainstream schools do not have a sound system of specialised support for teachers as well as students. Furthermore, the participants regarded mainstream schools as highly unlikely to be able to have enough specialised staff to meet the needs of children with SEN, especially those with SLD, because the majority of the school staff and resources will always be prioritised for the mainstream students. However, in special schools, where SEN children are the only priority, the students are able to receive as much individual attention, supervision, resources and tailored support as they need.

In addition to special schools' strength in resources and expertise, all participants also commented positively on their curriculum flexibility and suitable environment. They saw these two factors as the irredeemable conflicts between the mainstream and special school provision that make inclusion placement problematic, because mainstream students' social, collective and academic learning environment can be often incompatible with what SEN children, especially those with SLD, require. The headteacher in particular highlighted that her school adapts individually and has more freedom and resources to meet the individual needs of her students.

The upper school teacher and the speech language therapist in particular identified that special schools can also demonstrate their positive effect in helping to boost students' confidence and self-esteem. They spoke highly of the behavioural progress they had witnessed their students make. They argued that it may do great damage to students' self-esteem and confidence if the students were to remain at the bottom in their mainstream classes because academic competitiveness is often taken as the common standard to rank students in the mainstream. In special schools, however, the two participants stressed that the

students can be with peers of similar abilities in a relatively more relaxed and non-competitive learning environment, where they can restore their confidence and self-esteem, and most importantly, they can achieve.

Participants A, C and D (headteacher, lower and upper school teachers) in particular, further suggested that before making any judgment, one has to have hands-on experience of working with SEN children especially those with SLD to fully know the situation. In this regard, they invited those who are interested to visit their school, spend a day or two with the students, and see what it is really like in a special school for SLD children. They were confident that this onsite experience would help to resolve misunderstanding and change negative attitudes towards special schools.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to advance the understanding on special school educators' perceptions, attitudes and understanding of special school provision in relation to efforts towards inclusive education in England by offering qualitative data that may complement the existing research evidence in the area. With this research, I hope to give voice to the educators who work closely with SEN/SLD children at the frontline of special education.

One interesting finding was that special school educators questioned the appropriateness of limiting the meaning of inclusion to mainstream settings only. They believed that special schools can also be part of inclusive education, or even more inclusive sometimes than mainstream schools. They voiced that the mainstream may still exclude students with separate curricula and units within schools, whereas special schools can have the whole class together. This finding easily finds academic support. Cooper and Jacobs (2011) argue that the inclusion agenda often denigrates special schools as exclusionary in the mistaken belief that mainstream schools are the only places for inclusive education to take place, but in fact, "special schools can make a significant contribution to educational social inclusion" (p. 193). Other academics also give their critiques on inclusion. O'Brien (2002) observes that "an extensive base of research on inclusion does not exist. That which does exist does not provide a uniformly positive picture" (p. 182). Farrell (2010) further posits that

there is no sufficient empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of inclusive education, and argues that its rationale is greatly flawed in the first place. Lindsay (2007) similarly remarks that, as research evidence on effectiveness cannot sufficiently support either special school or mainstream provision to be the only solution to inclusive education, the inclusion debate should be more than simply about special schools versus mainstream schools, but rather about how to create an inclusive education system in the broadest sense.

The study also found that the consideration of individual cases in terms of student experience and educational benefits was regarded as an essential part of inclusion. As SEN is such a wide spectrum, inclusion placements should be dependent upon and responsive to individual cases rather than one-size-fits-all. Hornby (2002) posits that the priority for SEN children must be that they have access to the education that is appropriate for them, not that they are forced to fit into a system designed for their mainstream peers which may not support their particular needs. Similarly, Farrell (2010) reminds us that inclusion is not the primary aim of education — the primary aim of education should always be education itself. This means that educators should provide the best suited learning environment and support for students according to their individuality. However, Lindsay (2007) highlights that whenever research finds poor outcomes of inclusive practices in the mainstream, it is often argued to be an incentive for making greater efforts to improve the implementation of such a policy that is seen as inherently correct. This warns that one should beware of the ideologically driven positions of inclusion, and return to the evidence and needs based agenda of genuinely inclusive education (Kavale & Mostert, 2003). As Sinclair (quoted in Cigman, 2007) highlights, “inclusion is not always the best option for every person with every disability, and that involuntary inclusion is as problematic as involuntary segregation” (p. 777).

The findings also highlights that special schools can be regarded as positively contributing to special and inclusive education in terms of staffing, environment and resources. In comparison, the current state of mainstream provision is often criticised for lacking competence and training, being short of resources and suitable physical environments,

relying on an inflexible curriculum, having difficulties responding to challenging behaviours, and overemphasising academic achievements (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Evans & Lunt, 2002; Shevlin et al., 2009). Among these weaknesses of inclusive schooling, MacBeath et al. (2006) identify the lack of training and expertise in mainstream schools as the central problem of inclusion. Farrell (2004) similarly points out that the success of inclusion largely depends on the availability and quality of the support in mainstream schools. Yet, there is no quick fix for these problems, since it does not only require good planning and “an army of special professionals” (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 269), but also implies years of training and experience. It can therefore be said that with the current state of special education, for now special schools still have an important role to play with their expertise and resources that are not yet widely available in the mainstream.

To conclude, although a myriad of research can be found regarding the debate of special schools versus mainstream schools, no ironclad conclusions can be reached. Lindsay (2007) reviewed 1373 papers published between 2001 and 2005 in the area of special and inclusive education, and found mixed results of the effectiveness of special and mainstream schools in catering for SEN children, showing that no provision is overwhelmingly better than the other. On one hand, mainstream schools may be subject to financial and league tables pressure, and more than often may have to focus on training for academic and technical skills, while special schools might be able to offer a more tailored educational experience targeted specifically to the individual needs of their students. On the other hand, special schools’ separated educational settings may encourage the marginalisation of an already vulnerable group, while the mainstream may offer at least a seemingly more inclusive environment. Nonetheless, however problematic it might be, judging from the current state of academic debate and educational practices, the pursuit of inclusion will go on, even if just for “an ethical project of responsibility to ourselves and others” (p. 126), as Allan (1999) notes. After all, inclusion at its root touches the age-old moral issues:

“How do we want to live with each other? On what basis should be given priority to

one value or another? How far does the majority want to go in accommodating the needs of the minority?" (Sarason & Doris, 1982, pp. 54-55).

5. Limitations and Implications

The main limitations of this study are that first, it is a small-scale study with only six participants, which makes it difficult to generalise from the findings. Second, it cannot offer richer findings that a comparative study between special and mainstream school teachers' views may have offered. Thus, these results only reflect special school teachers' understanding of special school provision and inclusive education in England. However, this design gives the study the strength of offering in-depth qualitative information regarding the research topic, and hopefully serves to strengthen the existing research data so as to potentially provide a foundation for future studies in the area.

The findings of this study show that although inclusion is regarded as the common goal that all educators should aim for, it does seem that considering various practical issues, there is still a long way to go before it can be properly achieved on a large scale. This, on one hand, keeps encouraging academics and practitioners to work towards inclusion. On the other hand, it may also bring one to rethink inclusion and reflect on the current education system. Relating to research in other areas such as school effectiveness and pedagogical studies, one may find inspiration to better address the issues of special and inclusive education such as that of 'extended schools' and 'social pedagogy'. Future studies could also be done in the areas such as parents' attitudes towards and understanding of special school provision and inclusive education, as well as SEN students' experience in special schools and mainstream inclusive schools. Both qualitative and quantitative research evidence in these areas is rather lacking. In addition, questions such as 'how inclusion can better meet individual needs' and 'whether school cooperation between special and mainstream provisions may better cater to individual needs' may also require further exploration.

6. Ethical Consideration

In this study, I followed BERA's ethical guidelines for educational research (British Education Research Association [BERA], 2004). I took careful consideration of ethical issues

such as confidentiality, anonymity, trust, respect and responsibility. I designed and conducted my research strictly conforming to the ethical guidelines, by requiring all the interviewees to sign a consent form that informs them of the research details including data collection process, right to withdrawal, confidentiality, data storage, known risks, remuneration, and expected benefits, so as to make sure that all interviewees were consenting, voluntary, well informed, and their confidentiality and anonymity were protected. In addition, I also provided feedback when I finalised the study.

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