Where Do I Send My Child with Disability? How Australian Parents Negotiate Their Kindergarten Placement Dilemmas

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Choosing a kindergarten for young children is a highly demanding process. For parents who have children with disabilities this process can be particularly challenging, given the choice between special and inclusive kindergartens. While there has been wide-ranging research on parental concerns of kindergarten practices involving children with disability, there is little attention paid to how parents who have children with disabilities negotiate kindergarten choice dilemmas. This qualitative case study focuses on four Australian parents who have children with disabilities and reports on their perspectives regarding how they negotiated choices in placing their child with disability in either a special or an inclusive kindergarten. Using the notion of 'contact zone' as an interpretive framework, this article illustrates that kindergarten choice is difficult, involving complex considerations. For parents who have children with disability, choosing a school is hard work, in many ways a struggle to negotiate conflicting dilemmas in an attempt to find a school that can better shape the life courses for their children.

Key words: kindergarten, inclusive education, disability, contact zone, trust.

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations [ND], 1989), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (2006) and the Salamanca Statements and Framework for Action

on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) provide a strong legal basis for inclusive education of young children (Trohanis, 2008). In Australia, the provision of education for all children is the responsibility of government. The Federal Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), 1992 and the subsequent Disability Standards for Education 2005 in Australia seek to eliminate discrimination against learners with disability. Section 22 of the Australian Disability Act makes it unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the grounds of the person's disability (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). These legal provisions give parents the right to decide if they want to access an inclusive or a special kindergarten service for their children with disability. A special kindergarten is a segregated educational setting which admits only children with disability. The dual system of special and inclusive kindergartens in Australia makes the subject of school choice a difficult task for the vast majority of parents who want the best for their children (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Peers &Agbenyega, 2013). Entering inclusive kindergarten can be a joyful but also an anxious time, particularly for parents of children with disabilities because the latter may feel that their child with disability will not have the same opportunities as their peers without disability in inclusive kindergartens (Jones & Gillies, 2010; Taub, 2006).

An ideal inclusive kindergarten is a learning environment where all children can access and participate in all parts of the kindergarten program with other local children, including support for families to provide a sense of belonging, acceptance and respect for each other's different skills, abilities and cultures (Jones & Gillies, 2010;Yooralla, 2012). Yet, in inclusive learning environments, pedagogic and disability discourses can add to the construction of some learners as deficient (Smith & Long, 2014).This article uses the theoretical metaphor of contact zones (Pratt, 1991 Singh & Doherty, 2004) to theorise the conceptual and pedagogical boundaries often created between children with or without disability studying together, which often make school choice a complicated process for parents who have children with disability.

Framing the contact zone concept in inclusive education
The term 'contact zone' was coined by Mary Louise Pratt drawing attention to children who speak different languages coming together in a classroom space for dialogic encounter (Pratt, 1991). She further explains the contact zone as a space where people who are "historically separated come into contact with each other and establish relations, usually involving

conditions of pressure, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt, 1991, p. 6). Although the concept of contact zone is used more often to study issues of racism and responses to cultural difference, it can be applied to the study of *typically* and *atypically* developing children who learn together in an inclusive educational setting, it is a form of border crossing (Giroux, 2005). First, the concept of contact zone is relevant to the study of special or inclusive schools because these schools enroll children with varying degrees of disability, each child with distinct characteristics, dispositions and cultures. Second, we applied the contact zone concept to draw attention to the fact that studies on disability conceptualize disability as a social and cultural construction that can be traced throughout a multiplicity of cultural practices (Klibthong, 2013). This suggests that a continuing dialogue between studies on disability and culture is important for gaining insight into ways normalcy and disability are produced culturally and the implications of such productions for education of all children (Björnsdóttir&Jóhannesson, 2009; Klibthong, 2013). In this way, an inclusive education contact zone can be described as a learning space of multiple encounters, where children with disability/ additional needs and typically developing children, "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). Inclusive education also resonates with Pratt's (1991) conceptualisation of contact zone theory as "relation to models of community" (p. 1).This view is consistent for analysing inclusion as a community of diverse participants in a dialogic space who are automatically engaged in struggles for rights to participate, speak and be heard in their inclusive community. Struggles within inclusive or special school communities are due to each member bringing to the learning community different histories of privileges and disadvantages, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, economic, cultural, knowledge, social, symbolic and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1979, 1983; Klibthong, 2012).

According to some researchers, parents' awareness of these differences present school choice dilemmas when it comes to choosing kindergarten places for their child with disability - an example is the fear that their child cannot cope with learning routines, particularly in inclusive programmes (Agbenyega& Klibthong, 2013; Daniel & King, 1997; Taub, 2006). Some other researchers reported that parents are apprehensive of inclusive programs because kindergarten teachers do not have adequate knowledge to support children with disability(Agbenyega, 2007), that there

is insufficient time for children with disability which leads to rushing them through programme transitions (Taub, 2006), that there is bullying by other students (Daniel & King, 1997; Grove & Fisher, 1999; Jones &Gillies, 2010), and that children with disability are viewed as unable to learn the same curriculum as their peers without disability and require the intervention of an educator in a way that prescribes deficit in the child (Biesta, 2010).

In inclusive education contact zones some educators may judge children according to a group norm (Biesta, 2010) to mark and identify them as deficient or competent. According to Biesta (2010), identification "is about taking up an existing identity, that is, a way of …being identifiable and visible that is already possible within the existing order (p. 547). But many parents do not have the power to resist any attempt to make their children with disability take on 'normal' identities that are already waiting in mainstream classrooms.

Setting the problem
Despite evidence favouring inclusive kindergartens over integrated or segregated special kindergartens, many parents are still placing their child in special education or integrated settings (Foreman, 2009; Lindon, 2012; Loreman, Deppeler& Harvey, 2010). According to Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2010), inclusive education practices are not synonymous with integration. Integration is defined as a practice that requires children with disability to adjust into existing kindergarten cultures and practices (Loreman, Deppeler& Harvey, 2010). Integration can lead to inequality because some teachers may still cling to traditional teaching practices and push all children irrespective of their situation and ability through a rigid mandated curriculum. Such practices contradict the ideals of inclusive kindergarten practices which aim to transform the whole kindergarten system and its practices to meet the learning goals of all children irrespective of their needs (Agbenyega& Klibthong, 2012; Loreman, Deppeler& Harvey, 2010).

The lack of transformation in teaching practices can lead to marginalisation and subsequent stereotyping of children with disability by teachers and other children (Macgill, & Blanch, 2013; Shevlin, 2011). Marginalisation and stereotyping can come in the form of children with disability being perceived as not capable of achieving educational standards in mainstream inclusive kindergartens. According to Young

(1988), marginalisation is the most serious form of oppression. By oppression we mean that children with disability are controlled by teachers to the extent that they have limited choices to develop according to their own potential and preferences. Macgill and Blanch (2013) posit that children who do not fit the norm of mainstream school cultures are often excluded from meaningful participation and given inferior learning activities. Practices which exclude some children can trigger fear in parents who have children with disability and lead them away from placing their child in inclusive programmes (Grove & Fisher, 1999;Jones &Gillies, 2010).

It is in light of these problems that this qualitative case study, which focuses on four parents who have children with disabilities, attempts to shed light on how the parents negotiated choices in placing their child with disability in either a special or an inclusive kindergarten. It addresses the question: *How do parents make choices between special and inclusive kindergartens for their child with disability?* The purpose is to find out how parents can be better supported to find the appropriate educational placement for their young children with disability.

Method

This article is based on an interpretive qualitative case study that examined how parents who have children with disability make school choices (special or inclusive kindergarten) for their child with disability. The parents are coded as PA1, PA2, PA3 and PA4. In this article we present the parents' stories as a multiple case intended to bring to light an insight into the complexity and difficult nature of making kindergarten choices through in-depth personal accounts (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Below is a table of information on participants and their children.

Table 1.*Information on participants.*

Participants	Age (yrs)	Profession	Distance parent lives from school
PA1	38.8	IT specialist	1km
PA2	43.3	Shop assistant	1.4km
PA3	32.6	Self-employed	25km
PA4	31.7	Office clerk	23km

Table 2.*Child demographics.*

Child	Gender	Age	Primary disability	Secondary disability
Child A		4.2	Moderate intellectual disability	Speech delay
Child B		4.3	Moderate intellectual disability	Speech delay
Child C		4.1	Moderate intellectual disability	Perceptual difficulty
Child D		4.4	Moderate intellectual disability	Speech delay/perceptual difficulty

Each participant has a son diagnosed with moderate intellectual disability with IQ scores ranging from 36-51 (Sattler, 2008). The Bream Special Development Kindergarten caters for children with intellectual disability within the mild to severe group in the age range of 2 -18 years and the Cosmos Inclusive Kindergarten (pseudonym) which is operated by a not for profit disability organisation caters for all kinds of children with and without disability from the age range of 2 to 5 years.

We came into contact with the two kindergartens when we led a team of 28 directors of the Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education from Thailand on one week working visit to the two schools in June, 2013. It was during these visits that we became interested in finding out from parents why they selected these schools for their children. We discussed our research intentions with the principals two weeks after the visitors had left and with a written agreement indicating consent to allow the study to proceed, the principals agreed that we meet with the parents when they pick-up their children and brief them of our research intention. It was finally agreed that we recruit parents through a poster display on the daily notice-board. Three weeks after our advertisement we received e-mail contacts from seven parents out of a total number of 230 parents whose children attend the two schools with expression of interest to participate, however, three declined due to time constraints and other personal reasons. Four parents who signed and returned the consent forms became eligible participants. All of the participants were from an Anglo-Saxon background.

After obtaining consent from the four parents, we began a professional relationship. We visited each school for one week, during which time we met with the parents and had informal conversations in the

morning when they dropped off their children. These meetings were useful in getting to know the parents and build trust. It was during one of these informal meetings with the parents that we asked them to nominate how and where they would like to be interviewed.

Data generation and analysis
The information used in this study was gathered in English from one group discussion and face-to-face individual interviews as a follow-up. The group discussion with PA1, PA2, PA3 and PA4 took place on a Saturday around 12 noon in a coffee shop within a big shopping mall which the parents have nominated for this purpose. The group discussion lasted for a little over 2 hours, giving the parents a relaxing moment to narrate their stories. By bringing parents who have special and inclusive kindergarten experiences in relation to their child's education into one setting to share their lived stories, we have demonstrated data generation in a contact zone. In order to enrich and validate the data, we followed up the group discussion with individual face-to-face interviews in the participants' respective homes. Sample questions we asked parents included but not limited to: Tell us about your experiences of having a child with disability? What are your dreams for your children? Why did you choose to send your child to the current kindergarten? What are your challenges in deciding which kindergarten to send your child to? How would you describe your child's current kindergarten experience? Is there anything you would like to add? We recorded the data on a digital voice recorder, and the transcribed data concerning each participant was sent back for cross-referencing before analysis.

In our data analyses, we combined interpretative analysis (Smith &Eatough, 2006) with a framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The framework approach we adopted followed an iterative process beginning with *familiarisation*. At this level we immersed ourselves in the raw data by reading the transcripts separately, studying notes and so on after which we compared key ideas and recurrent themes. We followed this with the identificationof a *thematic framework*. At this level we noted key issues and concepts, for example, what comments go with what and what small ideas belong to what big ideas. We also paid attention to how meanings were distributed across themes. This gave rise to *indexing* in which we applied a thematic framework to all the data in textual form by short text descriptors to elaborate the index headings. As an iterative process, we *charted* the data by rearranging according to the appropriate

part of the thematic framework to which they relate. We then abstracted and synthesised the information for *mapping* and *interpretation*. At the interpretation level we used charts to define concepts, map the range and nature of the phenomena and find associations between themes leading to explanations of the findings.

Results

This study aimed to build on informal relationships with parents who have children with disability, to create personal and meaningful conversations about how they negotiate kindergarten choice dilemmas. The power in the kindergarten choice process lay with the parents who chose their stories to be heard and with us as researchers who want their stories publicised. In this research we realised that the individual parents brought with them their own reasons and motivations for becoming involved, which produced varied narratives.The key findings of this research may be seen as the following. Typically, parents who have children with disability are considered special predominantly within an historic context when it comes to accessing services. This historical construction of disability/normalcy played a role in how some of the parents made their school choices. The results detailed parents' perspectives on how they identified with the kindergartens that they sent their children in order to redefine their future. In doing so, the parents expressed opinion that depicted stress and the issue of trust. There were references to changes that occurred to the family, descriptions of feelings of hurt, indications of apprehension, and discussions about children's future.

Family circumstances and potential issues for school choice
The contact zone discussion and follow-up interviews showed that there was widespread pressing personal discomfort the parents felt initially when they discovered they had children with disability. The diagnosis brought dramatic changes to the lives of the parents emotionally, psychologically and physically but they felt that placing their children in a good kindergarten is fundamental to minimising the effect of the disability on their children's future in the long-term. As the four parents explained:

PA3: Hmm…I didn't know I would have a child with disability, I think everything is going to be fine but my hope was dashed when it all turned out to be what I always feared…I felt grief about my child's disability. I became concerned with the discomfort my child and I have to go through

for the rest of our lives. As a parent you need to fight and change your situation. It is always good to start with a strong early childhood program
PA1: It is the same with me but all children are children…although it added stress on the family and I felt a sense of loss for what the child may not become what you expect if I do not get the right support for him.
PA4: It is like grief that never ends; if your child is dead your grief may be temporal but disability…knowing that my child have to live with it for the rest of his life is not something easy to think about. Getting a good kinder is the issue, if you get one that meets all his needs you are sure he is being prepared for the future.
PA2: I worry first but that worry is all gone because I begin to think that he is just like any other child, I love him and what I fear most is how others would judge him.

These circumstances demonstrate that parents are deeply concerned about the future of their children in terms of how to meet their critical needs. In fact each of the four parents openly acknowledged their grief of having a child with disability, which raises the issue of how to ensure that parents who need additional support for their child with disability are linked to kindergartens that have appropriate services to meet their children's unique needs. The study also uncovered independent living as one of the key considerations for parents' kindergarten choice.

PA3: I want him to be independent, to do things for himself that is the most important thing for me.
PA1: All I want for him is self-determination, he is capable of doing things and I want people to accept that fact, you know many people are very narrow minded and just look on the disability but I see some good future in him.
PA4: If he can develop self-help skills, he can be employed in future in the local shop, he can take care of himself that is what every parent wants.
PA2: He will grow to determine his own future, I am not going to force anything on him, just give him the support he needs to be an adult in his own right.

Finding the balance
By accepting that they cannot change the disability, parents have the option to make good educational choices for their children in the hope that it would help their children attain their future goals. The study uncovered that the decision whether to send their child either to special or inclusive kindergarten appeared challenging to all the parents. The results showed

that *trust and mistrust,* coupled with *public perception* were crucial factors for the parents when making decision regarding kindergarten choice.

> PA3: First, I sent him to a special kindergarten; the kindergarten caters for children with developmental disability, I wasn't really happy because every child in this school is diagnosed with one form of disability or the other but I stick to it for a while…I didn't trust inclusive practice at the time. I know of the research on inclusion, I did a lot of reading…I didn't trust it, I was apprehensive about whether the inclusive kindergarten can really support my son because I didn't see the same resources, I saw in the special school…but some parents who enrolled their children in the inclusive kindergarten spoke highly about the programme. I trusted their testimonies; I withdrew my child from the special kindergarten and put him in an inclusive kindergarten…it is quite a distance I have to travel everyday to send him there but it is not a bother to me, it was the best thing I have done for my child. His progress is remarkable, the teachers are terrific. I think my decision was based on trust and testimony from other parents, and not on the research I read.
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> PA1: It is a matter of which system you trust to support your child reach the goal you have for your child. I don't really feel at ease with inclusion, you know inclusion promises all the good things but when you go there and see that some children with disability are isolated, and not well supported your heart aches. Some teachers don't have the required resources to cope with their work…not many of the kindergartens here are inclusive or accept children with a disability so I have to settle with the special kindergarten around here. I think it has all been good so far; there are resources to support all the children.
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> PA4: A friend who works for the organisation which established the inclusive kindergarten told me about how fantastic their programme is. I know it is far away but I gave it a try and it is working. Others would see value in my child when they know that he is in a mainstream kinder.
>
> PA2: I looked at various kindergarten websites and visited some. There are all sort of things on their website describing they are this, they are that, they're inclusive but I don't trust them. They don't have the resources or special qualification…staff should know about children with disability. I trusted the special kindergartens; they have the resources to provide the best support for my child. Trust was the main thing that influenced my choice, I would say, but I am still worried because my son only sees the faces of children like himself…disability…I don't know how he would be perceived as having attended a special kindergarten all his life.

These narratives highlight how the individual parents negotiated a balance between two different kindergarten provisions. The important lesson that can be gleaned from this experience is that each parent did what they think at the time was best for their child. The next section discusses the implications and limitation of the findings.

Discussion

This study collected data from four parents who have children with moderate intellectual disability to illuminate their experiences of having a child with disability and how they negotiated kindergarten education choices. The purpose is to identify how parents can be best supported by linking their needs to appropriate kindergarten services. The study has demonstrated that issues of disability are social and cultural constructions that can be traced throughout multiple cultural practices (Apple, 1999; Bourdieu, 1989; Klibthong, 2012). Because social and cultural constructions of disability are implicated in the ways the parents made kindergarten choices, contact zone theory can be beneficial for professionals in dialoguing with parents who have children with disability about how their young children's educational needs can best be met. The study called for dialogue with parents to reduce confusion and overwhelming situations of normalcy and disability arising from cultural interpretation and production of difference and restore hope to parents (Robinson & Diaz, 2008). Dialogue with parents also means dismantling unequal relationships that plague inclusive contact zones, where children with disability are often assigned inferior status. By focusing on the strengths of the child with disability, modes of children's behaviour would not be read in the inclusive contact zone by teachers as personal deficits, instead, as the challenge for innovation in teaching practices (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2013).

It can be argued that inclusive policies and legislations are power instruments that prescribe legitimate ways of accomplishing what is in the interest of the power actors. This position is reiterated by a review symposium of Bernstein's work:

> Power relations create, legitimize and reproduce symbolic boundaries between different groups of students (the child with or without disability my own example), and different categories of instruction (Atkinson, Singh &Ladwig, 1997, p. 121).

In this way, the boundaries and their particularities arising from inclusive policies, acts and legislations, set the foundation for individual choices. This is evident in the research findings. For example, PA3, removing her son from a special school to a mainstream inclusive kindergarten, and PA4's direct choice of an inclusive setting occurred because by policy the two systems (special and inclusive kindergartens) are available to parents as options. In addition, it can be argued that societal expectation and attitude toward children with disability played a role, particularly in PA4's decision making. This is evident in her revelation that by enrolling her son in an inclusive kindergarten she has added value to her son which society would appreciate.

Societal construction of what counts as 'normal' or special kindergartens has definitely impacted her choices. PA2, for example, made a choice based on resources and specialised knowledge of staff to meet her child's needs. Despite this she was still apprehensive of the socialising factor for her child. She worried that her child would be acquainted only with those society has *bothered* as having disability. This implies getting a kindergarten of her choice is not the end of the matter but how society perceives the products of those kindergartens. Thus, it is only within the contact zone between disability and *normal worlds*, between special and mainstream schools, that the conditions of disability are made visible. We can describe such contact zones as *fault lines* where "highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination'' (Pratt, 1991 p. 4) are entrenched. It is only in these fault lines where the practice of inequity emerges. It is here that parents are placed in dilemmas, with no captions and no adequate markers to give them directions. It is here that children considered 'normal' enjoy systems of normal schools and children with disability are prescribed special schools. The actions of both PA2 and PA4 depicted the power of perception of these fault lines. That is how they think others may perceive them and how they in turn, perceive others. The findings thus suggest a need for the contact zone to be "renegotiated, reworked, and remade in new and contingent ways" (Singh & Doherty, 2004, p. 10).

By evolving a contact zone for sharing about insider perspectives, educators and parents can gain insight into the uniqueness of the individual experiences, and challenge our notions of parents with children with disability as the other. Also, the ways parents perceive kindergartens and their testimonies have a strong impact on their ability to overcome their

kindergarten choice dilemmas. The results further demonstrated that trust is pre-requisite to self-determination and can also influence the extent to which parents can express their needs to others and assert themselves. In addition, parents who have a clear idea of what they need are better able to articulate their educational needs to others (Getzel&Thoma, 2008).

We recommend that trust must be seen as a particularly important tool for developing dialogic encounters in contact zones. The contact zone must be enacted as places that are fluid with interdependent relations (Robinson & Diaz, 2008). This means kindergarten choice for a child with disability, whether special or inclusive, should be viewed more as complex pursuit than what is simply gleaned through their relationship with other parents. Parents' experiences with disability need to be considered as "an intertwined part of the landscape of that experience, rather than as two separate domains that impact on each other in fixed and definable ways" (Rooney, 2012, p.332).

Another implication that can be taken from the analysis of the participants' comments was their experiences wrapped up in the culture of newly acknowledged contact zone which they have enacted; that they felt brought them social justice for their children. As many kindergartens are moving towards inclusion as the preferred education option, the authors of this study recommend systematic parental involvement as an essential component of the process of establishing inclusive programs. Parents need to be acknowledged as key stakeholders in the development of inclusive kindergartens (Grove & Fisher, 1999; Shevlin, 2011). Being part of this development process is important for parents to receive relevant information regarding inclusion in order to make intelligent choices. Informing parents about inclusion should not be limited through teacher conferences, parent newsletters and from reading about inclusion in magazines and websites. Parents want access to information, support for their decisions, and provision of appropriate services (Grove & Fisher, 1999). It is not enough to simply say inclusive kindergartens are better than special kindergartens or vice versa, instead it is only by gleaning the testimonies of parents in relation to those kindergarten systems they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of inclusive or special kindergartens. The major implication garnered from this study highlights the importance of professional development for kindergarten directors on trust building in increasing and leveraging parents' knowledge of inclusion and what it has to offer their children.

Limitations

The findings of this study reflected only the opinions of four parents. The participants were those that were willing to make their voices heard hence, the study is not generalizable to the ways parents who have children with disability make kindergarten choices. What is presented is a snapshot narrative of parents' experiences.

Conclusion

Understanding the underlying drivers of how parents of children with disability make kindergarten choices demands that academics, policy makers and kindergarten directors engage in a close examination of inclusive contact zone factors. In this study we have documented the pains that the parents went through initially when they found that they had children with disability and how appropriate educational placement gave them hope – in the sense that their children's knowledge acquisition in those settings would lead to independent living. This study suggests that for inclusive education to gain prominence as the better option, inclusive kindergarten educators must move beyond a limited traditional focus of kindergarten-community partnerships to a contact zone where they can dialogue with parents. In sharing this research we hope to stimulate a deeper conversation within special and inclusive kindergarten education contact zones, that is, those that cater solely for children with disability and those that are inclusive. It is an affirmation of the importance of equity of choice to respond to the increasingly demands for inclusive education of all young children (UNESCO, 2004).Finally, we recognise that researching disability issues with parents who have a child with disability is delicate because there are many ethical boundaries to negotiate. However, we think that not giving parents the opportunity to voice their feelings and thoughts is an ethical violation of their fundamental human rights. Giving them space for authentic and multiple voices to be heard is where we begin to build trust for parents to opt for inclusive education.

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