Social Constructions of Young Children in 'Special', 'Inclusive' and Home Environments

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The paper tells of the social constructs surrounding young children with learning difficulties in their home, ‘special’ early education setting and ‘inclusive’ or mainstream early education setting in England. The exploratory study focused on how three- to four-year-old children made sense of their environments and how their identities were constructed by different parties in the different contexts. Ethnographic case studies were conducted using semi-structured and informal interviews with parents and practitioners, documentary analysis, fieldnotes, and live and video observations. Shared constructions across the contexts for each child were common, with constructions of them being happy and making progress pervasive across the children and settings. Differences in constructions across settings indicated that qualities could shine or negative constructions be tempered, thus showing the role of the environment and the culture of inclusion in socially constructing children with special needs.


Keywords: childhood, early years, education, special needs.

Introduction

English early years provision, like provision for older children, is more or less inclusive with many settings in states of in-betweenness (Corbett, 1997) and transition as they respond to political drivers for inclusive and comprehensive provision. The policy of placing children at the centre of individually created packages of provision (DfES 2004; DfES/DH 2003) can result in young children with special educational needs attending both a mainstream or ‘inclusive’ early childhood setting, and a ‘special’ early childhood setting. ‘Mainstream’ refers to local provision attended by typically developing children; sometimes children with special educational needs may be integrated, that is, present and expected to fit in (Mittler 2000). This mainstream provision could be ‘inclusive’ if radically reformed to welcome and celebrate diversity (Mittler 2000). ‘Special’ refers to settings developed for ‘other’ children based on the premise that their difference requires specialist treatment in a segregated setting (Thomas and Loxley, 2001). Corbett (1997, p. 53) has argued that ‘what counts as inclusive
in one context may be seen as highly exclusive in another’ and the contextual, contested nature of the terms is evident in this research. Nonetheless, within the multitrack system of mainstream/inclusive and special provision parents can, and do, negotiate combinations of the two, hoping for ‘the best of both worlds’ (Flewitt and Nind, 2009).

The cultural phenomenon of children experiencing combinations of different types of early education is under-explored. The practice is enabled by policies based on philosophical or practical premises and not on research of what this means for the children. The aim of this small-scale research therefore was to conduct in-depth ethnographic case studies of three young children with learning difficulties who went between home and two early years settings, one more inclusive and one more special, to examine how the children made sense of their differing experiences. One line of exploration, and the one examined here, was how the actors in the various settings constructed the child – how they saw, talked about and treated the child as a particular kind of person.

There are tensions in the paper related to the nebulous status of these young learning disabled children. We are interested in the interaction between the children, their impairments and their diverse social environments that might facilitate or hinder their active participation as members and learners. We regard the children as meaning-makers – social actors actively constructing their own childhoods (James and James, 2004). We also regard them as socially produced and constrained by what is made possible for them by societal expectations and those who speak with authority (Benjamin and others, 2003). We seek to understand the children’s experiences through understanding the constructions of them as less powerful people (young children) by more powerful people (professionals/adults) and simultaneously acknowledge our own power as researchers. The children could not tell us in words how they saw themselves, but the constructions articulated about them speak of the relational dynamics that they were active in forming and informing. We listen to the children by reading, observing and interpreting the meanings drawn from their interactions and contexts, focusing on how they are constructed in sociohistorically situated dynamic contexts.

Methods and approach

Case study is ‘the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances’ (Stake, 1995, p. xi). This research involved three cases: three children in their real-life contexts where ‘the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and where multiple sources of evidence are used’ (Yin, 1989, p. 23). We sought to observe and listen in ways that would produce vivid descriptions and support interpretations (Bassey, 1999) of how the children were socially constructed in contexts, generating analytical statements based in raw data unique to these cases but with potentially wider application.

The case-study children were identified by gatekeepers from an earlier study of parents choosing to combine settings for their young children (Nind and others, 2005). Gatekeepers nominated four-year-olds with learning difficulties attending a combination of mainstream and special provision (defined by them but later understood differently by us). Children were selected based on parental and second setting interest in participating. Considerable care was taken in negotiating access, although one setting (Helen’s Infant School) permitted interviews but not observations.
Although the children were the central focus, the cultural informants were the parents and practitioners. Audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted in the spring term and again in the summer alongside many informal focused conversations recorded in fieldnotes. Document analysis focused on the children’s Statements of special educational need, which formally described them and the provision required to meet their needs, reports, and in one case the home-school book used for everyday communication. The observation and interviews became progressively focused as research issues were clarified. We sought to build interpretive statements grounded in the data, particularly regarding divergences and ambiguities, looking for insight rather than consensus to capture the complexity of the cases.

This study draws on the 35 hours of recorded interview data, documents and fieldnotes. Interview topics for parents included description of the child, their communication, family routines, choice of preschools, expectations and experiences, and home–preschool links. For the professionals, topics included the nature and background of the setting, description of the child, the child’s likes, relationships, routines and communication, professionals’ contact with/knowledge of the other setting the child attended and how the child coped moving between settings. Observation schedules drawn from the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (Harms and others, 2005) and the Orchestrating Play and Learning Criterion of the Evolving Inclusive Practices Dimension of the Index for Inclusion (Early Years) (Booth and others, 2006), plus interview descriptions informed our judgements about the special/inclusive status of the settings. Mostly, insight was gained into the public rather than private (Thomas and Loxley, 2001) constructions of the children, although observations generated insights into the subtlety of constructions in action.

Interview and video data were transcribed and reviewed to build familiarity. Analysis involved iterative and inductive interpretation of data coded for descriptors of the children (happy, affectionate, etc.); codes were later grouped in thematic patterns, removing duplicates and merging similar codes to form constructs that could be compared across settings. Data from the two time phases were compared for stability and fluidity of concepts. The Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software package Transana was used to enhance the systematic, rigorous analysis and quantitative and qualitative checking to confirm constructs across the multimedia data sets.

We adopt descriptive reporting (Bassey, 1999) to give readers a feel for each child as she/he was seen in each setting. We explore the implications of what it meant for the young children themselves to be perceived through different contextual lenses, and whether or not they could re-construct themselves across place and time. Thus, the next section describes each child in turn, noting the inclusive or special nature of their different settings, and drawing out the similarities and differences in how each child was perceived. We then draw the three case studies together and probe credible explanations for differences in perceived competence and needs. Although intrinsically interesting, these are instrumental case studies (Stake, 1995), examined mainly to provide insights that can be related and recontextualised by readers to other settings.

The children in context

All three children, Mandy, Helen and Jamie, lived in the south of England with their parents and enjoyed frequent contact with their extended families. Mandy also had a younger sister.
Mandy

Mandy, who had Angelman's syndrome and epilepsy, was pre-verbal, just beginning to walk with support and a 'happy, contented little girl' (Statement). At home, Mandy was seen as happy and socially responsive, with social interaction identified as an area of strength. Her parents talked warmly of her relationship with her sister and cousins. They spoke of her interest in toys and her determination to keep hold of some things: 'it's like a real tug of war'. Mandy’s dependence on her parents ‘for dressing, toileting and feeding’ was emphasised in her Statement, but while her parents spoke of this and of her developmental delay they also spoke of her independent play. They described her as someone who was struggling: she ‘has trouble with the coordination’; she ‘struggles with releasing objects … struggles with stacking tasks’ (Statement).

With the exception of the sense of struggle, much of the family view of Mandy was echoed in her other contexts. Her mother took and collected her from these settings and through this she shared regular, reciprocal direct communication with staff. Thus, for Mandy, there was a crucial thread other than just herself connecting the contexts.

The first setting was a suburban Children’s Centre, previously special provision for families with children with special needs before becoming one of the local authority’s specially resourced inclusive settings with new staff and new building attached to a mainstream primary school. Staff saw the Centre as inclusive ‘because we look at the individual child and what their needs are and meet those, rather than whether a child’s got a special need’. However, as three-quarters of the peer group had significant special needs and received special programmes from therapists using special equipment, we saw this setting as more like special provision.

Mandy’s Statement tells of her need for specialists, special approaches, ‘enhanced staff pupil ratio’ and ‘assistance from all therapies’, and attendance at the Children’s Centre was intended to meet these needs. Here she was formally recorded as ‘a delightful, happy 4-year-old’ (physiotherapist). Mandy helped to form this positive construction of herself by being responsive to adults calling her name. She was described as developing relationships with staff and somewhat interested in other children, ‘she moves her head to where the children are (. . .) she is aware of them (. . .)’, as ‘a keen explorer’ and as ‘so determined’ (interview).

Mandy’s dependence, however, was a major theme in how the Children’s Centre saw her: ‘totally dependent on adults for her dressing, feeding and toileting skills’ (Children’s Centre paediatrician) (our italics). Her need for ‘adult support for all her needs’ (Statement) was stressed; she was ‘dependent on adult support for most activities’ (educational psychologist). This was connected for these staff with Mandy being a ‘little girl with developmental delay’ (Statement). She was also ‘very amenable’, a ‘quite compliant’ little girl who ‘adapts to her environment’ (interview), ‘tolerates guidance’ and ‘accepts adult help’ (Statement).

Mandy’s second setting was a Village Playgroup started 26 years previously by local parents. The manager defined this mainstream environment as inclusive, reflecting an inclusive policy and statutory need to provide opportunities for all children. The peer group was typically developing children and the context assessment indicated extensive inclusive practice with collaborative problem-solving rather than isolated intervention. Mandy’s Statement refers to her ordinary needs for ‘opportunities and support to promote play and social skills’, a
foundation stage curriculum (‘modified and differentiated’), and ‘opportunities to work in a variety of settings’. It was to meet these needs that she attended the Playgroup.

As at the Children’s Centre, Playgroup staff regarded Mandy as happy and responsive, but at the Playgroup her enjoyment of the other children was celebrated, with staff commenting, ‘there are certain children who she’ll aim to go for like to cuddle’ (interview). She was ‘very observant’, interested, determined and ‘strong-minded’ (interview). Playgroup staff put less stress on her dependence on others and more on what she could do with adult support. They regarded her as easy to accommodate, someone who was not a complainer, who would ‘just blend and fit in’ (interview). Mandy’s group identity was important at the Playgroup with staff stating early on that she had ‘become part of the group’.

There was a lot of common ground between the settings in how Mandy was understood. The educational settings differed from home only in focusing on Mandy as an ideal pupil. The Playgroup stood alone, though in never referring to Mandy as delayed and in their positive affirmation of her belonging within her (mainstream) peer group. Accounts from all contexts made numerous references to her being happy, sociable, liking to explore people, toys and materials, interested and determined. There were shared constructions of her as a mixture of independent, dependent and vulnerable. They all frequently spoke of her making progress, referring to the child she was becoming. It is the case–study researcher’s job to create plausible interpretations of what is found: Mandy was small and smiley, she did not transcend gender expectations in her behaviour, nor did she present an uncomfortable level of challenge; therefore, we suggest that it was easy for positive constructions of her to be formed wherever she went.

**Helen**

Our second case-study child had identified ‘epilepsy, developmental delay and a possible autistic spectrum disorder’ with delays in her motor skills, self-help skills and expressive and receptive language (Statement). She was tall and appeared older than her chronological age. The autism construct was predicated on observations that she ‘jumps up and down when excited and flaps her hands; she loves wheels which she enjoys spinning; she has a favourite t-shirt which she wants to wear all the time … bangs her head against objects and people when she is frustrated’ (Statement).

In the spring interview, Helen’s mother, in her perceptions from home, spoke of her making progress, developing speech and able to spend time, play and take turns with the child next door. She reported that Helen went about her day happily. Later, in summer she was more tentative, describing Helen as ‘quite happy but …’ going on to talk more about her difficulties. In the home-school book, she wrote of Helen ‘getting a bit aggressive when near your face’. In interview, she puzzled about her unpredictability: ‘she’s got a switch in her (.) within an instant she can be going off on one in temper and she can suddenly start (. )’ and worried about Helen posing a safety concern to others because ‘headbanging is everywhere and that is a big issue’.

Helen was not someone whose identity was fixed. Her mother’s perception of her sociability was ambiguous. She explained in her first interview that ‘she’s not really into that social playing side [with peers]’, but that, ‘she’s close to her grandparents’, ‘knows her cousins’ and gets excited to see family friends. By the summer, Helen’s developing relationship with the
girl next door meant she was seen as more socially connected. Helen’s mother also explained ‘when she’s focused on something that really gets her attention then she’ll sit there for quite a while’, but later noted: ‘she’s not one for sitting down for very long’, ‘she’ll change her mind every few minutes, we can go through 50 million toys’. Thus, Helen was seen as connected and unconnected, and focused and unfocused, depending on her mood.

Helen’s first setting, the local Opportunity Group, opened in 1971 as one of the earliest playgroups welcoming children with learning, physical and behavioural difficulties. In 2007, it provided ‘specialist play facilities’ for ‘very special children’ (leaflet) and from the context assessment we judged it a special setting, largely staffed by volunteers supported by therapists and advisers with a peer group almost exclusively of children with significant special needs. Helen’s mother took her to and from the group and spent time there, so to some extent she and the staff could co-construct their image of Helen.

The Opportunity Group positioned Helen as a child-making progress: ‘she has learned to climb down the steps’,'she’s beginning to get words’ and ‘head butting has got a lot better’. Staff saw ‘a little girl who is usually happy and enthusiastic’ (report) and ‘a very smiley child’ (interview). However, in this context, surrounded by vulnerable children, Helen was a child who needed supervision, requiring ‘the minimum of a one-to-one keyworker at all times’. Staff said that ‘she likes other people around her but she doesn’t socialise with other children’. They found Helen puzzling, unfathomable: ‘we don’t know why she does it’; ‘she went through a stage at home where she was rocking on her knees and putting her knees in her eye sockets until she got black eyes and we never knew what that was about’. She was also seen as a challenge and a responsibility: ‘they do bring a helmet which we’ve never used because we reckon that with our help we can watch her’; ‘we need to be told from someone who’s professional what the right approach is’ (interview). They saw her as socially uncon- nected: ‘I don’t think there is strictly a relationship’ [with staff], ‘if different people did the same things with her I don’t think it would make any difference’ and ‘she props herself [up on us] sometimes but … it’s not a loving cuddle or even a fun cuddle … you don’t get that with Helen’ (keyworker).

Helen’s second setting was an Infant School some distance from her home. She was escorted in a taxi and Helen’s mother’s communication with the staff was largely through a home-school book. The school had two specially resourced classrooms for children with complex needs, one of which, the assessment unit, Helen attended with a one-to-one supporter. These classrooms began as a special school but evolved to become part of the adjoining primary school. The teacher described the class as ‘a special setting that can lead to inclusion and offers opportunities for inclusion’. Although the immediate peer group was almost exclusively children with significant special educational needs, there was access to typically developing children in assemblies, celebrations and some playtimes in a model of locational and social integration.

At the Infant School, Helen’s progress was central to talk of her: ‘starting to put two words together’, initiating, using Makaton, saying ‘Good Morning’, leading staff to things, being more likely to share interest and less likely to head butt. This was largely put down to staffing: ‘she’s been much better since she’s had one-to-one’. She was referred to as ‘generally happy’ (home-school book), laughing a lot and having ‘a sense of humour’ (support worker). Helen was regarded as needing supervision: ‘unmanageable without adult one-to-one’ (interview). Regarding sociability, staff recounted ‘[she] doesn’t communicate with other children
although she does look at them’ and ‘if other children laugh she’ll be interested’ (interview). Helen was constructed more consistently, however, as an ‘aggressive’ child: ‘she head butts and she has started to use her fists to hit’ and ‘she has hit me and it was hard’ (support worker). Her teacher focused on the lack of pattern or sense to her behaviour, ‘she’s very unpredictable, and when she’s distressed, she’s very distressed’, ‘She’ll scream, cry, bang her head forwards or backwards on objects, walls, floor, furniture and people, and she’ll do that for three-quarters of an hour’. Notes from staff in her home-school book complained of her unreasonableness: ‘very demanding today’; ‘it seems that she is trying to be naughty’, ‘lots of unprovoked head butting’. She was someone who caused problems for others, ‘sometimes we’ve had to ring Mum because it’s distressing for everyone else in the classroom’, with hints of the blame lying with Helen: ‘she’s not aware of others’ needs and is emotionally dependent on adults’; ‘she does things to get attention like she’ll pull an electric cable and look at you or she’ll head butt to get attention’ (interview). Moreover, in this setting she was someone to be feared, ‘all the children here are very wary of her and avoid her…some children are terrified of her’.

In each context some of Helen’s interactions and interventions were informed by her diagnosis as delayed and possibly autistic, but other constructions prevailed; Helen was a child-making progress, learning to comply and mostly happy. The two settings outside home shared a perception of Helen as someone needing high levels of supervision and to be outwitted. This was subtle at the Opportunity Group, positioned as the need for staff awareness, whereas the Infant School staff were more explicit: ‘you have to be three steps ahead of her’ (interview). Staff across the settings shared a perception of Helen as interested in others from a distance. At home and the Infant School Helen was constructed as aggressive and unnecessarily unpredictable — a potential problem to others — whereas the Opportunity Group saw her more as posing challenges to be met.

In seeking a plausible interpretation of how Helen was constructed, it is evident that there was less over-arching communication to support a shared co-construction. It may also be that she was less automatically likeable because she posed more challenge. She provided inconsistent cues making her difficult to read, resulting sometimes in negative perceptions of her. This relationship between being hard to read and problems fostering mutual positive affect is commonly reported in the parent–infant interaction literature (e.g. Rogers, 2006). Moreover, being big for her age, we suggest, may have complicated how Helen was perceived, increasing her threat and aggravating adult difficulties in achieving a ‘critical communicative match’ (Warren and Rogers-Warren, 1984).

Jamie

Jamie, our final case study, did not yet have a Statement of special educational needs but his development was delayed and, as his mother recounted, he faced challenges related to his cleft palate and lip, broncho-oculo facial syndrome, speech and language delay, endocarditis, microcephaly, short stature, deafness (glue ear) and gross motor delay. She explained, ‘he gets tired, not like other children, he gets tired and then he gets clumsy’. Primarily though, she spoke of him as someone at the heart of the family: ‘We’re lucky to have him. I think that’s why we’re so close. We are a very close family us three’; ‘he knows daddy’s got bad eyes, and he’ll do what he can to help daddy, just as [his dad, registered blind] will do what he can to help Jamie’. His mother also described Jamie as sociable generally, enjoying the company of other children, loving
going on the bus and being close to his grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and local friends.

Echoing the other parents, Jamie’s parents saw him as a little boy who was making progress: his ‘speech and language have come on a lot’, he was ‘doing more for himself’ and interacting more (interview). His mother spoke proudly of him as competently helping his dad; his father was observed celebrating Jamie’s ability with puzzles, ‘You’re so clever. Don’t get big-headed!’ (fieldnote). His parents said playfully that he was ‘not a bad little boy’, interacting with Jamie’s teasing approach with them (fieldnotes). They explained that despite being told at his birth that he was ‘brain dead’ (interview), he was doing well. For them then he was as a survivor, a little boy they were lucky to have – a prize.

Jamie went to and from his main setting, a suburban Playgroup, on the bus with his father and Playgroup staff and family each saw the relationship with the other. The Playgroup was designated as one of the authority’s ‘special inclusive settings’, offering a structured approach and some language specialism. Peers included eight children with special educational needs for whom the setting received extra funding. The context assessment indicated integration more than inclusion, in that there were clearly two categories of pupil co-located but often having different experiences.

Playgroup staff also saw Jamie as family-centred, someone who continued to talk mostly about his daddy. They recognised his sociable qualities, telling us Jamie ‘loves being with his friends’, ‘knows all our names’ and has a good relationship with his keyworker, other adults, his cousin and some close friends. Jamie’s father corroborated the bond with the keyworker, explaining ‘loves him, absolutely loves him’. The Playgroup summed up Jamie’s strengths: ‘He’s friendly. He’s sociable’. They stressed the progress he had made, including in his friendships, relationships, play, independence and communication. Staff echoed Jamie’s parents’ comments about how he helped his dad and how his competence with puzzles was beyond his peers, one of whom was told, ‘Jamie will help you, Jamie can do puzzles’ (fieldnote). Staff here also spoke of Jamie as ‘always happy … always comes in smiling … always bubbly’. They talked of his use of touch as ‘very endearing’, but he was also seen as vulnerable: ‘He’s so tiny. He needs familiar adults to be able to communicate. He also needs familiar children. He needs someone looking out for him’. This connected with a construction of Jamie as disadvantaged, by some of his family circumstances, by the system in which he was not disabled enough to get financial help with transition to school, and by his facial features that might attract negative comments from new peers. This may also have reflected a Playgroup attitude towards their children with special needs as needy and dependent on them.

Jamie’s second setting was a relatively recently established Dad’s Club for fathers and their children, again enabling perceptions of home and outside setting to be shared. This was mainstream without allocated provisions for children with special educational need, and as the keyworker explained, ‘inclusive’ in its ethos (interview). This was borne out in the context assessment. The peer group was predominantly typically developing children (nought to five) with some older siblings. Dads stayed at the sessions playing with their own and others’ children and talking to each other.

Dad’s Club staff, like all parties, noted Jamie’s strong link with his family, observing that ‘when he first started he was very, very clingy to his dad’; ‘I think they’ve got quite a special
bond’ (interview). The staff here also noted his interest in other children with whom he tried to play. They noted his progress and told us, ‘he’s come out such a lot’ and ‘there has been a difference in him’. At Dad’s Club, Jamie, with his smiley disposition, was seen as ‘a lovely little lad, quite happy and content’ (interview).

The major construction of Jamie across his three environments was someone who was exceptionally close to his family, sociable and making progress, competent and happy. Like Mandy, Jamie was small, smiley and unchallenging, and like Mandy, he was universally perceived positively. There were, though, some subtle variations in how he was constructed. For the Playgroup, he was vulnerable but at the Dad’s Club just quiet, and for his parents, he was tired and cherished.

Constructing special educational needs

The case studies illustrate the different social constructions of the children, some defining, such as Mandy being a happy little girl, others subtly encapsulated within a series of descriptions, such as Jamie being competent. Constructions could be quite distinct, such as Helen being an aggressor to be tamed and outwitted, or more nebulous, such as Jamie being vulnerable or quiet or a child who gets tired. Rather than merely reducing the children to unproblematic defining qualities, the social constructions encompassed ambiguities: Mandy as dependent and independent, and Helen as vulnerable and a danger to others, focused and unfocused, and connected and unconnected.

The case studies also indicate the impact of attending different settings on the way children are constructed; constructions result from interaction between what the child brings and the staff responses based on what they bring. We can see some of the influence of the children’s networks. Mandy had very proactive parents who were well supported and who steered communication across all her environments. Jamie’s parents had far fewer resources (social or financial) to challenge, request or suggest alternative provision. Shared communications in both cases stemmed from a primary carer taking the child to and from their early years settings, but Mandy’s mother’s communications were more in keeping with the language of school than those of Jamie’s father. These children’s families as well as the children themselves were actively shaping the social constructions of the children by professionals.

Constructions were dependent partly on the resources the adults had at their disposal. The Opportunity Group had a higher staffing ratio and fewer demands on what they were expected to achieve, which, although not denying the role of individual agency, made it easier for them to be positive about Helen. Of the three children, there was least communication between Helen’s environments, none between the two early years settings and only a home-school book between her family and the Infant School. Although Helen’s parents did much to find high-quality provision for her, they lacked confidence in challenging professionals’ views and were intimidated by the Infant School. The greater negativity in Helen’s mother’s comments about her in the home-school book compared with interview suggests that the school discourse dominated in home-school communications.

Constructions of the children often emerged in talk about who the children had been, who they were now and who they were becoming. The universal construction of the children as happy and making progress connects with Uprichard’s (2008, p. 303) contention that
'children and childhood are always and necessarily “being and becoming”’. Uprichard maintains that these dual concepts co-exist in our constructions. By focusing on the children as happy little girls/boys, the adults were adopting a present and ‘being’ discourse. At the same time, by focusing on their progress, they were adopting a future and ‘becoming’ discourse, seeing the children as becoming more than they currently were. It can be more challenging to see young children with learning difficulties as ‘becoming’ – adults in the making – as the extent to which they will achieve expected patterns of adulthood is unclear. It may be that the adults were compensating for this by focusing strongly on the progress the children were making, thus avoiding constructing them as stuck in time as eternal children. Progress is about becoming more competent and Uprichard (2008) reviews the increasing problematisation (e.g. Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Christensen and James, 2000) of this notion of incompetent children becoming more like competent adults. Our data lend support to the critique that in/competence is very much about context. The data illustrate how the children were understood as differently competent in the different settings and also differently in/dependent and vulnerable (see also Nind and others, 2007). Micro-analysis of the interactions in environments within environments (home corner, outdoor play, etc.) could add detail to these understandings, bringing in the elements of space and time as explored by Brown (2007).

Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 62) argue that ‘it is impossible to imagine any human behaviour that is not heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs’. The case studies provide sufficient detail to show that it would be a gross over-simplification to claim that, in the special environments, the children were constructed as special and, in inclusive environments, they were constructed as ordinary. There were more subtleties than that and other constructions came to the fore in the analysis. However, it would also be an over-simplification to construct the settings as either special or inclusive despite our original interest in studying children experiencing both. The legacies of special educational discourses described by Skrtic (1991) were in evidence beyond just the special settings. Nonetheless, it was only Mandy’s Village Playgroup, which was found to be highly inclusive in the context assessment, that constructed their child with special needs as ‘part of the group’. Inclusive environments engage in collaborative problem-solving focusing on the teachers’ strategies and good teaching for all, in contrast to traditional environments where the focus is on individual children, diagnosing needs and prescribing individual technical interventions (Thomas and others, 1998). The implication for parents choosing individually designed packages for their young children is that getting the combination of special resources and typically developing peers they seek is not straightforward. Rather, practice and discourse legacies, institutional ethos and individual stances will all influence how their children are understood and treated in the settings.

Although there are limitations in studying just three children, we were looking to gain ‘both unique and universal understanding’ (Simons, 1996, p. 225) from the detailed case studies. We can engage in Bassey’s (1999) fuzzy generalisation to make predictions and draw theoretical insights: the policy of encouraging parents to combine mainstream/inclusive and special provision has consequences for how children and their special educational needs are constructed. Ultimately, going between different contexts means that children have some potential for being, and being seen to be, different in each; there is potential for different qualities and competences to shine and for negative constructions to be tempered. The potential for variation though, depends not only on the dynamics of how the children perform their various roles as child/pupil, boy/girl, passive/active and so on, but also on...
their parents’ social and cultural networks and communications, and on how these interact with the need to construct the children as being and becoming in line with external influences and constraints on them.

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