

MOTHERS VOICE THEIR PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT

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Abstract: In 1995, the Swedish Parliament passed a bill which stated that parents of children with intellectual impairments have the right to choose whether or not their child should be enrolled in a special education school during a trial period. This paper presents a qualitative interview study which examines how the mothers of seven children with mild to moderate intellectual impairments perceived the school placement process and whether or not the mothers believed that they had a choice in selecting their child's placement. The results indicated that the parents were not always informed of the placement options. Some mothers of the children who attended special education school classes reported feeling that their child was socially isolated and that they wished he/she had more contact with other children. On the other hand, some parents of children who were educated in regular classes claimed they had to struggle for their rights. The interviews suggest that more explicit guidelines are needed to define the parameters of parental involvement policies.

Introduction

The study described in this paper is part of a three-year project which was carried out at the Department of Human Development and Special Education in Stockholm (ESV-project). The project consisted of three studies which aimed to study: 1) organisational and managerial perspectives, 2) parent and class teacher perspectives, and 3) pupil, group, and educational perspectives (Fischbein, Malmgren-Hansen, Allodi-Westling and Roll-Pettersson, 1997). The author of the present study was responsible for

the second study 'Parent and Class Teacher Perspectives.' The study consisted of parents of 100 children who received special educational services, and the teachers of 93 of those pupils. From the original pool, the parents of seven children with intellectual impairments were interviewed regarding how they perceived the school- placement process.

The framework for the Swedish educational system is stated in "the Curriculum for the Compulsory School System" [Lpo-94] (1998) and the

Education Act (1996). The Curriculum for the Compulsory School System states that parents should play an active role in the education of their children and stresses the importance of collaboration between the home and school. The Curriculum also states that education should be adjusted to the needs of each pupil; that instruction should assist the pupil's continued learning and development; and that instruction should be based on the pupil's background, previous experiences, language, and knowledge. It is stated in the Compulsory School Ordinance, chapter 5, (in Education Act, 1996) that if a child needs special educational services, then an education plan should be drawn-up, which is devised jointly by school personnel, the pupil, and the parents or guardians.

The Swedish Parliament passed a Government Bill, 1994/95:212 which resulted in the SFS 1995:1249 law. The law enables the parents of children with intellectual impairments, i.e. learning impairments, brain damage, and autism to choose whether or not their child should be enrolled in a special education school during a trial period, January 1st, 1996 till June 30th, 2000. Within this time span, the above mentioned group of children may not be enrolled in the special education school without their parent's consent. If the parents choose not to enrol their child then the child, will attend a regular class and follow the regular school curriculum in accordance with the Education Act

(SFS 1995:1249, §§ 1-3). Children who are enrolled in the special education school can be educated either in a "*träningsskoleklass*" (life-skill class) for pupils with a moderate to profound intellectual impairment or a "*grundsärskoleklass*" (reading-based class) for pupils with a mild to moderate intellectual impairment, or have an "integrated placement¹," in which case the pupil will follow one of the special education school curricula. Despite the fact that parents are now permitted to choose whether or not their child is to be enrolled in the special education school, they do not have the legal authority (if the child is enrolled) to select the type of instruction (i.e. life-skill or reading-based curricula). If the child is enrolled and there is a disagreement between the parents and school pertaining to the type of instruction and/or whether or not the child may have an integrated placement, then the school authorities have the final decision regarding both issues (Government Bill 1994/95:212). The special education school classes are as a rule mainstreamed in regular schools. However, the special education school is not always in the vicinity of the individual pupil's home, and the pupils may have to travel long distances to attend school.

The Swedish compulsory school has in the last few years experienced economic cutbacks which may have obstructed the process of choice and family involvement. This hypothesis is supported

by an article written by The National Agency for Education (Dagens Nyheter, 2000a) which states that the number of pupils in the compulsory special education school has increased by an average of 52% between 1992/93 and 1999/00, while the percentage of pupils who are individually integrated has remained at approximately 14% during the 1990's (The National Agency for Education, 2000b). Parallel with the increase of enrolment in the special education school, has been a decrease in teacher employment in the regular school (The National Agency for Education, 1997). In a study conducted by Tideman (1998), it was found that, due to fiscal cutbacks, pupils with milder intellectual impairments who previously attended regular classes, were now being enrolled in self-contained special education classes. Furthermore, Rosenquist & Tideman (2000) reported that there appears to be a lack of ethical guidelines in the school placement process. According to their paper, parents have reported feeling forced into enrolling their child in the special education school in order to procure their child the resources he/she needs. In addition, Persson (1998) found, in an interview study, that some teachers question whether, in view of economic cutbacks, it is worthwhile allocating extra teaching time to pupils whose learning capacity is limited. Furthermore, Roll-Pettersson (2001) in a study which was part of the previously mentioned ESV-project, found that the majority of teachers (92%, $n=38$),

regardless of whether they taught in self-contained special education classes or regular classes had not received inservice training on how to teach children with special education needs. 89% ($n=37$) expressed the need for training in these domains. Roll-Pettersson (2001), as well as Werts, Wolery, Snyder, Caldwell, and Salisbury (1996), maintain that teachers' lack of supports and training may result in excluding pupils with intellectual impairments from regular classes. Not only did teachers feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of their students, but parents in Roll-Pettersson's study (submitted) expressed their greatest needs in the information category, in which approximately 75% ($n=76$) rated, as their greatest need needing more knowledge about future services which the school could offer their child.

Taken together, these factors suggest that parents in fact are not able to influence their child's school placement to the optimal extent. This study describes the experiences and perceptions of a few parents (i.e., mothers) in the school-placement process.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical approach of this study is based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977 and 1986). In the ecological systems model, the environment is divided into a hierarchically linked framework, extending from

microsystems to the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1977) used the metaphor of Russian dolls to describe the different layers of the environments which influence development. The layers move from inner most (proximal) to outer most (distal) environments. Microsystems consist of the proximal environments in which the developing person resides and develop, such as the home and classroom, and which thereby have a direct influence on cognitive and emotional growth. The next layer, the mesosystem, is made up of the relationships and interactions between microsystems. Mesosystem factors, which are discussed in this paper, are processes between parents and school. The next level of interaction is the exosystem which consists of relationships and linkages between at least two systems, whereof one of which does not contain the developing person. Exosystem variables included in this paper are the ambiguities between local and national levels regarding parental involvement in the placement process. The most distal layer of influence is the macrosystem, which does not consist of specific environments, but is made up of the blueprints of a specific society or culture, i.e. their laws, regulations, and belief systems. In summary, this study analyses how contextual variables in proximal and distal settings affect parental perspectives in the school-placement process.

Söder (1999) maintains that researchers tend to dichotomise between either a

clinical (individualistic) or a contextual (environmental) perspective when analysing special educational studies or topics. Söder (ibid.) contends that it is important for researchers to move away from possible predetermined biases in order to develop new perspectives. The discussion section of this paper conforms with Söder's (1999) "relativistic approach" which he defines as "open" and inductive, and the commitment to a specific perspective is played down in favour of more openly asking "how competent actors handle dilemmas in their everyday lives" (p. 7).

Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate how the parents of children with intellectual impairments (a) perceived the placement process, (b) if they felt they had a choice in deciding their child's placement and c) what resources were needed for their child to be able to be educated in a regular class.

Methods

Qualitative methods were selected in order to gather descriptive data about parents' perspectives and experiences in the placement process. Data collection consisted of using a semi-structured interview guide based on a set of basic questions and areas to be explored (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). Probe questions were used to

gather additional data. The author conducted all interviews during a nine-month period, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes and verbatim transcriptions were produced. Six of the seven interviews were held in the families' homes (one mother preferred to meet at an office) in an effort to create as open a forum as possible, so that parents felt that they could freely discuss the issues at hand.

Participants and procedure

The participants consisted of seven mothers of children with mild to moderate intellectual impairments, all residing within a 150-kilometre radius of Stockholm. They were recruited through the previously mentioned project conducted at The Department of Human Development, Learning and Special Education. Participants in the larger survey study consisted of the parents of 100 children who received special educational services, and the teachers of 93 of these children (Roll-Pettersson, 1999). All the parents were sent a letter of introduction along with the surveys. The letter described the purpose of the study and requested parents who were willing to be interviewed to write their telephone numbers on an attached paper and return it along with the surveys. A total of 30 parents agreed to be interviewed. Of these, 12 were parents of children rated as having an intellectual impairment. Eight of the children in this group were educated in self-contained classes, and four were educated in regular

classes. All parents who had a child who attended a regular class were automatically selected to be interviewed ($n=4$). One of the four moved to a self-contained class before the interview took place, reducing the number to three. The parents of four children who received their education in a small, self-contained class were selected because they happened to be at home when the author phoned. One of the latter interviews could not be used due to a fault in the tape recorder, leaving a total of seven parents for the study (three children attending regular classes and four attending a special education school class). The absence of fathers in the present study may be idiosyncratic and attributable to these particular families, with the mothers assuming a more active role in their child's education. A brief description of the seven pupils and their school situation is given in Table 1.

Table 1.**Description of the participating children and school situation**

Name *	Age ⊕	child characteristics φ	Description of school placement Ø
Sara	8	Has Down syndrome, no information on degree of intellectual impairment.	Second grade, regular class, the class is divided in two groups consisting of 12 and 13 children. Two teachers and one aide are responsible for the groups. Sara is not enrolled in the special education school. She is socially involved with her peers.
Ronny	10	Has a suspected intellectual impairment	Was in a regular class from first to third grade where he was socially included. Started in a special education class in fourth grade in a new school. 9 pupils, one teacher and one teachers aide in the class. Is enrolled in the special education school which has very little participation with reg. class.
Emma	11	Has autism and a mild intellectual impairment.	Fifth grade, regular class, 20 pupils, one teacher and one aide. Does not receive special education services and is not enrolled in the special education school.
Johanna	11	Has a suspected intellectual impairment.	Attends a regular combined third- fourth grade class and participates in mostly non-academic subjects such a home –economics, music, gymnastics with each group. Receives sporadic special education services and is not enrolled in the special education school.
August	9	No information on degree of intellectual impairment	Attends a self-contained class mainstreamed in a regular school, some participation (plays, musicals etc.), encounters peers from regular classes on the playground.
Magnus	9	Has a mild intellectual impairment	Attends a self-contained class located in a separate building which also has other special education classes, very little contact with regular classes.
Caroline	7	Has a mild intellectual impairment and a hearing impairment	Attends a self-contained class located in separate building, almost no contact with regular classes.

* All names throughout report are pseudonyms.

⊕ Children in Sweden start first grade at seven.

φ Child characteristics came from data collected from the larger study.

Ø Description of school characteristics as given by participants.

Data analysis

The interview data were analysed using an emergent category designation process which involved dissecting each interview into separate units that form an idea, or convey a piece of information.

These units were compared to each other and formed separate categories (Lincoln & Guba in Erlandson, et al., 1993). Themes were then evolved from the data. In order to validate interpretations, the author mailed the

transcribed interviews to each participant, along with a cover letter describing the categories and general planned content of this article. The purpose of this procedure was to insure that participants had a clear understanding of how the interviews would be used, and thereby, were in a position to either agree or disagree with the categories and/or contents. Parents were also requested to contact the author if they felt the need to clarify any of the above. None of the participants responded to this request.

Results

Four major themes emerged regarding parental experiences and perceptions of the placement process: a) perception of past encounters with other systems; b) educational placement; c) beliefs and thoughts regarding integrated/segregated schooling; and d) being a parent, including personal attributes and reflections.

Perception of past encounters with other community-based systems

It is inevitable when talking about the placement process that memories of previous encounters with other systems should arise. One issue was not receiving enough information or help from competent persons during their child's pre-school years. For example, in regard to the habilitation centre, Caroline's mother said:

The early interventionist must have just accidentally fallen into her job. She wasn't much help. Caroline got one of those 15 hours-a-week places at a day-care centre; she had it since she was three. It took a while before she started receiving services...the early interventionist was supposed to go out to the day-care centre and help the contact person, but that didn't work. She went there and practically just scratched her head [meaning she didn't know what to do]... It is not easy [as a parent] to know what you need when you are right in the middle of it all. Looking back I think they handled everything very poorly.

A second issue was not being listened to by people in authoritative positions. Sara's mother had decided before Sara started school that she wanted her to attend the local school and not travel the 60 kilometres to another town in order to be educated in the special education school. She said:

The early interventionist continuously argued that the only educational placement possible was the special education school ...'It would never work out in a regular pre-school, and it would definitely never work out in the regular school.' She had a very powerful resistance and saw only one alternative. That eventually lead us to cut off our contact with her. We had totally different perspectives on how the work should be done

with our child. Because she [the early interventionists] had such a position, she also had an authoritative status, and the local school authorities listened to what she said. It is difficult being a parent if you aren't very verbal or have the right background to put forth what it is you want. You are in an inferior position."

Despite these negative aspects, Sara's mother changed habilitation centres and has been very satisfied with the facilities at the new centre.

Educational placement

Routines and procedures for the child's placement were unclear and differed between the individual families. Some of the parents were informed of placement option choices by the early interventionist; others by a headmaster; some made their choice together with a team; while still others seemed to have made the decision themselves. There also appeared to be some doubt as to whether or not parents were informed about their options, as well as whether the informers were knowledgeable about those options. Ronny's mother said:

It was with a bit of agony that we decided. It was difficult to get advice because the teachers didn't know if it was better for him to stay

in the regular class [or go to the special education school].

Caroline's mother said that the early interventionist spoke with her about placement and that there then was a meeting at the habilitation centre with the early interventionist and a psychologist (however, she pointed out, a representative from the local school did not attend the meeting). Referring to the local school she said:

I have later on understood that they have some kind of system so that they can check up on which child understands and which child doesn't. I don't know where they get that [referring to that information] ...There was no money to have her there [local school] with an assistant, besides every-one has said "all the assistants have to go". Yes, they decided that this [special education school] was the best decision.

Later in the interview, when asked if she felt that she had any real influence in the school placement process, she said:

No, not at all, except that we simply made the decision. Though, I don't think we had any choice. I never got an answer [from the local school] about whether or not she could attend that school with an assistant. We never got that far... they didn't

have to be bothered [referring to their case].

Magnus's mother felt that she made the choice regarding her child's educational placement. She said:

It doesn't feel as if anyone forced this on us. We have felt a lot of freedom to choose from the headmaster. We visited the reading-based classes [referring to the special education school classes for pupils with mild to moderate intellectual impairments], and the life-skill classes [for pupils with moderate to profound intellectual impairments], and we visited the regular school where we live. You know, we have older children that go there, and I don't think we would ever get the resources needed to make it work. And then, I know that the teachers in that school are so old. They've been there so many years. They would never understand what all this entails...When it comes to placement I think we made the decision ourselves. But, of course, I don't know what they would have said if we had said that we wanted him to go to our [name of local school].

August's mother had originally hoped that August could be educated in a regular class in the local school with an assistant, but she said that the school could only afford to allocate support from an assistant 10 to 12 hours per

week. For this reason, she felt that integration was not appropriate for him. On the other hand, she felt that she had influenced August's school placement because she was able to choose between the reading-based and life-skill based classes. She said:

...that type of instruction did not suit him at all [reading-based]. They did not play the way they do in the life skills class...He needs to use several senses together when he learns something [which they do in the life-skills class].

Emma's mother refused to let her daughter be enrolled in or transported to the special education school in another town. She said that the headmaster and local school authorities were against placing Emma in a regular class. Talking about her rights, she said:

There is no school or agency that can place a child in the special education school against the parents, not according to the law. I told that to the headmistress and after that...we had a meeting, and [she said] that we had to take into consideration the poorer quality of education [in regular classes] and the difficulties of integrating a child in the normal school.

Later in the interview Emma's mother described how she struggled in order to procure placement in the regular class:

This is her *normal* school and this is the school she is going to attend. It is *normal* that the kids living here go to this school; it is the closest primary school... Fight? Well, I kept her home from school a whole semester and taught her myself because the town couldn't arrange an educational placement for her [my italics].

Sara's mother said that she had chosen the local school because:

This is the school in our area, the closest school to where we live. And, that is why we insist that a school, is a school for all, and that certain [pupils] should not be picked away [excluded].

Another issue that arose in the context of educational placement was the question why the child was referred to the special education school. It appeared that the special education school was considered the natural placement for Ronny because having an intellectual impairment meant that he would fail the national tests which are taken in the second and fifth grades. Ronny's mother said.

They tested him in the second or third grade. It's a test that is identical for all throughout Sweden, and his teacher judged that he wouldn't pass a new test in the fourth or fifth grade. She said that he wouldn't pass the Swedish, English,

or math. No matter how much help they could give him, he still wouldn't pass.

While talking about placement, several parents discussed the advantages and disadvantages of their child's present placement. Magnus's mother said:

Magnus attends a small class with only four pupils, it is calmer there and he can work at his own pace. Another advantage is the teacher... is very competent and knows a lot about special education...Those are the advantages but the disadvantage is that he is a bit isolated. I wish that he could come into contact with more children that weren't disabled.

On the other hand, Caroline's mother (special education school) was distressed that her child's teacher was not more knowledgeable about sign language. Sara's mother thought that the integrated setting also improved her child's learning accomplishments and was sure that the special education schools self-contained classes could never have helped her daughter accomplish the theoretical and social achievements that she had made in the integrated setting. Emma's mother, though satisfied with the teacher, reported that Emma was not getting the resources she needed in the integrated setting, nor learning as much as she should.

..she has a very good teacher, one whom she likes and who likes her. Everyone knows my daughter. On the other hand, she doesn't know every one, but if something were to happen...then someone from the school would let me know. Those are the advantages. The disadvantages in this case are that she is not getting the help she needs. She is not going to master what she needs to learn...She is far behind in Maths, Swedish, and English.

Even though the classes in the special education school were smaller, the poor behaviour of other pupils seemed to effect Ronny negatively. Ronny had recently started in the special education school, his mother said:

The disadvantage is that there are some rowdy kids there that might be an explanation for why he has become more rowdy. They seem in some way to get each other worked up. I didn't notice that in the old class.

Another topic that was discussed were the supports and resources needed for the child to be integrated in a regular class [no distinction was made between enrolment and non-enrolment regarding integrated placement]. Most of the parents mentioned the need for extra personnel, such as a special educator, a teacher's aide, language specialist, and an atmosphere that supports inclusion. Sara's mother summarised her ideas:

Personal aide, and one with a good form of employment, well educated... the person should be very competent in many areas. There needs to be a teacher, personnel, and a work group that wants this and is capable of getting things done and changing things. There needs to be a head-master who can lead this and who can explain this outwardly to politicians.

Other supports mentioned were smaller classes, adjusted teaching methods and syllabuses, computers, and physical education adapted for children with special needs. Johanna's mother felt that she could not demand the supports and resources that her daughter needed in the regular class because of the present economic cutbacks. In addition, some mothers of children being educated in special education classes expressed concerns about integrating their child into a regular class due to the lack of available supports in the school. As August's mother said:

It is very difficult for us to consider putting him in a regular school because classes have become much larger...and there are fewer teaching resources in the classrooms. There will have to be a radical change in the regular school before we put him in there. He has both an older sister and younger brother, so I know how the school works. I would not want to expose him to that. They do not have time for the pupils.

Cutbacks have entailed that treatments and aides that were recommended by other agencies have not been followed. Emma's mother said that it was written in Emma's educational plan (following the recommendations from an evaluation centre) that she should receive support from a special educator 10 -12 hours a week, but to her mother's knowledge, Emma was not receiving that support. In relation to supports and resources, the topic of goal setting was raised. Johanna's and Carolina's mother did not seem to be aware that their children were entitled to an educational plan. Johanna's mother said:

No, I don't think we have [a goal]... it seems as if we work according to her pace and then hope that she makes improvements... I don't know if they [school staff] have any goals. If they have, then I haven't understood that they have told us so...I don't think that they have a certain goal for her.

When asked if school and parents write goals together, Caroline's mother replied:

No, we don't. They have actually never asked me what I want from the activities in the school. No, they have never asked me; they actually haven't. All I've done is look at the computer programs and other things that she does.

Beliefs and thoughts regarding integrated/segregated schooling.

When discussing educational placement, the third theme, integration versus segregation emerged. A patent issue perceived by parents of children educated in self-contained classes was the wish for more contact with pupil's in the regular school. Magnus's mother said:

..I would like more integration, but I would still want the advantages that the special education school has; small classes and personnel that really understand what it is all about; but still, that there was more interaction; that there was a group with pupils who are intellectually disabled but they are with the others.

One factor discussed by several parents was environmental barriers. Two special education schools had expanded and, within the past year moved, into newly built units that were not connected to the mainstream school. One of the mothers mentioned that the situation reminded her of the 1800's. She said that the parents had not been informed in advance about the plan to separate the self-contained classes from the regular school. Distressed about the development, she went to see the headmaster and told him:

I thought the whole thing was crazy... but he didn't think that it was strange at all. When I told him that it felt like being thrown out of the school, he just said, 'Well, that will have to be of your own

opinion,'[meaning that he doesn't agree] though I really did feel that it was terrible that they could do that.

Sara's mother viewed integration as something philosophically deeper than educational placement, she said:

I think of this as a way of viewing humanity. What kind of society do we want? Are some to be left out, or are all to be included in our society and our school? And if you feel that way, then it [inclusion] isn't strange. But, if you feel that some belong and others don't, then one makes several schools and divides them up in different groups.

Being a parent: personal competencies and reflections.

The comments from the participants suggested that having a child with intellectual impairments had a prolonged and challenging influence on their lives. Emma's mother, who has fought the headmaster and local politicians for an integrated placement (without enrolment), said that the process has been so trying that she has at times felt almost unable to cope. Caroline's mother said:

One should be a doctor, a psychologist, a social worker, and language pathologist all at once. You need to understand and know what your needs are, both in regard to yourself as a parent and what is best for your child. But, as I said, you need to

have a basis of simply knowing what your rights are. It might not be the handicap which is most problematic but everything else surrounding it.

Sara's mother, describing her experience and the personal competencies she thinks are needed said:

Ever since her birth it has been a continuous gnawing at all levels and fighting the whole time on some plane in order to explain, convince, motivate everybody and everything on all levels. But if you are strong-willed, then you will succeed...You need to be one of the most competent people that has ever walked in a pair of shoes. You need to be stubborn, you have to be very articulate and able to speak up for yourself in all situations, even when you are being neglected and are standing there by yourself. You have to be a good educator and teacher so that you know what level your child is on and what you should do next. You need to be a good lawyer so that you know all the laws and paragraphs, all the loopholes, and all the support you can get. And never give up, always, when one door closes, find another one, and then when that one closes, find a new one. It is difficult to be such a combination of people, and it is hard to have the energy to fight in all instances.

Discussion

This study provides a description of how seven mothers of children with intellectual impairments experience the school placement process; if they feel able to make a placement choice; and how they feel about their child's present educational placement. Generalising from this study must be done with caution and is restricted by several factors. First, this study is limited to the perspectives and experiences of seven mothers. Secondly, the results are based exclusively on statements from one interview; no further follow-up contacts were made with the mothers in order to ask them to clarify uncertainties derived from the interviews. For this reason, it is not always clear whether the mothers were knowledgeable regarding increased parental influence as specified by the SFS 1995:1249 law. Sara and Emma's mothers articulate being aware of their rights (not to enrol their child), but how this information was obtained was not addressed in the interview. It is possible that other mothers were aware of their rights but did not execute the right "not to enrol" because due to i.e. economic cutbacks, there was no guarantee of obtaining support from assistants, and the regular school had large classes. It is also unclear how the local schools interpreted the law. In Caroline's case it appears that "integrated placement" may not be an alternative offered by the municipality for a child enrolled in the special education school, and that the choice to attend a regular class may

only be attained through non-enrolment. However, as mentioned earlier, the local school obviously did not have the supports or resources needed to procure a adequate quality education within a regular class. In summary, if parents want their child to be integrated in a regular class, they must un-enrol their child, a strategy which leaves them at the mercy of the dwindling economy and resources in the local school. Once again, these interpretations must be interpreted with extreme caution as no follow-up contacts were made with either the mothers or the local school authorities to verify or clarify the previously mentioned postulations. Despite the above mentioned methodological limitations, the themes described in this paper reflect the feelings and experiences of the participating mothers and are therefore valuable for the field.

The analysis reveals that the mothers in this study have a relativistic approach considering both contextual factors and their child's idiosyncratic needs when exploring placement options. The special education school, with its small classes and specialised teachers, was perceived by the mothers as offering resources and supports which the regular school does not. Despite differences pertaining to enrolment and type of placement, both Sara and August's mothers felt that they had influenced their child's education and were satisfied with the instruction and social development of their child.

These findings are consistent with Erwin, Soodak et al. (in press), who maintain that the principle components of a well-functioning, parent-school relationship are that parents feel that their child is treated well, that school staff treat them (parents) with respect, and that they are viewed as significant resources in decision-making and planning. The findings in this study are also congruent with the Erwin et al. (1995) study which asserts that parents experience anxiety and frustration when they feel that their child is not attaining the accommodations he/she requires, or when they disagree with the professionals. Among, the sources of anxiety or frustration that parents in this study mentioned were placement options, lack of functional individual educational programs (IEP), and teachers who were not knowledgeable about their child's special education needs. One unanticipated finding from the present study was that within the last year (the interviews took place in 1997), special education schools were moved into units that were separate from the mainstream school. This situation angered and distressed the parents who felt that their children were being "pushed out," a fundamental question being; Is this a change that is occurring on a national level? Further studies are needed to determine the extent of and reasons why separate units are being built. In search for a solution to the question of how best practice can be aligned with policy Erwin and Soodak (1995)observed:

In an effort to create more supportive and effective educational environments for children, school districts must consider their policies regarding families...However, affording families consistent opportunity for meaningful involvement in their child's education will require restructuring of school systems. Parent input is only meaningful in a school system that values parents as partners...Hopefully parents will not have to 'stand up to the system,' but rather they will be seen as an integral and valued part of the system. (p.145)

Part of the discrepancy between national policy and day-to-day practice may be the result of vagueness regarding the intentions of the central government. Bill 1994/95:212 maintains that in order for parents to decide between the regular school and the special education school:

(T)he school has a dialog with them [the parents] and informs them of the different school alternatives. This information should include a description of the requirements that the different school alternatives place on the pupils, identify the requirements guardians are entitled to expect of the school and the school's resources for meeting the special needs of the pupil. *Guardians should also be informed that the regular school has fewer available resources for designing*

individualised instruction than the special education school...while, intellectually disabled children may not be enrolled in the special education school without the consent of their guardians, their guardians are not entitled to choose which class their child should be placed in (p. 16-17, my translation and cursive addition).

As described by the bill parental involvement implies, on the one hand, that parents need and should have more input in the school-placement process; on the other hand, parents are not permitted (when enrolled) to choose which class (reading, life-skill based, or integrated) their child should attend. This macrosystem paradox may also explain the findings in this study which suggest that in some municipalities the parents of children who are enrolled are not offered an "integrated placement"; instead the choice they are offered is between reading and life-skill classes. The content of the bill only marginally highlights the importance of parental input and the reason why parents perceive integration as an important alternative. The lack of these perspectives may be reflected in the fact that some municipalities, school administrators, and teachers do not appear to be aware of the humane and ideological concerns that underline the integration/inclusion school movement. The integration/inclusion movement postulates that it is not a question of passing an exam designed for the norm,

but, rather a matter of serving students with all abilities and disabilities in the regular classroom with the needed support (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997) regardless of whether or not they meet the regular curriculum standards (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). Ronny was removed from a regular class because it was clear that he could not pass the exams in Maths, Swedish, and English in fifth grade, despite the fact that he was socially included and his mother preferred the regular classroom placement. Even though the integration/inclusion movement is more related to human rights and social issues, such as belonging to a school and community, than to academic gains, learning can be enhanced in integrated settings, given the needed supports and resources (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). Despite the predominantly normative stance regarding the integration/segregation debate (Söder, 1999), the results from this study underscore the need for genuine options (attending a large class with inadequate support and/or passing a national exam is not a feasible option), flexible solutions, and a meaningful role for parents in the placement process.

The present study also agrees with Erwin et al. (1995) in so far as some parents express more frustration over the shortcomings of the system than their child's impairment. The present study supports Mattson's (1995) finding that as a rule parents are not included by the school in the goal-setting process. There are also doubts as

to whether there are written goal statements for all of the participating children, or whether teachers instruct according to the pupil's pace. The lack of IEPs and routines regarding goal setting appear to be especially frustrating when evaluation centres have made recommendations to parents which are not followed up in the schools. A discussion concerning the lack of interagency collaboration between parents, schools, evaluation, and/or habilitation centres is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the sharing of information and development of communication channels between agencies would undoubtedly ease the previously mentioned feelings of frustration. Mattson (1995) observes that teachers have difficulties defining objectives, planning, and evaluating. Roll-Pettersson (1999) found that a high percentage of teachers need more information on how to teach their pupil (57%, $n = 41$ teachers of 93 pupils), on how to write educational plans (41%, $n = 41$ teachers of 93 pupils), and that more time needs to be allocated to write them (61%, $n = 41$ teachers of 93 pupils). An example on what could be included in the goal-setting process can be found in the American Public Law Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997 (Heufner, 2000), which states that the IEP (Individual Education Program) which is both a meeting (parents must be included) and a document, includes a statement of present performance, measurable annual goals, measurable short-term

objectives, a statement of special education and related services, and evaluation procedures, i.e., how progress toward the annual goals should be measured. Further implications of the IDEA are that teachers will need to work cooperatively with parents as partners and that "dumping" a child with an impairment in a regular class without needed supports is "totally unacceptable" (see Heufner, 2000, citations p. 203). It is clear when analysing the data from the interviews that there is an ongoing interaction between contextual factors (type or lack of placement options) and individual characteristics (parents who are willing and able to defend their rights). Distal factors, such as paradoxes and vagueness in the law regarding parental involvement do have an effect on proximal settings (i.e. schools' and local politicians' interpretations of parental involvement regarding placement, the child fails national test, and interpretation of this event) and exert an impact on parents. For this reason, it is pertinent to suggest that law makers re-examine the content in the Education Act in regard to parental involvement and input. Following a change in macrosystem documents, researchers can then work with parents, local school authorities, schools, and other agencies (i.e. evaluation centres and professions in habilitation centres) to develop more explicit guidelines on how to enhance the development of parental involvement in both the education of the child and in the placement process. This will

undoubtedly also require restructuring exosystem variables, such as allocation of resources in municipalities and improving teacher and school administrator education within this area.

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Note:

- ¹ In this article "integrated placement" refers to enrolment in the special education school. Terms such as 'attend a regular class' or 'integrated' are used interchangeably, regardless of whether or not this involves enrolment in the special education school.

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