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Pupils' views on inclusion: moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools

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This study examined the views of 101 boys and girls aged 10–11 and 13–14 with statements of special educational needs for moderate learning difficulties. Questions centred on their experiences of school, teaching and learning in mainstream and special schools. The study is set in the context of the international move towards more inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream schools and the greater importance attached to the child's voice in decision-making in education. Most children expressed positive evaluations of their schools and the teaching they received, while a significant minority expressed mixed views. A significant proportion in the mainstream preferred learning support in withdrawal settings. While the majority in both settings preferred their current school, a significant minority in special school preferred to be in a mainstream setting. A notable emergent theme from the study was the high incidence of 'bullying' that was experienced. Though experienced in both settings, those in special schools experienced far more 'bullying' by children from other mainstream schools and from peers and outsiders in their neighbourhood. These findings are discussed in terms of the tensions or dilemmas about difference that were experienced and their implications for the move towards greater inclusion.

Introduction

Rationale

The inclusion of children and young people with disabilities and difficulties into mainstream schools is one of the central international policy issues in school education. While inclusive educational policies continue to generate intense debate, there is comparatively little systematic research on its many facets. One important facet of the inclusion question is children's own perspectives on their special educational provision. This article reports and discusses a recent research project which contributes to this field through examining the perspectives of children and young people who receive special education provision for their mild to moderate general learning difficulties, that are commonly called moderate learning difficulties (MLD).

This project examines the assumption that pupils' perspectives will reflect a tension between positive aspects (wanting and appreciating help) and negative

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aspects (wanting to avoid stigmatizing associations), whether in special schools, mainstream withdrawal or in-class supported placements. This underlying theoretical assumption is consistent with the results of earlier studies (Inner London Education Authority [ILEA], 1986; Lynas, 1986; Cheston, 1994; Padeliaadu & Zigmond, 1996; Lewis, 1995; Social and Community Planning Research [SCPR], 1996; Norwich, 1997). As argued more fully in previous work, this tension relates to positive and negative personal evaluations of 'difference', the positive aspects of receiving individually appropriate help with learning, and the negative aspects of experiencing stigma and devaluation. The project is, therefore, part of wider theory and research into 'difference dilemmas' in the field of disability in education (Norwich, 1993, 1996).

Policy Context

This research has significance for two linked areas of policy and practice concerning children and young people in this country. One is the move towards the greater inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream school. Developments in this country have been given greater prominence since the Labour Government came to power in 1997 with the SEN Green Paper (Department for Education and Employment [DFEE], 1997) and the consequent Programme of Action (DFEE, 1998). Since the introduction of the Education Act 1981, which set out the legislative principles for educating children with SEN in mainstream settings subject to certain limiting conditions, the trend has been to a decreasing percentage of school-aged children in special schools. Current estimates are that about 1.3% are in special schools in England (Norwich, 2002). Over 60% of all pupils with significant SEN, i.e. those with Statements, are now receiving their schooling in mainstream settings. Pupils who are still in special schools tend to be those with more and more severe difficulties, often those associated with more significant learning difficulties. One of the reasons for focusing this study on pupils with moderate general learning difficulties, or MLD, is that not only has this group constituted the largest grouping amongst those with Statements and in special schools (Audit Commission, 2002), but it is the area where local education authorities (LEAs) are moving forward with inclusive developments. If the proportion of pupils in special schools is to continue to decrease to 1% and below 1%, then pupils with mild to moderate general learning difficulties will need to be increasingly included in mainstream schools. In using the terms 'moderate general learning difficulties' and 'moderate learning difficulties', it is assumed that this is an administrative label (associated with Code of Practice procedures and more recently with government moves to define the areas of SEN more specifically (Department for Education and Skills [DFES], 2002)). There is no assumption that all pupils to whom it is applied administratively share common settings or learning characteristics.

The original SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education [DFE] 1994), which set out the procedures for identifying, assessing and providing for pupils with SEN in 1994, promoted practices which took account of children's views and feelings about their special provision. In the revised SEN Code (DFES, 2001), these

principles have been further emphasized. Recognizing the child's voice in education is part of a wider movement across various areas of social provision. The Children Act (1989), the current cornerstone of care and welfare legislation, for instance, recognizes that children's and young people's perspectives should be included in decisions about care. However, it has been noted that the enthusiasm for children and young people to give their views sometimes goes beyond their language and conceptual abilities, especially of those with severe or profound intellectual impairments (Felce, 2002). Policy imperatives can tend to assume the ease of eliciting views and feelings without questioning elicitation methods. These points suggest the need for some discussion about interviewing children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Research in eliciting perspectives

It is now widely recognized that there is a need for varying approaches to enable children and young people to contribute to and participate in decisions about education provision and individual education plans (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). For instance, various techniques based on pictorial representations are now used to communicate with children whose problems are within the autistic spectrum and for those who have verbal or written communication problems (Kirkbride, 1999). Information technology is also widely used to enable those with difficulties in physical writing to put their thoughts down through word processing (Detheridge & Detheridge, 1997). The growing practical interest in children's perspectives has also generated various methodologies for doing this (Gersch *et al.*, 1993; Council for Disabled Children [CDC], 1995; Jelly *et al.*, 2000).

Eliciting perspectives is not just a technical matter, it also involves complex ethical considerations. Seeking children's perspectives has been a growing trend over the 1990s. Several research studies, mostly small scale, have investigated children's perspectives with relevance to special education (for example, Sheldon, 1991; Caffyn & Millet, 1992; Cooper, 1993; Armstrong *et al.*, 1993; Wade & Moore, 1993; Whitaker, 1994; Norwich, 1997). More recently, researchers have been asking more specifically about the dynamics and processes involved in such enterprises (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Christensen & James, 2000; Scott, 2000). Some of the factors that have been considered include:

1. the child's and young person's competences and characteristics;
2. the questioner's competences and characteristics;
3. the purpose and use made of eliciting child and young person's views;
4. the setting and context: power, relationship and emotional factors;
5. ethical and human rights considerations.

Lewis and Lindsay (2000) bring together a range of contributors who examine various facets in depth. Competences in this field are cognitive, linguistic and physical, i.e. what children can understand, their receptive and expressive language abilities and their physical skills to provide adequate responses to questions and assessment tasks (Daniels & Jenkins, 2000).

The issue of eliciting reliable and valid information is crucial, and has been long identified as critical to the research process with children and adults. Two significant issues that have been identified are that of 'pleasing the interviewer' and 'presenting an ideal self' (Begley, 2000). Stalker (1998) and Grove *et al.* (2000) have highlighted the related tendency of some children to acquiesce to the suggestions of others. These issues are more complex with children than adults as children are in situations of even greater power differentials. Further, as children may find themselves in situations where the questioner might in fact be part of a problem for them, they may not be in an environment where they can be open in communication.

There is also a growing trend to treat children as participants in the research process, a paradigm approach whose ideal is to empower children and see them as the experts (Warren, 2000; Davis *et al.*, 2000). This is a move against this power differential, and is reinforced by the call for children to have a voice as an expression of their human rights. (Davie *et al.*, 1996).

Design and aims of the study

The study was designed to elicit the perspectives of a representative sample of boys and girls with mild to moderate general learning difficulties in one LEA towards the end of Key Stage 2 and during Key Stage 3 of their mainstream or special schooling. The focus was on their perceptions and evaluations of their educational provision, their self-perceptions and self-evaluations, and their responses to the terms and labels relevant to them. The specific aims of the study were:

1. to examine how children with MLD see their special provision;
2. to find out whether their views include positive and negative aspects;
3. to examine how children see themselves and the balance between positive and negative self-perceptions;
4. to explore their responses to the terms and labels used by others to describe them; and
5. to examine whether any of these perspectives vary according to type of special education placement, age or gender of pupils.

The findings reported in this study will be confined because of shortage of space to special provision, that is questions 1, 2 and 5. Findings relevant to questions 2 and 3 will be reported elsewhere.

Methods

Sampling

The project took place in a south-west county LEA, which was approached as it had a well-established tradition of inclusive practice. All pupils in the LEA who had Statements of SEN in which mild to moderate general learning difficulties was a main feature were identified. The term 'general learning difficulty' was taken as synonymous with moderate learning difficulties in this project. The LEA used the

Table 1a. Breakdown of sample: school by age and gender

	10	11	12	13	14	Total
Mainstream school boys	5	8	0	9	5	27
Mainstream school girls	7	5	0	5	7	24
Special school boys	8	5	1	4	8	26
Special school girls	6	6	0	3	9	24
Total	26	24	1	21	29	101

broad definition of learning difficulties based on the SEN Code of Practice (DFE, 1994). All pupils in the two age ranges, 10–11 years and 13–14 years, were then identified. The aim was to identify 50 pupils in each age range, with half being drawn from mainstream, and half from the four relevant LEA special schools.

Parents of pupils were invited through schools by letter to give permission for their children to take part in the interviews. Not all identified pupils actually took part: 27 mainstream and 9 special school children who were identified to meet age and gender criteria did not participate. Reasons for non-participation were varied and applied across both kinds of school: parental refusal; not meeting the criteria of moderate learning difficulties; judged by their teacher/s as unable to respond appropriately to the task; and permission slips not returned. Pupils were then asked whether they wanted to be involved and whether the interview could be recorded. Their right to withdraw was explained in clear terms. It can be assumed that their understanding of their right to withdraw or influence the interview process was clear to at least some of them, by the fact that one did not want their interview recorded and one pupil did not want to participate.

The final research sample of mainstream pupils was distributed amongst 33 schools (51 children altogether), of whom 8 had placements in designated resource bases (units) in 4 of these mainstream schools. For the special school pupils, 24 had placements in two generic special schools, and 26 were in special schools designated for children with MLD. The pupils from each of the four combinations of school and age range were also selected to keep a balance between boys and girls, and between rural and urban settings, as far as was possible (see Tables 1a and 1b).

No attempt was made to match the pupils in the mainstream and special schools in terms of kinds and degrees of learning difficulties for several reasons. Those in special school were expected to have more severe difficulties, which in fact proved to be the case. Details of difficulties were recorded from each pupil's current

Table 1b. Kind of school by setting

	Urban setting	Rural setting
Mainstream schools	22	29
Special schools	26	24

Table 2. Range of difficulties in learning in special and mainstream schools

	Mainstream	Special	Total
MLD only	12	4	16
MLD + LCD	19	13	32
MLD + Motor	4	5	9
MLD + EBD	5	2	7
MLD + LCD + Motor	6	9	15
MLD + LCD + Sensory	2	4	6
MLD + EBD + Motor	1	3	4
MLD + LCD + EBD	1	2	3
MLD + LCD + Epilepsy	0	2	2
MLD + Sensory	2	0	2
MLD + LCD + Autism	0	1	1
MLD + Motor + Epilepsy	0	1	1
MLD + Sensory + EBD	0	1	1
MLD + Motor + Sensory + LCD	0	1	1
MLD + Motor + Sensory	0	1	1
MLD + Motor + LCD + EBD	0	1	1

(MLD—difficulty in acquiring basic educational skills; LCD—language and communication difficulty; EBD—emotional and behaviour difficulty; Motor—motor impairment; Sensory—visual or hearing impairment).

Statement, and their most recent National Curriculum attainment levels in mathematics and English were also collected. The recency of the issuing of Statements varied, as would be expected given the age range of the pupils and the fact that some Statements were issued when the children were six years old and even some within the last year. Nevertheless, this data enabled a comparison to be made between the nature and severity of difficulties of the samples in each school setting. Table 2 shows the differences and highlights the combination of difficulties additional to MLD.

Of all the sample, more pupils were recorded as having a language and communication difficulty (LCD) with MLD than having MLD alone; 60% in this group. It is clear that pupils in special schools have more additional areas of difficulties, as summarized in Table 3. This shows that 75% of pupils with MLD only were in mainstream schools, while 25% were in special schools. On the other hand, of pupils with MLD plus two other areas of difficulties, 52% were in special schools while only 20% were in mainstream schools.

Analysis of National Curriculum attainment levels across schools, as assessed by teachers, again highlighted the differences between school type. For example, pupils in special schools showed greater percentages below level 1:

- for English, 34% in special and 22% in mainstream school;
- for mathematics, 30% in special and 12% in mainstream school; and
- for science, 28% in special and 10% in mainstream school.

Conversely, the higher attainment levels 3 and 4 were found more in the mainstream

Table 3. Number of additional areas of difficulty by school

	Mainstream	Special	Total
MLD only	12 75%	4 25%	16
MLD + 1	19 49%	20 51%	39
MLD + 2	10 29%	24 71%	34
MLD + 3	0 0%	2 100%	2

Chi-squared = 13.4, $df = 3$, $p < .004$.

than special schools sample. It is to be noted that there were no attainment scores for between 40 and 60% of pupils levels (missing data, dis-application and insufficient evidence to decide on level).

Research approach

Semi-structured interviews were used as this enabled a full and in-depth exploration of perspectives expressed by pupils in their own terms. A common interview framework (see Appendix I) was designed to cover the various aspects of pupil perspectives that related to the research questions. Specific questions were tailored to the circumstances and placement of the pupil. Interviews did include a question about their current and past teachers and schools. Pupils were told that their replies were anonymous and that any report based on the interviews would not reveal these details. Teachers in the school were aware of and accepted the focus of these questions.

Time taken for each interview varied according to the child's interest and abilities, as well as occasionally for other practical considerations. Most children were able to engage in the interview process, with most interviews taking between three-quarters and one hour. A small minority of pupils took less than half an hour, and a number of children took substantially more than an hour. On average, older children provided more in-depth responses than younger children, though not exclusively so. Further, children from mainstream schools tended to be able to engage better in the interviews, though again, not exclusively so.

One interviewer conducted all interviews and, as far as possible, some time was spent in developing rapport between interviewer and child. The interviewer also monitored the child's concentration and engagement. The semi-structured open-question approach enabled an informal style and a wide-ranging exploration of ideas. This approach was well suited to the research purposes and was sensitive to potentially difficult areas.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed in full and content analysed in terms of emergent categories and themes, on one hand, and the research questions, on the other. Three transcripts were also coded by a second person to check for coding reliability; agreements were found in over 90% of the codes used. Successive levels of analysis were conducted, making use of the qualitative data analysis computer programme NUD-IST to sort the data. From this, frequencies of references under the various broad categories were identified and compared across school, age and gender differences in the sample. Excerpts from the transcripts that exemplified various perspectives under these categories were also recorded. Where numerical differences in frequencies appeared substantial (greater than 10% difference), cross tabulations and statistical testing by chisquare was done.

Findings

The findings will be presented in terms of pupil perspectives of their special provision in mainstream and special school settings. Comments will be made where there are age and gender differences. Where reference is made to significance in the findings, this is where probability levels were less than $p < .05$ using a chi-squared test. Findings in relation to the emergent theme of 'bullying' will also be reported as these relate especially to the perspectives of those pupils in special schools. The findings are reported in terms of clear-cut categories, such as, positive and negative, and enough and not enough, but also in terms of a mixed category. This represents pupil responses where there were references both to positive and negative, or enough and not enough within the interview. Where percentages of the overall sample are quoted, it can be assumed that the percentage is very close to the actual numbers, as the total sample was 101. Where the percentages are of subsamples, e.g. special school pupils or special school boys, then percentages are given with actual numbers in brackets or after slash.

1. Perspectives on special education provision

Current feelings for school

The majority of pupils (65%/66) expressed mainly positive feelings for their current school, with 31% (32) expressing mixed feelings (positive and negative) and only 4% (4) mainly negative feelings. There was no difference in feelings between the primary and secondary aged pupils. While there was no difference between special school boys and girls, there was a tendency for mainstream boys to have more mainly positive feelings and for mainstream girls to have more mixed feelings (chi-square = 6.5, $df = 2$, $p < .04$).

Table 4. What they found hard to learn: frequencies and percentages

	Mainstream		Special		% diff.
	/51	%	/50	%	
English/literacy	48	94	38	76	18
Mathematics/numeracy	31	61	23	46	15
Other subjects	28	55	13	26	29
Creative	8	16	5	10	6
Understanding	7	14	3	6	8
Physical*	3	6	4	8	-2

(*Some children pointed out that their learning difficulties were due to factors such as hearing, physical problems affecting their writing.)

Evaluation of present teacher

The majority of pupils (55%/56) were mainly positive in their evaluation of their current teacher/s while 45% (46) were mixed (positive and negative). There were no pupils who were mainly negative in their evaluation. Nor were there differences across school, age or gender.

Hard and easy to learn

Mathematics/numeracy and English/literacy were hardest to learn, with English/literacy being particularly highlighted by mainstream children (see Table 4). All pupils also made fewer references to areas which they found easy than to those they found hard to learn (see Table 5). They also did not differentiate as much between areas which were easy to learn (20–39%/11–20 in mainstream and 6–36%/3–18 in special) as they did between areas that were difficult to learn (6–94%/3–48 in mainstream and 8–76%/4–38 in special). Other subjects were found to be easier than mathematics and English for both school groups

Table 5. What they found easy to learn: frequencies and percentages

	Mainstream		Special		% diff.
	/51	%	/50	%	
Other subjects	20	39	18	36	3
English/literacy	18	35	17	34	1
Mathematics/numeracy	18	35	17	34	1
Creative	15	29	9	18	11
Physical	10	20	3	6	14

Help with learning

More pupils overall thought that they had enough help currently with their learning (53%/54) than not enough help (26%/27). This was an overall judgement which included different areas of learning and sometimes different teachers. Given this diversity of contexts, some mixed judgement would be expected. We found 21% (22) of pupils who made mixed judgements. There were no significant differences in these levels of perceived help between category groups. For example, a secondary mainstream girl who felt she did not get enough help said:

I actually got special needs but I don't go ... I actually need help with all my lessons, but I don't get it.

Waiting for help with learning in class

Though only half the sample indicated their views about waiting, more pupils reported not waiting for help (42%/42) than having to wait (33%/33). About a quarter of the sample reported that they sometimes waited (25%/25). There were no significant differences between pupils in mainstream and special schools or between boys and girls. However, there were significant differences between the primary and secondary boys, but not for the girls. Secondary boys reported waiting for help more than primary boys, while primary boys reported not waiting more than secondary boys. This tended to happen more in mainstream than special schools, but numbers were too small to test this tendency.

Sources of help

Pupils reported receiving more help with their learning overall from teaching assistants (45%/44) than teachers (30%/30). There were no significant differences in the degree of help from assistants and teachers between mainstream and special schools. However, mainstream boys reported much less help from their teachers than special school boys. This is consistent with the tendency, reported above, for mainstream boys to report waiting more for help. Though friends as helpers were also mentioned by 15% (15) of pupils overall, this conceals a significant difference: 25% (13) of mainstream pupils compared to only 4% (2) of special school pupils reported receiving help from friends. For example, one mainstream secondary girl reported:

My friends are really good towards me, they know that I've got difficulties so if ever I need anythin' or spelling they can help me all the time.

A mainstream primary girl reported:

Hum, they're kind, hum they stand up for me, and they help me, and they tell also the people off not to call me names.

Learning support in mainstream: available and preferred

Mainstream pupils reported a range of learning support which they had received or were receiving. Over 80% reported both withdrawal (84%/43) and in-class support (86%/44). Group work (66%/34) and one-to-one work (59%/31) were also frequently reported compared to support for most subject areas (8%/4) and the teaching assistant supporting at their table (22%/11). Secondary-aged pupils reported more withdrawal and group work, while primary-aged pupils reported more in-class support and teaching assistants supporting at the table.

Preferences for support showed a wide variation that reflected some age and gender differences: 40% (20) preferred mainly withdrawal; 33% (17) in-class support; while 30% (15) preferred a mix of the two. There were no age and gender differences for those preferring a mix. However, withdrawal and in-class support were preferred much less by secondary boys than primary boys. It seems that secondary boys preferred neither kind of support.

Reasons given for preferring withdrawal were in the following order: better quality support (47%/24); less noise and appropriate and better work (29%/15); more fun (24%/12); less distraction (22%/11); more attention (20%/10); less bullying (12%/6); and being with friends (8%/4). The fewer negatives about withdrawal were: boring without friends (14%/7); and boring and work too hard (8%/4). There were fewer reasons given for preferring in-class support: likes being with teacher and friends (14%/7); teaching as good as withdrawal (10%/5); being with friends (6%/3); not missing out/getting the same as everyone else (4%/2). For example, a mainstream primary girl who did not like in-class support said:

Well people do take the mickey if you've got someone with you.

Q: How does that feel?

Just feels terrible.

A mainstream primary boy, who did not like being in a large class said:

In year 5 there's only say you'd have this massive room and you'd be like and there'd be a maths lesson in there or an English lesson and you'd have all these kids chatting an' all that and you couldn't really think an' all that.

A mainstream secondary girl, who expresses mixed views about in class and withdrawal, said:

[When the assistant comes to give me help] ... Well it makes me feel that it's only just me that needs the help and it's no one else in the room that needs help it's just me—'cos like she comes up to us, and that lot, it's like why is it me?

Q: So why is that bad for you?

Because it makes me look bad. 'cos when she comes up to me and I tell her to go away they start laughin' and they start to taking the mick out of me and fings like, like tha'. That's when it all starts up when she comes up to me, all the time they start.

Q: It sounds as though it makes you feel different, sticking out?

All the time. I don't really mind as long as I get a little bit of help I don't really mind.

Table 6. Pupils preferring present and other schools

	Present school	Mainstream school	Special school	Do not know /not mind	Total
Mainstream Pupils	33 (65%)	13 (25%)	1 (2%)	4 (8%)	51
Special pupils	27 (54%)	18 (36%)	1* (2%)	4 (8%)	50
	60 (59%)	31 (31%)	2 (2%)	8 (8%)	101

*Prefers mainstream—special school link scheme.

I don't mind outside the class as long as it's not for the whole lessons because I like being in with my mates. I don't like getting taken out because it makes me feel like I'm different towards the others.

Mainstream pupils' views of special school

Only 7 of the 51 or 14% of mainstream pupils had been at a special school at some stage in their schooling. However, 41% (21) overall knew someone at a special school. This was significantly more so for secondary (58%/15) than primary pupils (24%/6). About two-thirds of the mainstream pupils (63%/32) expressed evaluations of special schools. These were mostly positive views (53%/27) compared with mixed (28%/14) and negative views (20%/10). Though there was a tendency for girls to be more positive and boys more negative about special schools, this was not a statistically significant difference. Similarly, secondary pupils were more negative and primary pupils more positive, but not significantly so.

Special school pupils' views of mainstream schools

By contrast, 37 of the 50 or 74% of the special school pupils had had mainstream school experience. This was slightly more so for girls than boys, but there was no difference between primary and secondary pupils. Most of these pupils (62%/31) expressed evaluations of mainstream schools, mostly a mix of positive and negative views (48%/24). Some 36% (18) expressed mainly negative views while only 16% expressed mainly positive views. There were no differences between boys and girls or between primary and secondary pupils.

School preferences

Generally, pupils tended to prefer their present school to any other (59%) (see Table 6). However, only one pupil (2%) in mainstream preferred a special school, whilst 18 (36%) in special school preferred a mainstream school. Focusing only on the special school group, it was found that the tendency to prefer their present special school (54%/27) was mainly found in the primary-aged pupils. There was a significant tendency for secondary special school pupils to prefer a mainstream school (53%/13 compared to 20%/5 in primary pupils: chi-squared = 7.3, df = 2, *p*

<.03). There is a similar tendency for special school boys to prefer mainstream school compared to special school girls (54%/14 compared to 21%/5; chi-squared = 8.5, $df = 2, p < .01$).

The following are some representative views on special schools. For example, a secondary mainstream girl, whose sister went to special school, said:

'Cause when I went to the shop one time with my friend, I heard someone talk to the other person said, [that special schools] are a bit stupid, it's got loads of dumb people there, and all that kind of stuff.

A secondary special school boy said:

I don't like that, it's when, you're not a baby and you're 14, you know, 14, if you're in a mainstream school then you'll be treated like an adult, you would more or less have the same privileges as, umm, be treated the same as, you know ... The teachers always treating me like babies in the school when you're not. People out of school calling you names, if, 'cause, if they find out about your school and being nasty to you.

A mainstream primary girl, who had been at a special school, said:

Because it helps children with, who can't, like [those two boys] with their reading and writing and stuff and it will give more encouragement to them. Well they just help you. They have like, help, more helpers and stuff. It was all right, it was perfect. Yeah, used to have good times there.

Q: What did you particularly like about this special school?

Umm like when it was my birthday they made a cake for me. They teach me really good there, they was helping me a lot an' that.

A special school secondary girl said:

Yeah because ... our teacher doesn't actually mind us ... takin' our time on it ... and that so ... [Feel] Quite happy because I feel I'm not being rushed and I don't miss half of it.

Q: When you felt you were being rushed in the other school, how did that actually make you feel inside?

Really, really horrible 'cause I thought I was really missin' out on lessons and that ... not keepin' up with them all and that.

A special school primary girl, with negative experiences of mainstream school, said:

I felt quite lonely.

Q: Why do you think you felt quite lonely?

Because most of the children wanted to play by themselves with other children who've been ... who ... who've been in that class for quite a long time, that means that ... that I couldn't really get on with any of the other people.

Another special school secondary girl with mainstream experiences, said:

I liked it there, but there was one teacher there who wasn't very nice and I don't think he liked me much. ... He read my stuff out to the whole class and I felt like he was

teasing me and I was getting all upset, because I knew that I couldn't read or spell, and he knew that I couldn't and he read it out to the whole class.

2. Name calling and 'bullying'

Incidence and form

Pupils reported experiencing a range of interactions which they called 'name calling' and in some cases 'bullying'. We categorized these accounts into types of 'bullying'—physical, verbal (name calling, labelling) and teasing (similar to verbal but presented as fun or humorous) and a mix of the three forms. We found that overall 83% (84) of the sample experienced some form of 'bullying'. A mixture of types was experienced by 68% (69), mainly verbal by 24% (25), mainly physical by 5% (6) and mainly teasing by 3% (3). There were no significant differences in the overall level or percentages of forms across differences in gender, age or kind of school.

'Bullying' related to learning difficulties

Examples of 'bullying' relating to learning difficulties were described by 49% (49) of pupils. This degree of learning difficulties-related 'bullying' did not, however, differ significantly depending on gender, age or school.

A special school girl who had been previously in a mainstream school said:

I was picked on more ... because I couldn't read ... I'm not sure ... they call me thick, thick ... um dumb.

A secondary mainstream school boy said:

The fact that I can't, that what my mind is thinking, my hand won't write down neat or fast enough ... it doesn't really bother me that my writing isn't as neat or organised as anyone else, but it does sometimes get to me when I've just been bullied and I write something I can get ...

I can read fine and things like that, but my spelling and my writing are two of my main problems. My spelling has got a lot better in recent years but I still have the same unintelligible scrawl that I use, ... it's really frustrating. It's sometimes almost as bad as the bullying. When I feel I can just snap my pencil in half because it is just so frustrating.

Feelings about 'bullying'

Feelings about 'bullying' were reported by 77% (78) of those reporting 'bullying'. Most of these pupils (56%/43) reported some kind of mixed negative response (upset, hurt and withdrawn) and neutral response (ignoring it, not being bothered, keeping calm, or telling the teacher). Upset, hurt and withdrawn responses were reported by 36% (28), with 5% (4) reporting frustrated and angry responses. Only 3% (2) reported mainly neutral responses. There were no significant differences in feelings about 'bullying' for differences in gender, age or kind of school. For example, a secondary mainstream girl said:

My friends call special school children brainless and I hit them for saying that. It's not their fault they need help, is it? It's hurtin' for them, 'cause it's not their fault you're not good at the stuff.

A secondary mainstream boy reported:

Well, I generally feel very angry ... and there are times where I get so angry and I'll just bottle it up and I just don't want to walk behind them and hit them in the head ... that is what happened at my old school, I ended up hurting someone who was not anything to do with the problem ... who just happened to get in the way accidentally. So that's what I am scared of happening here, so I generally bottle it up and ... I get sometimes visions when I'm sleeping of umm me doing quite horrific things to them.

Source of 'bullying': pupils in own school

About half of the pupils (52%) in the whole sample reported some 'bullying' by pupils in their own school. Differences were found when taking account of gender, age and school together. Mainstream primary girls reported significantly more in-school 'bullying' than special school primary girls (83%/10 compared with 42%/5), while there were no such differences between mainstream and special school primary boys. By contrast, mainstream secondary boys reported less in-school 'bullying' than special school secondary boys (17%/2 compared with 70%/8), while there were no such differences between mainstream secondary girls and special school secondary girls.

Sources of 'bullying': pupils from other mainstream schools

Pupils in both mainstream and special school reported 'bullying' by pupils from other mainstream schools. There were very few references to 'bullying' by pupils from other special schools. Special school pupils reported significantly more 'bullying' overall than mainstream pupils by other mainstream pupils (30%/15 compared to 12%/6; chi-squared = 5.1, $df = 1$, $p < .02$). Though this tendency was found for both primary and secondary special school pupils, it was significant only for primary special school pupils.

Sources of 'bullying': neighbours and peers outside school

Pupils in special schools reported significantly more 'bullying' by neighbours and peers outside school than mainstream pupils (48%/24 compared with 4%/2); chi-squared = 25.7, $df = 1$, $p < .000$). This difference was significant for both primary and secondary special school pupils, though more so for primary pupils. There were no differences between boys and girls. For example, a primary special school boy said:

'Cause when I came to this school ... when I went home they would laugh at me and say 'Oh [he] goes to [the special school]', like [our mainstream] school's better than [that special school], 'cause that school is even worse. This school's fun and that

school down there, 'cause they were horrible when I went down there, they say 'you smell' and that.

A secondary special school girl said:

I don't go out often 'cause, you know ... I don't have any much friends because, you know, I'm from [a special school]—they don't like people ... So if I'm moving to that school ... you know, you know people will start, you know, people don't like me don't go to that school ...

Q: Why do people not like special school people then?

I do know, they just think they're thick or somethin' ... [My sister, who goes to mainstream] dun't say horrible things about my school. Sometimes she's in the right mood, she say nice things about my school. If somebody winds her up, you know, she says horrible things about my school.

Discussion and conclusions

The nature of MLD

The characteristics of the sample constitute one of the notable findings of this research project. Most pupils were shown to have one or more associated areas of difficulty in addition to the defining mild to moderate general learning difficulty. Though this association with other areas of difficulties is widely recognized (Crowther *et al.*, 1998), this study shows the extent of these associations in a representative sample of pupils identified in an LEA. The most frequent subgroup was moderate learning difficulty combined with a language and communication difficulty, a greater number than those with MLD alone. The sample also illustrated the extent to which special school pupils with MLD had more associated difficulties. This significant difference in the percentage of pupils with one to three additional difficulties in special school pupils was consistent with their lower National Curriculum attainment levels in the core subjects. This sample illustrates two important points. The first is that inclusion is progressing for children with less complex and severe difficulties. This leaves special schools with pupils who have more complex and severe difficulties, even in the area of MLD, which is considered to be a less severe form of learning difficulties. Secondly, the characteristics of the sample reinforce the need for a more complex dimensional model of difficulties in learning and show the inadequacy of a simple categorical approach. A child's difficulties can be identified at the same time as being along several dimensions, such as the four-dimensional model (cognition and learning, language and communication, sensory and motor, and emotional, social and behavioural) proposed in the revised SEN Code of Practice (DFES, 2001).

Perspectives on provision

Consistent with the initial assumptions, pupils' perspectives on their special educational provision showed a notable degree of contrary evaluations. The majority expressed mainly positive evaluations of their present schools and teachers in

mainstream and special school, while a significant minority expressed mixed evaluations. Mainly negative evaluations were low or non-existent. Perspectives on whether they received enough help with their learning were consistent with judgements about whether they had to wait for help. Most pupils believed that they received enough help and did not have to wait for help. However, a quarter believed that they did not receive enough help, while a third believed that they had to wait for help with learning. A slightly lower proportion was mixed about receiving enough help and having to wait for help. It was also found that pupils reported receiving more help from teaching assistants than from their teachers, and more from these adults than from their peers. This finding about the central role of teaching assistants reinforces inspection and other observations about the critical role of assistants in the development of more inclusive schooling (Balshaw, 1999).

Mainstream pupils, few of whom had special school experiences, had mostly positive views about special schools. Mainly negative views were held by about 1 in 5, with slightly more, at about 1 in 4, holding mixed views. This was different for special school pupils, where the majority had had mainstream school experiences. For them, only about 1 in 6 had mainly positive views of mainstream schools, whereas about half had mixed views, with about 1 in 3 having mainly negative views. This difference could be due to special school pupils' 'bad' experiences in the mainstream, and mainstream pupils' lack of experience of special schools.

Mainstream pupils reported receiving learning support mostly in withdrawal settings and in class. Small group and individual support were also reported by more than half. Their preferences were roughly similar across the three options of withdrawal, in class and a mix. However, more reasons were given for withdrawal. Reference to the quality of teaching, less distraction and less 'bullying' are notable, as were the very few references to missing opportunities through withdrawal. These findings are consistent with what has been found in other countries (Padeliadu & Zigmund, 1996). They indicate that taking account of the pupils' voice on learning support does not necessarily support a system of teaching which has abandoned withdrawal teaching.

As shown in previous research (for example, Lewis, 1995), most pupils (59% overall) preferred their current school to any other. However, only one of the 51 mainstream pupils preferred to go to a special school, while 18 of the 50 special school pupils preferred to go to a mainstream school. It is especially notable that despite this trend to prefer current provision, secondary special school boys preferred to be in the mainstream more than primary pupils or special school girls.

Another important finding of this study was the relatively low independent impact of age and gender or school differences on these perspectives on special provision. There was only one significant school difference: mainstream pupils reported much more help with learning by their peers than special school pupils did. There was only one significant age difference: the 13–14-year-old pupils reported more withdrawal learning support and the 10–11-year-olds more in-class support. There were no gender differences.

However, there were more interactions between these factors, though still few overall. Several interactions suggested that *mainstream boys* felt they were getting less

help. This is shown in the findings that mainstream secondary boys reported waiting for help more than mainstream primary boys, and both reported waiting more than special school pupils. This is consistent with mainstream boys reporting that they received less help than special school boys. But, although mainstream boys felt they were getting less help in class, they were more positive about being in mainstream school than mainstream girls.

This differential evaluation by mainstream boys of class and school is interesting in the context of special school boys' greater preferences for being in the mainstream compared to girls. It could reflect a greater sensitivity to and involvement by boys in where they are at school—mainstream rather than special school—than in their learning and teaching in class. Another interaction is consistent with this interpretation when applied to secondary boys. Secondary boys in mainstream preferred withdrawal and in-class learning support less than primary boys. This suggests a reluctance to accept any of the current forms of learning support. This sensitivity is consistent with another finding in this study (but not reported in this article) that secondary pupils tended to deny or minimize their learning difficulties more than primary pupils.

'Bullying'

The most interesting emergent finding was the high level of 'bullying' experienced irrespective of gender, age or school placement. About half the pupils reported that this 'bullying' was related to their learning difficulties. Earlier research has shown the links between being bullied and having learning difficulties (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Farrell, 1997). It is difficult to know whether this level of 'bullying' is higher or lower than for a sample of pupils not designated as having MLD. Studies reviewed by Best (2002) do not provide appropriate reference points for comparisons. However, there is little current research that links bullying to inclusion and our findings identify experiences which have been associated in previous decades with the stigma of receiving special education. 'Bullying' has been referred to in inverted commas because it is reported without corroborating evidence and covers some behaviour which is usually not classed as bullying, e.g. 'teasing in fun'. The term is used generically to cover various forms—physical, verbal and teasing—with most pupils reporting a mix of forms. Most pupils reported responding to 'bullying' with a mixture of hurt and neutrality, but a large minority responded with upset and anger, again with no gender, age or school differences.

The perpetrators of 'bullying' were identified as pupils in their own schools, as pupils from other mainstream schools and as neighbours and peers outside school. About half of the pupils reported 'bullying' in their own school, with differences between mainstream and special school depending on age and gender. Special school pupils overall reported more 'bullying' than mainstream pupils by pupils from other mainstream schools and by neighbours and outside peers. There was considerably more 'bullying' of special school pupils (48%) than mainstream pupils (4%) by neighbours and outside peers. These findings show the pervasiveness of 'bullying'

but also that special school pupils experience more 'bullying' from peers outside their schools, and that this is related to their going to special schools.

Concluding comments

This study was designed to achieve a balance between the breadth of sample and the depth of qualitative data. This was judged to have been successful but at the cost of not interacting with these children for more than one interview session. The reliability and validity of data could not be judged against other data sources or through repeat interviewing over time. Nevertheless, internal consistency of interview accounts was high when areas were covered by different questions, and the level and depth of engagement by many of the children indicated that what was reported reflected their genuine perspectives. Pupils' perspectives were analysed in terms of age, gender and broad school placement. In this study we have not analysed the variation of perspectives in terms of the different kinds of mainstream placements (unit versus individual placement with support) nor by kind of special school (MLD designated v. generic special school). Nor did we analyse in terms of the recency of the issuing of Statements, which might also account for some variation in perspectives. These analyses will have to be done and reported in a future article.

These findings also only represent children from one LEA. The final sample also represented 74% of those identified in the random sampling from the LEA register of those with moderate general learning difficulties. It is difficult to know how this might have affected the reported findings, as some reasons for non participation were parental refusal and some were based on judgements about capabilities to respond to the interview process. It is clear that future research is required to check conclusions from other samples through other related methods.

Nevertheless, the findings have significant educational implications for the theory, policy and practice of inclusion. Theoretically, the findings show contrary or mixed perspectives on special educational provision, whether this is in mainstream or special schools. Most of the pupils are positive about their current provision and teachers, report getting enough help, and not waiting for help, though a significant minority express mixed evaluations. Yet, there is a high incidence of reported name calling, teasing and physical 'bullying'. These perspectives, therefore, reflect positive and negative evaluations arising from their 'difference' from other pupils. Thus, many of these pupils experience some tensions over their differences, in keeping with theory about the tensions or dilemmas arising from difference. This article reports data which have been analysed across the sample of 101 pupils. Further analyses of individual cases are relevant to testing for tensions about their 'differences' that were experienced, but these cannot be reported in this article.

The findings can be interpreted as supportive, on balance, of the move towards greater mainstream school inclusion for those pupils with moderate learning difficulties currently in special schools. This conclusion is on balance as there are some contrary indications, as would be expected from the dilemmatic perspective. It is important to be clear about what we are referring to, because inclusion is a complex and poorly defined concept. For the purpose of this discussion, inclusion

will be taken to mean moving special school pupils with significant difficulties into mainstream schools and retaining them there. Placement alone, is, however, not sufficient. Inclusion also involves adapting the mainstream school to be more accommodating of children with significant difficulties (physical and curriculum adaptations and social acceptance). The findings show a clear preference by a significant number of the special school pupils, though not all, for mainstream school. These pupils are just as likely to receive the same sort of support in mainstream as others with MLD already there. They might also receive the benefits of more help from their peers and friends, as their mainstream counterparts already do. As regards 'bullying', mainstream pupils did not report more in-school bullying overall than special school pupils. On the contrary, mainstream pupils received significantly less 'bullying' than special school pupils from other mainstream school pupils or from neighbours and outsiders. In drawing these conclusions from this study, we need to be aware that those in the special school sample had more severe and complex needs and this might call into question the appropriateness of current mainstream learning support to their needs.

The findings also show that a high proportion of mainstream pupils prefer learning support in withdrawal settings, either as the main form of support or mixed with some in-class support. This underlies the distinction between inclusive schools and inclusive classrooms. If inclusive schooling and teaching is taken to mean full-time mainstream class placement, then this will be inconsistent with the child's voice on these matters in many cases. This point is relevant to including special school pupils who have more severe and mixed difficulties in learning into the mainstream. They might also be expected to prefer some learning support in withdrawal settings; perhaps even more so than the already included mainstream pupils.

The findings also make a contribution by showing how taking account of the perspectives of pupils can inform policy and practice. Professionals at all levels of the educational system need to be aware of the contribution which can come from listening to such perspectives in practical decision-making, as advocated in the revised SEN Code of Practice (DFES, 2001). We have not addressed in this research the more basic question about whether the child's voice should be the determining factor in education decision-making. Whatever position is taken on this matter, it is clear that children's perspectives are crucial for such decision-making. This calls for more realism and effort in finding ways of eliciting their perspectives.

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Appendix I. Common framework for interview schedules

I. Perspectives on special provision

1. What kind of special education provision currently receiving
2. Reasons for receiving support or withdrawal
3. Who was involved in decision about support or withdrawal
4. Past experience before receiving special provision (if relevant)
5. What they do in special class/school, withdrawal or in-class support
6. Evaluation of special provision
 - (i) direct questions about own perspectives on positive and negative aspects
 - (ii) indirect questions about how key others evaluate provision
7. Perspectives on acceptability of different special education placement

II. Self-perceptions

1. Dyadic comparison of self with key others
2. Change in self over time. Possible selves

III. Labels

1. How they describe themselves to others
2. How their parents/carers/teachers/others describe them
3. Personal feelings about these labels
4. Awareness of other labels used
5. Personal feelings about these labels