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To cite this article: Priya Lalvani (2013) Land of misfit toys: Mothers' perceptions of educational environments for their children with Down syndrome, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17:5, 435-448, DOI: [10.1080/13603116.2012.683047](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.683047)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.683047>



Published online: 28 May 2012.



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Land of misfit toys: Mothers' perceptions of educational environments for their children with Down syndrome

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(Received 15 December 2010; final version received 1 April 2012)

In this qualitative study, 19 mothers discussed the education of their children with Down syndrome. Mothers reflected on their expectations and perceptions of different educational environments, focussing particularly on their understanding of inclusive education. The findings suggest that mothers' beliefs and decisions related to the education of their children with Down syndrome were embedded in culturally constructed notions of normalcy and stigma. Their support for particular educational programmes was inextricably linked with their understanding of the sociocultural meaning of Down syndrome. Findings revealed the existence of institutional resistance to inclusive education as well as dominant educational discourses that positioned students with Down syndrome as *other* and identified segregated learning environments as most appropriate for these students.

Keywords: inclusive education; disability studies; down syndrome; parents' beliefs; special education; children with disabilities

Introduction

In the USA, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 opened the doors for students with disabilities to receive public education in the *least restrictive environment*. This meant that students with disabilities would be entitled to be educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. As a result of this landmark legislative mandate currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, many students with disabilities now receive specialised instruction within general education settings, which refers to environments in which nondisabled students learn general education curricula. Although this practice, commonly referred to as inclusive education (or simply 'inclusion'), has been elevated to dominant education discourse in the US, few issues engender as much controversy and debate as the movement to educate all students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Kavale and Forness 2000; Winzer 2000). Situating the practice in vastly different philosophical perspectives, some scholars view it as one option on a continuum of educational placements, others as general education reform (Kavale and Forness 2000). There has also emerged a body of scholarship in the US and in the international arena which posit that inclusive education is less about disability than it is about democratic educational practices for all groups of students and that frame

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inclusive practices in the context of social justice (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Slee 2004). The author's definition of inclusive education is consistent with this latter conceptual framework.

Research literature points to numerous benefits of inclusive education, indicating that the academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities who are educated in general education classrooms are better than for comparable students educated in non-inclusive, segregated classrooms (Cole, Waldron, and Majd 2004; Freeman and Alkin 2000; Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas 2002). Inclusive education also presents increased opportunities for interaction between students with and without disabilities, which may have positive developmental implications for both groups of students (Fisher and Meyer 2002; Peck et al. 2004; Stevens and Slavin 1995). Indeed, from the standpoint of sociocultural theory, cognitive development occurs through a dynamic process of children's interpersonal interactions; higher mental functions emerge through children's engagement in social and cultural activities that expand their potential developmental levels (Vygotsky 1978).

Although educational discourse is becoming increasingly focussed on how to successfully include students with disabilities in general education classrooms, in practice, large numbers of these students continue to be educated in *self-contained* settings, i.e. separate, smaller classrooms or schools for students with disabilities. National statistics indicate that in 2004, approximately 33% of all preschool children with disabilities were educated in inclusive classrooms, and approximately 52% of all children with disabilities between ages six and 21 were educated predominantly (i.e. spend at least 80% of the school day) in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Additionally, studies reveal that students with severe disabilities are more likely to be educated in self-contained settings (Smith 2010; Williamson et al. 2006), despite the documented social and academic benefits of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities (Downing, Spencer, and Cavallaro 2004; Fisher and Meyer 2002; Foreman et al. 2004). Smith (2010) reveals a disturbing reality that the overwhelming majority (approximately 90%) of all students with intellectual disabilities in the US are educated predominantly outside the general education classroom. Furthermore, he argues that the segregated education of this group of students perpetuates negative attitudes and reinforces the stigma attached to intellectual disability in US culture.

A simultaneous concern for educators pertains to the acceptance of children with disabilities by their nondisabled peers when they *are* in inclusive settings and the quality of interaction that takes place between these groups of children. With regards to this, Guralnick (2001) argues that the social integration of children with developmental disabilities with their typically developing peers remains an elusive goal. A consistent finding in inclusive education literature is that students with developmental and intellectual disabilities are at risk for social isolation, and compared to students without disabilities, have fewer reciprocal friendships, a lower rate of social participation in inclusive learning environments, and tend to be relegated to the periphery of the classroom community (Buisse, Goldman, and Skinner 2002; Guralnick et al. 2007; Hestenes and Carroll 2000; Kliever 1998).

The research findings described above raise questions regarding the factors considered by parents when they engage in educational decision-making and the extent to which they are influenced by their perceptions of the social environment in particular educational settings. There is a growing body of research focussed on parents'

perspectives on inclusive education. Some studies indicated that parents who strongly advocated for inclusive education for their children with disabilities viewed this practice as representing belongingness and community membership; in discussing their reasons for their commitment to inclusion, they raised pertinent issues of social justice, equal opportunity, and fundamental civil liberties (Erwin and Soodak 1995). Other studies highlight parents' perceptions of inclusive education as having led to positive academic and social outcomes for their children with disabilities, and as an avenue for the acceptance of individuals with disabilities in the larger community (Downing and Peckham-Harding 2007; Palmer et al. 2001; Rafferty and Boettcher 2000) Although inclusive education is generally perceived positively by the parents of children who attend these programmes (Rafferty and Boettcher 2000), there tends to be greater support for inclusive education among parents of children with mild disabilities than among those of children with severe disabilities (Leyser and Kirk 2004; Palmer et al. 2001; Rafferty and Boettcher 2000). Additionally, studies have documented parents' concerns about teachers' lack of competency, preparedness, or willingness in working with children with disabilities (Palmer et al. 2001), and about the social acceptance of their children with disabilities in general education classrooms (Freeman and Alkin 2000; Garrick-Duhaney and Salend 2000; Leyser and Kirk 2004).

The study reported in this article explored mothers' beliefs, perceptions, and expectations with regard to the education of their children with Down syndrome, focussing on their understanding of different classroom environments. By privileging perspectives that were borne out of lived experiences, this study aimed to understand the socio-cultural contexts in which the education of children with Down syndrome are embedded, and within which educational placement decisions are made.

Methodology

Participants

Nineteen mothers of children with Down syndrome participated in this study.¹ Their ages ranged from 24 to 48 years. The ages of their children with Down syndrome ranged from approximately 6 months to 6 years. In terms of ethnicity, the sample was comprised of women who identified as Caucasian (15), African-American (one), Filipino (one), Hispanic (one), and Biracial (one). The mothers hailed largely from middle-class backgrounds. The majority was married, two were single, and one was living with her partner. With regard to their children with Down syndrome, six were under the age of three and 13 were in preschool or elementary school. Among the latter group, four were being educated in inclusive classrooms and nine in self-contained classrooms or schools.

The study initially adopted a purposive sampling method, a common sampling technique in qualitative research in which participants are recruited in a deliberate manner (Punch 2005). Participants were recruited through a private, New Jersey based early intervention programme and elementary school which specialises in serving children with Down syndrome.² In order to recruit participants, flyers pertaining to the study were distributed to parents by the programme's social worker. Additionally, the author obtained permission to speak at a parent meeting held at the facility. During this meeting, the study was introduced as one that aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences of raising a child with Down syndrome, and to explore mothers' expectations or perceptions of their children's education. Written information

describing the study was provided to mothers. Those who were interested in participating contacted the author. This represents a homogeneous purposive sampling technique (Patton 1990; Punch 2005), in which a relatively homogeneous group of individuals provide rich and intensive information pertaining to an area of interest. Through this technique, 13 participants were recruited. Additionally, for the purpose of increasing variation on the dimensions of interest, participants were also recruited using a sampling method known as snowballing (Patton 1990), i.e. mothers who participated in the study were requested to provide flyers or share information about this project with other mothers of children with Down syndrome whom they knew. Through this method, six additional participants initiated contact with the author, seeking to participate in the study.

There are limitations of this sampling method which may have implications for this study. The mothers in this study constituted a relatively homogeneous group in terms of socioeconomic background. Many were recruited from the same organisation that serves children with Down syndrome and are likely to have had many similarities in their understanding and expectations of their children's education. All mothers in the sample had at least a college education, and this is likely to have influenced the levels to which they challenged professional judgment with regard to educational decisions for their children. Additionally, since this study is based on an interpretivist paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1985), transferability of the thematic findings to all mothers of children with Down syndrome is neither possible nor the aim of the study.

Data collection and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers who consented to participate in this study. During the interviews, they generated extensive and detailed narratives related to their experiences as mothers of children with Down syndrome. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions. Specific to the education of their children, mothers were asked to discuss their understanding of the range of educational environments for students with disabilities. They were also asked to discuss their perceptions of their children's educational programmes and the processes through which their children had been placed in these. Mothers whose children with Down syndrome had not begun preschool discussed the kind of schooling they anticipated or envisioned. All were asked to articulate their beliefs about inclusive and self-contained classrooms. Although the interviews were guided by open-ended questions, to a great extent, the issues spontaneously raised by the mothers served as points for exploration. This method is consistent with Harding's (1993) standpoint epistemology, which emphasises that critical questions should emerge from lived experiences and should serve as the starting point for inquiry. Each interview lasted between 2 and 4 h; the longer ones were conducted over two sessions. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Data collection continued until no new data emerged from the interviews.

During data analysis, the transcribed interviews were reviewed exhaustively for commonalities in the experiences of the mothers, as well as for shared perspectives and interpretation of their experiences. This is consistent with the emergent themes approach, which is described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a method for analysing data in which conceptual themes emerge from the evidence rather than the other way around. In the next stage, patterns in the narratives were noted in a non-discriminate

manner and codes were identified based on frequency and consistency of shared experiences, perspectives or interpretations. Following this, more abstract stratifications or broad categories of codes were identified, each consisting of a cluster of codes containing salient and discrete accounts or perceptions that pertained to a broader conceptual phenomenon. Once these core categories were identified, the data was coded based on identified codes. The data analysis and coding was done by the author. In the following section the key findings that emerged from the study are discussed, organised under thematic clusters of perceptions and concerns voiced by mothers with regard to their children's education. It should be noted that the titles of the following sub-sections (and the title of this article) incorporate 'in-vivo' codes, i.e. they are quotes derived from the narratives of the mothers in this study.

Results

'Land of misfit toys': classrooms as places of belonging

When mothers discussed educational programmes, they focussed to a great extent on issues related to acceptance and group membership. In discussing the nature of inclusive or segregated education, they often expressed beliefs about where their children would 'fit in' or where they might 'belong'. Among those who expressed support for inclusion, this kind of education was viewed as the natural environment for students with disabilities, and placement in a general education classroom was understood as an indicator of societal acceptance of their children. For instance, one mother expressed:

Andrea: I guess (inclusive education) represents my daughter being included in day-to-day life. That she is not being segregated. That she's not being singled out and that she is being accepted for who she is. Or at least an attempt to try to accept her for who she is. She should not have to earn her right to be in this class. It is her right.

Like Andrea, others who supported inclusive education also viewed it as a fundamental right of all children to access the general education curricula and their neighbourhood school communities. They raised the issue of membership, not only in the context of classrooms or schools, but also in the context of society. For these mothers, the advantages of inclusive education went beyond immediate gains; their reasons included that this kind of education would best prepare their children to participate in society as adults, provide them with tools for success in work settings, or help them to become more integrated in their communities. This is evidenced in the following quote from one mother:

Josephine: She's got to learn to fit into the real world. And deal with real world problems. If she's in an inclusive setting, those are things that hopefully she will figure out for herself ... She's got to relate to everybody, not just her quote-unquote disabled peers. And if she's in self-contained, then it's just – there's that whole segregation thing again. You know, it's like, here are all the quote-unquote normal kids and here are all the – you know – what they used to call it in my school – the kids who ride the short bus ... Those are some of the social issues I worry about.

Inclusive education was perceived as a practice that can increase acceptance of students with disabilities by their nondisabled peers, and as a means for increasing societal acceptance of people with disabilities in general. Many mothers also expressed

beliefs that inclusive education benefits children without disabilities and for society in general.

Some mothers expressed a preference and support for self-contained education. When discussing the education of their children, these mothers were just as inclined to discuss classrooms in the language of belongingness. Similar to those who supported inclusive education, this group of mothers was concerned with issues of 'fitting in' and group membership. For instance, focussing on considerations of where her child would be most likely to feel part of the collective group, the mother quoted below expressed views about self-contained classrooms as places of unconditional acceptance among similar groups of individuals:

Maria: I think in a self-contained classroom with other kids, it's sort of like – the land of misfit toys. Where everybody is in it together. If you look at all the disabled kids together, it's sort of like, the land of misfit toys . . . It doesn't rise to the top as much. It doesn't become noticeable and you could write it off as a quirk.

Other reasons for this group of mothers' support for self-contained programmes pertained to their perceptions of these as welcoming environments for their children, and as offering them safety and protection from failure or rejection, as evidenced in the quote below:

Karina: Maybe it's my own security blanket that he has to be in a Special Ed. Room. . . . I don't want him to go into something and then get kicked out. I want him to know there's always going to be that classroom where people understand him and don't expect him to be perfect in a way that they might in a typical class.

'Especially for special needs': segregated settings as venues for specialised education

Some mothers expressed their understanding of self-contained classrooms as environments where services are delivered by professionals using 'special' equipment and techniques. In discussing self-contained classrooms as desirable places for the education of their children with Down syndrome, they articulated beliefs about these settings as offering access to much-needed resources and professional expertise. Additionally, they focussed on the idea that in self-contained classrooms, their children with Down syndrome would be educated by teachers who are not only trained 'especially for special needs', but who also possess the dispositions deemed necessary for doing so. More specifically with regard to this, they articulated perceptions of special education teachers as people who have qualities such as patience, understanding, and empathy in excess of general education teachers. General education teachers were perceived as lacking not only the training but also the willingness to teach children with disabilities. This is evidenced in the following comment by one mother:

Yolanda: In a specialized environment I know that the teachers and the teacher's assistants are all trained especially for special needs and so I know that they would have the patience and the understanding, the training and the ability.

These findings are noteworthy in light of these same mothers' rejection of the notion that their experiences of raising their children with Down syndrome were significantly

different from the experiences of motherhood in general. Most mothers in this study positioned their children with Down syndrome as more similar to, than different from, children without disabilities. However, with regard to education, some focussed on the educational needs of their children with Down syndrome that rendered them different from children without disabilities, rather than on those that could be considered common to all children. When confronted with important education-related decisions, this group of mothers succumbed to dominant narratives on disability and ideological notions of children with Down syndrome as ‘other’. In attempting to understand these mothers’ preferences for specialised, albeit segregated, educational settings for their children with Down syndrome, it is necessary to situate their beliefs in the context of dominant educational discourses and practices. The following section discusses findings that emerged in this study pertaining to mothers’ experiences and interactions with educational professionals.

‘We don’t offer inclusion’: institutional resistance to inclusive education

Many mothers in this study encountered resistance to the idea of educating their children with Down syndrome in general education classrooms. Some recalled that when their children were transitioning to preschool, the Child Study Team identified a self-contained classroom as the most appropriate placement. Others, like Adele quoted below, recounted that they were informed that their school district ‘didn’t have’ inclusive programmes:

Adele: They didn’t have (an inclusive program) available. No. What they said was that for preschool they have their self-contained preschool class. That’s their preschool program. And I knew myself that – you know – that’s not least restrictive environment, but we figured that we would just get her into the school system first. We would do a year in that placement, just to get her acclimated to being in the school environment and then deal with it. Looking back, maybe I should have started fighting sooner.

Some mothers reported that they had expressed their personal preferences for self-contained classrooms for the education of their children, and that their school districts had complied with their request, concurring that this would be the most appropriate educational placement for their children. Others expressed that they had initially wanted to explore the possibility of inclusive education, either for preschool or for kindergarten; however, professionals had recommended self-contained classrooms, furnishing a variety of reasons. Some were told that their children were ‘not ready for inclusive education’; others were informed that a self-contained classroom was the only option because the school district ‘does not offer’ inclusive education. Other reasons reportedly given to mothers in support of self-contained classroom placement included: smaller class size, availability of therapeutic resources, and their children’s delays in development or deficits as indicated through evaluations. Some mothers who had initially hoped to explore inclusive programmes for their children recalled that self-contained educational settings had emerged as the more appropriate, and indeed, the most attractive option after they had met with the professionals at their children’s Individualised Education Plan meetings. They recalled that they had ‘bought’ the idea because it was presented to them in an appealing manner, and that they had become ‘convinced’ that segregated classrooms were indeed the ‘best’ for their children. The following quotes from two mothers in the study illustrate this point:

Paula: I first wanted her to just go to mainstream classes, you know, regular classes. But then they suggested for her to be in self-contained. And then I kind of figured that maybe that would be a better option. They recommended self-contained because they felt like she was – her level of understanding wasn't for a regular mainstream class. So they said that they could provide her with, you know, with a good educational system in the self-contained class.

Andrea: The social worker said, at the placement meeting: 'We have a new program. It's in a self-contained class.' ... They did a great job of selling this program, the self-contained program ... I bought it. She convinced me. I felt she was really doing the best for me. I thought, the social worker is doing what she thinks is best. You're thinking you're getting a good deal. I thought – I'm getting this great program. Fabulous. I thought this must be right – the best.

Andrea's experiences were similar to those of another mother in this study – Adele (quoted earlier in the section). Both, whose children who had begun preschool in self-contained classrooms based on the recommendations of professionals, expressed a great deal of regret and dissatisfaction with the decisions that had been made. At the time of the interviews, Adele and Andrea were engaged in negotiating a move to a more inclusive classroom setting for their children. Notably, both mothers reported that they were encountering continued resistance from educational professionals regarding a transition to a less restrictive setting. Their story was not unique; there were others in the study who had reportedly challenged professional decisions and whose struggle to gain access to inclusive settings for their children was ongoing and unresolved at the time of the interviews.

Mothers whose children with Down syndrome were being educated in general education classrooms expressed overall satisfaction and perceived their children to be gaining from their participation in these programmes. These mothers recalled that they had advocated for this particular placement. Overall it is remarkable that in this study there were no accounts of educational professionals initiating a dialogue on inclusive placement unprompted by parents. Mothers whose children were being educated in inclusive settings perceived that placement decisions had been either partly or predominantly family-driven. Set against the backdrop of institutional resistance to inclusive education, a prominent theme that emerged in the stories of many mothers pertains to their roles as educational advocates for their children. Mothers who had challenged the recommendations of professionals and pursued access to inclusive education for their children spoke about this kind of advocacy as a 'struggle' and a critical aspect of parenting their children with Down syndrome, as articulated by Andrea: '(I am) an advocate so that I can get a proper education for Molly. Every step has been a struggle. You have to prove everything. You have to be really educated to know your rights'.

'Will they be invited to birthday parties'? Inclusive classrooms as places of exclusion

A consistent theme that emerged pertained to mothers' concerns regarding the acceptance of children with disabilities by nondisabled peers. Many mothers in this study questioned whether their children with Down syndrome would be included in social activities, develop friendships, or be considered valued members of their classroom communities. Most, regardless of their support for inclusive education, held beliefs about inclusive classroom environments as holding greater potential for the rejection or exclusion of children with disabilities. Issues pertaining to peer acceptance were

key factors in some mothers' lack of enthusiasm for inclusive education, as evidenced from this quote:

Leah: It would be a very hard thing for me to do, to let him go into an inclusive setting. I don't want him to be laughed at. Or made fun of because he's different. My biggest concern about an inclusive setting down the road, as he gets older, is that I want him to have friends. . . . That is what really scares me about an inclusive setting. In the middle school years, in the high school years, socialization is a huge component of the child's school day. And I don't think he would be invited to all the teenage parties . . . I want him to feel accepted and part of the group. And it's a nice thought that it could happen, but in all honesty, I don't see it happening.

Even among the group of mothers who strongly advocated for inclusive education for their children, social isolation was viewed as a negative bi-product of being in a general education classroom. For some, concerns about rejection or exclusion in inclusive settings co-existed with beliefs that inclusive education was the most appropriate path for their children. They expressed beliefs about social isolation as an inevitable aspect of inclusive education, as articulated in this quote from one mother:

Rose: I'd like to think that people won't ridicule her but I'm not sure whether she would really fully be socially accepted . . . I'm talking socially, not educationally. So I worry. You know, it's heart breaking for me as a mother to think that if there would be a sleep-over party as a teenager, that she's not invited . . . I dread the day that her feelings get hurt, which is coming. You know it's going to come.

Issues of peer acceptance were among the most frequently raised concerns with regards to inclusive education. Some mothers acknowledged that their fears may be unfounded; others expressed convictions that the social acceptance of children with Down syndrome in inclusive classrooms is an 'unrealistic' expectation, and that inclusive education holds the potential for intensely negative social outcomes. The following quote from a mother in the study is indicative of this:

Maria: I think the fears are sort of, socially as well as academically. Being made fun of . . . There's always somebody in the classroom that's – you know – the kid that's made fun of. Often times it's just the nature of children. Somebody who's sort of, you know, not in with the cool. . . . They're kids. They care about that. They want to be included. They want to part of it. Will they be invited to birthday parties? They don't want to be left out. I read an article in the Wall Street Journal talking about special ed. classrooms, and they said that somebody doesn't commit suicide because they don't know how to do math. They commit suicide because they have no friends. And that's why I think of the social aspect of it.

Maria's words shed light on the nature of her concerns as well as on her understanding of the sociocultural implications of having Down syndrome. For her, the intensely negative images that were evoked by the idea of inclusive education rendered it an inconceivable option. Although Maria's concerns were expressed in more extreme terms than those of most mothers in this study, it is worth noting that in general, her perceptions about inclusive environments as places where children with disabilities experience exclusion were shared by many others. Overall, mothers' beliefs about inclusive settings as places where children with differences are likely to be isolated, rejected, or ignored by nondisabled peers emerged as one of the most consistent findings in this study.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the education of children with Down syndrome is embedded in dominant cultural and educational discourses about disability and differences. Although the views of the mothers in this study varied with regard to inclusive education, their beliefs about this practice were inextricably linked with their understanding of the sociocultural meaning of Down syndrome, for themselves and others. When discussing the education of their children they took into consideration the social climate of classrooms, situating the benefits and drawbacks of different educational programmes in the context of the acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

A similarity that emerged between the views of mothers who strongly supported inclusive education and those who did not was that both groups discussed classrooms in terms of avenues to group membership and community belonging. However, they differed in their conceptualizations of the groups to which membership was sought or desired. Among mothers who strongly supported inclusive education, this practice was understood as representing acceptance in school communities or as a vehicle for full membership in society. Similar to the findings of other studies (e.g. Erwin and Soodak 1995), these mothers discussed inclusive education in terms of children's fundamental rights. Mothers who expressed preferences for self-contained settings discussed belongingness in terms of unconditional acceptance by similar peers and by teachers; they sought membership for their children within classroom communities that offered a buffer from rejection. These findings suggest that when considering educational programmes, mothers of children with Down syndrome may give primacy to the social implications of being in particular environments.

A critical finding in this study pertained to some mothers' perceptions of self-contained learning environments as safe havens where students with disabilities have access to specialised instruction, resources, and professionals who are able and willing to address their educational needs. This suggests that support for segregated learning environments may be entrenched in dominant educational beliefs that students with intellectual disabilities require significantly different methods of education (Valle and Connor 2010), and that special education teachers possess not only the knowledge of these different methods, but also the dispositional qualities deemed necessary. The findings of this study revealed these beliefs were held by many mothers, and that they were firmly upheld in institutional discourses and practices that focussed on the *otherness* of children with Down syndrome and positioned them in a separate category of student.

Consistent with the findings of other studies in which schools demonstrated a 'token commitment' to inclusive education (e.g. Humphrey and Lewis 2008), this study revealed that professionals identified self-contained classrooms as appropriate learning environments for children with Down syndrome and, in some cases, steered parents towards these programmes by packaging them as access to a specialised, individualised, and innovative education for their children. In the context of implicit educational ideology that privileged homogeneity and stigmatised differences, some mothers in this study interrupted their own realities and complied with professionals' judgments about education in smaller, segregated learning environments as best practice for the education of students with Down syndrome. This is resonant of Graham's (2006) assertion that the production of normative standards in education constructs and reifies notions of normalcy which intersect with parents' own interpretations of their children's disabilities and with Slee's (2004) claim that disability labels have come to serve as a

discursively produced system of sorting students. The findings are similar to those of other studies (Gilmore, Campbell, and Cuskelly 2003; Macartney 2007; Macartney and Morton 2009) in which educators, using a deficit approach in determining access to inclusive settings, failed to acknowledge the contexts of learning and viewed perceived deficits as justifiable reasons for denial of access to a child's natural learning environment. Furthermore in this study, accounts in which professionals neglected to inform parents that inclusive education could be considered for the education of their children with Down syndrome, actively resisted mothers' efforts to gain access to such programmes for their children (e.g. 'we don't offer inclusive education') or presented highly problematic conceptualizations of inclusive practices (e.g. 'she's not ready for inclusive kindergarten') point to a serious disparity between educational law and educational practice. The findings lend support to Kliewer's (1998) assertions that although the denial of access to literacy for students with Down syndrome is cloaked in the language of best practices in special education and *scientific* knowledge, the practice actually reflects the ever-shifting and culturally situated perspectives of those in positions of power and control.

A critical finding in this study pertained to mothers' beliefs about inclusive environments as places where children with disabilities are excluded, rejected, or ignored by peers. Although there was variability in the perceived experiences of the mothers in this study overall, there was remarkable consistency with regard to their expectations of inclusive environments as potentially leading to the exclusion of children with Down syndrome. These findings revealed a key factor in the lack of enthusiasm that many mothers may have for inclusive education. More broadly, they shed light on the ways in which mothers understood the social meaning of Down syndrome. Mothers in this study located disability not only in their children, but also in the environment; their expectations for the education of their children were embedded in constructions of normalcy and cultural attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

Lending support to perspectives on the education of students with intellectual disabilities as embedded in social contexts and cultural beliefs, this study has implications for educational practice and policy as well as for teacher education. First, the findings underscore the importance of closely attending to the extent to which children with disabilities are socially integrated with their typically developing peers in general education classrooms. To this end, teacher education should include training on facilitating meaningful interactions and friendships between students with and without disabilities in inclusive classrooms and for creating genuine classroom communities. Strategies for promoting the social integration of students with disabilities with their typically developing peers should be infused throughout coursework in teacher education. On a broader level, this study highlights the need for a paradigm shift in education; moving away from traditional special education dogma, educators need to engage in critical education practices that question the continued segregation of students with disabilities. To this same end, individual school districts need to be closely scrutinised with regard to the extent to which they are in accordance with educational laws.

Finally, by highlighting the critical role of parent advocacy in the educational placement of students with Down syndrome, this study underscores a need for more information, outreach, and support for families of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Parents who are unfamiliar with educational laws or are uninformed about the practice of inclusive education and its benefits for all students are more likely to concur with professional decisions that identify separate classrooms as most appropriate for their children's education, as was indicated in this study.

Therefore, services aimed at helping parents to understand the benefits of inclusive education and its implications for developmental and learning outcomes, and at becoming familiar with educational laws for students with disabilities may be instrumental in supporting them as they negotiate the education system in efforts to seek a meaningful education for their children with Down syndrome.

Notes on contributor

Priya Lalvani is an assistant professor in the department of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Literacy Education at Montclair State University. Her research interests lie in the areas of disability studies, inclusive practices, teacher education, and families of children with disabilities.

Notes

1. All names in this study have been changed to pseudonyms and do not represent the actual first names of the participants.
2. The author is not professionally affiliated with the Early Intervention Center from which many of the participants were recruited.

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