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## Exploring provision for children identified with special educational needs: an international review of policy and practice

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## **Exploring provision for children identified with special educational needs: an international review of policy and practice**

Jonathan Rix, Kieron Sheehy, Felicity Fletcher-Campbell, Martin Crisp and Amanda Harper

This project aimed to create a descriptive map of international research which explores the notion of the continuum of educational provision for children with special educational needs. It also aimed to determine and examine the nature of how the continuum of provision is conceptualised, operationalised and enacted in a sample of selected countries. Commissioned by the National Council for Special Education, it also identified implications for the development of provision within the Irish context. The research involved a systematic identification and thematic review of theory, identifying and examining literature associated with the conceptualisation of the continuum; it examined the policy and provision across 55 administrations as publically reported, primarily to international agencies; it carried out more detailed examination of policy and practice in 10 countries using a survey and vignette study; and it involved a series of interviews with a range of individuals in a range of settings in four countries with differing approaches to supporting children with special educational needs.

This paper outlines the overall findings of the research. It focuses in particular upon the need to change how we think about provision associated with continua, recognising the lack of international coherence in approaches to support for pupils with special educational needs. It identifies in particular the opportunities presented by a reconceptualisation of the class and the management of class resources, and the role key personnel can play in creating links between diverse services.

### **Introduction**

The provision of education for children identified with special educational needs creates a range of questions related to governance, curriculum, detection and placement (Norwich 2008). The response to these questions varies across and within countries. Frequently, the possibilities are framed as being upon a continuum. Children and young people are positioned upon a continuum of need (e.g. Martin 2009), supported within a continuum of provision (e.g. Lynch 2007) and by a continuum of services (e.g. DeLorenzo 2008). Such a conceptualisation underpins the legislation and policy documents within Ireland, where the National Council for Special Education commissioned the research upon which this papers reports. This research aimed to create a descriptive map of international research

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which explores the notion of the continuum, and how provision is conceptualised, operationalised and enacted internationally. It summarises the methods and findings from:

- a systematic literature review in relation to the conceptualisation of the notion of the continuum
- an international review of policy in 55 administrations across 50 countries
- surveys of provision in 10 countries
- visits to four countries

## **Background**

In looking across previous international reviews, it is evident that there have been many international agreements and legislative moves towards both establishing new provision and transforming established mainstream and special provision. As a consequence of these agreements, international practices are unified by the international language used rather than the policies, practices and attitudes described (Donnelly, Meijer, and Watkins 2011; Richardson and Powell 2011). It is evident that change has tended to be small, and the old assumptions and practices have remained in place (Ferguson 2008) with similar problems created in a variety of different ways (Rix 2009).

All countries formally record SEN student data (Vislie 2003); however, individual countries continue to use cross-national classifications differently and categories and schools are inconsistent across countries and levels of education (Florian et al. 2006). As a consequence, researchers within international agencies question the usefulness of comparing official statistics in relation to special educational needs, with some suggesting that the only comparable data relates to numbers within segregated settings (Donnelly, Meijer, and Watkins 2011). It is unclear why some countries feel that segregated support and special provision are necessary when they are not elsewhere (Evans 2003). Generally, there is an upward trend in numbers identified with special educational needs; however, there is small change in use of segregated provision and only a small increase within mainstream schools (Vislie 2003; OECD 2012), with around 2.3% of European students reported as being in segregated provision (Donnelly, Meijer and Watkins 2011). Typically, countries have an eclectic mix of provision (Riddell et al. 2006), and countries with a clear two track system are developing a continuum of services, with special schools increasingly seen as a source of guidance and support for mainstream (Meijer 2003). Where the traditional system is being replaced, local, flexible provision often has the same

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characteristics as the original, using formal identification to decide either placement or curricular arrangements which segregate the child within a mainstream context (Vislie 2003).

There is a trend towards greater decentralisation of governance, with rising importance given to parental choice and recognition that service quality needs closer monitoring. This creates a tension between a focus upon outputs and support for the vulnerable. There is also wide use of Individual Educational Plans at the same time as attempts to shift away from psycho-medical models of thinking about need (Meijer 2003). Inclusion is seen as more successful in primary schools than secondary, with boys having more difficulties coping with mainstream than girls and receiving more resources. Class teachers frequently receive support from specialist staff either situated externally, internally or within special schools, with support directed towards themselves or the pupil. Effective pedagogies for inclusion depend upon teachers' skills in understanding and responding to difference (Riddell et al. 2006); however, the area in need of greatest development in general teaching qualification is teaching students with special learning needs (TALIS 2008).

In the wealthy North, there has been a focus upon providing information on inclusive practice via in-class training; a focus upon whole-school reform, upon issues of leadership, upon service coordination, as well as multi-disciplinary planning, parental involvement and capacity building through in-school support systems. In the economically constrained South, there has been a focus upon access, retention and rates of drop-out, as well as experiences of poverty, negative communal attitudes, poor working conditions, and the relevance of the curriculum. Typically, distribution and allocation of funding has been more of an issue than availability of resources (Peters 2003).

## **Method**

This research involved four phases. The first phase was a literature and policy review, the second phase was a 10 country study, the third phase involved in-country visits and the final phase focused upon the development of a framework for conceptualising the findings. A detailed explanation of the methods adopted is available within Appendix A of the final project report (Rix et al. 2013).

### ***Identifying and describing sources for the literature review***

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This review used systematic protocols for searching databases and identifying relevant academic literature related to concepts of the continuum in order to answer the question:

*How have the continuum of provision and the continuum of services in relation to special educational needs been conceptualised in the literature?*

An electronic search of databases, citation indexes and internet sites identified academic articles related to continua in an educational context. After removal of duplicates, 2372 records were reviewed. The citations were independently screened in a two-stage process. This involved the application of inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Table 1) which defined the scope of the review. At all stages, decisions between pairs of researchers were moderated with other members.

	<b>Include if:</b>	<b>Exclude if:</b>	<b>Total</b>
1.	it does involve education	it does not involve education	<b>1294</b>
2.	it is to do with special education needs	it is not to do with special education needs	<b>187</b>
3.	it does include the term 'continuum'	it does not include the term 'continuum'	<b>128</b>
4.	the term continuum is linked to a physical or locational placement or to resource allocation	the term continuum is not linked to a physical or locational placement or to resource allocation	<b>282</b>
5.	it is to do with provision or services	it is not to do with provision or services	<b>7</b>
6.	young people under 18 are included in the study	no young people under 18 are included in the study	<b>16</b>
7.	it is available electronically	it is not available electronically	<b>117</b>
8.	it is available in English	it is not available in English	<b>0</b>
	<b>Total Included: 341</b>	<b>Total screened</b>	<b>2372</b>

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria and total excluded under each criterion

After Stage 1, because we sought explicit reflections upon the notion of the continuum, two sets of inclusion groupings were identified; (1) sources which focused upon descriptions of policy related to the continuum of provision or services and (2) sources which reflected theoretically upon the concept of the continuum in some way (see Table 2).

	<b>Theory</b>	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Total</b>	86	255	341

Table 2: Papers identified as theory for inclusion in data extraction

After removal of unavailable or duplicate studies, 65 papers were divided between four members of the research team for data extraction. Three members of the team worked with 27 of the papers and one member who would write the synthesis worked with the other 38. Prior to beginning the data extraction, the research team identified six papers as key to any understanding of the conceptualisation of the continuum. These were read and members of the team discussed the kinds of data which they felt were significant. The 65 papers were assessed for relevance in relation to the inclusion criteria and the overarching question. Those parts of the document which were appropriate, coherent and relevant to the notion of the continuum were extracted and placed within four separate files. The research team did not concern itself with collating information about the population, to whom the paper might refer, nor its country of origin, nor its specific field in relation to special educational needs. Gathering this data was deemed to be superfluous to answering the question upon which the review focused.

Australia (Queensland)	China	Iceland	Netherlands	South Africa
Australia (Victoria)	Croatia	Iran	New Zealand	South Korea
Barbados	Cuba	Ireland	Nigeria	Spain
Belgium (Flemish community)	Cyprus	Israel	Northern Ireland	Sweden
Belarus/ Belorussia	Estonia	Italy	Norway	Switzerland
Brazil	Finland	Japan	Poland	Uganda
Cambodia	France	Jordan	Romania	US
Canada (Nova Scotia)	Germany	Kenya	Russia	US State (Connecticut)
Canada (Ontario)	Greece	Latvia	Scotland	US State (New York)
Bulgaria	Hungary	Lithuania	Singapore	US (Ohio)
Chile	India	Mexico	Slovenia	Venezuela

Table 3: Fifty five administrations examined to gather an overview of nations

### **Identifying and describing sources for the 55 administration review**

We began our search with clear intentions to identify a broad spread of countries, geographically, economically, politically and culturally. For all countries, at least two sources of information from international non-governmental organisations were used. The aim was to look at as many countries as possible within the time available within the first phase of the research. We recognised that many countries would operate decentralised systems, with their own administrative control, regulations and procedures. These we identified as individual administrations, but given the high likelihood of a unifying national legislative framework we began by identifying one administration per country. In total, during an eight-week period we looked at 55 administrations in 50 countries (see Table 3) starting with those suggested by the NCSE steering group, international advisors and the

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OU research team. Others were looked at to ensure some degree of global coverage emerged either as a result of recognised gaps within the broad spread or because the research team was aware of an interesting policy development or school practice.

The research team was aware of the uncertainty inherent in these online sources and so groupings and themes established at this point were tentative, providing a focus for further investigation.

### ***Moving from 55 to 10***

As a consequence of these groupings, we chose to focus upon those administrations so as to achieve:

- (1) One administration per country.
- (2) At least two or more countries from each identified grouping.
- (3) Opportunities to gain insight into a range of issues linked to the notion of a continuum.
- (4) Countries with relevance to the Irish context.
- (5) A geographical spread.

Using these criteria, we compiled a list of 25 administrations in 25 countries, trying to fill in gaps from our first search. We then reviewed the information from the 25 countries and established a shortlist of 14, which was sent to NCSE as a starting point for discussion. On the basis of the data gathered and the rationales laid out above, there was agreement amongst the research team and advisors about focusing in more detail on seven countries (see 1–7 in Table 4) with considerable further discussion around the final three.

### ***Collection and use of the 10 country data***

Having selected the 10 countries, in-country researchers were identified because of their experience as academics or as writers of academic reports upon their special education system.

1. Australia (Victoria)	2. Cambodia	3. Canada (Nova Scotia)	4. Italy	5. Kenya
6. Lithuania	7. Scotland	8. Norway	9. Japan	10. Cyprus

Table 4: Ten countries identified for in-country research

Each in-country researcher was provided with a questionnaire, answer template and detailed question guidance, focusing upon the following areas as agreed with the NCSE (see Table 5).

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Table 5. Twelve areas for information gathering by in-country researchers.

1. Current legislation
2. Funding models and models for allocation of resources/supports
3. Professional standards
4. Resources/supports available at school and classroom level
5. Resources/supports provided from outside and from within the education system
6. Specialist/Generic Provision
7. The categorisation of individuals
8. Placement/enrolment/eligibility criteria
9. Numbers of students identified with Special Educational Needs
10. Dual enrolment/placement policies
11. Contradictions, challenges and strengths of the system
12. Key organisations, agencies and posts/individuals

The in-country researchers also received seven vignettes – short descriptions of hypothetical characters in a particular context – to which they gave detailed written responses to eight questions looking at placement, assessment, support, available services, funding, curriculum and decision-makers. For each vignette, there was also a question about how provision would change if the child had an additional specific characteristic giving a total of 14 possible examples for placement. Vignette studies have become established as a way of enhancing research into cross-country differences in decision-making in education and health systems (Blömeke et al. 2008; Gupta, Kristensen, and Pozzoli 2010), providing concrete examples to which participants can respond (Hazel 1995) and can support comparisons of different cultures' interpretations of a 'uniform' situation (Barter and Renold 1999).

### **Country visits**

On receipt of the responses from the in-country researchers, we compiled key points of interest for each country and, where practicable, for each NCSE topic area. After detailed discussions with the NCSE and their advisors, we focused upon:

- Italy
- Norway
- Japan

Prior to these visits, interviews were conducted in Ireland using the intended protocol. All visits involved two researchers from the research team. Each visit was for five days, except for Ireland which was for two days. We met with practitioners, parents, managers, policy makers and children within different parts of each education and educational support system. Interviews were responsive, extended conversations (Rubin and Rubin 2004). Ethical clearance was sought from the Open University ethics committee.



In Ireland, we met with 17 individuals in seven group interviews and one individual interview situation. In Italy, we met with 52 individuals in a range of group interview situations from three regions in Northern Italy, visiting seven educational settings. In Norway, we met 37 individuals in a range of group interview situations with individuals from four communes in Southern Norway, visiting five educational settings. In Japan, we met with 38 individuals from four prefectures in a range of group interview situations, visiting six educational settings. In every country, many of our interviewees had held various posts within the system other than their current position.

### ***Overall approach to data analysis***

The analysis of the data across all the phases was subjected to a thematic analysis derived from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The process of synthesising the different data strands was recursive in that the identification of themes and the development of the narrative within each theme involved the researchers, individually and collaboratively, revisiting and interrogating the data, and this process informing the manner in which the next stage of data gathering was formulated. For example, in analysing the data from the review of literature, the researcher who was to write the synthesis drew upon the data selected by himself and one other researcher. He identified concepts as they emerged from the data within 46 of the papers, two other researchers who had independently examined the other papers then assessed the relevance of the categories to the concepts they had identified within the data. They then allocated the concept they had identified to the appropriate categories. The synthesis was then produced on the basis of these agreed categories drawing upon the concepts and extracts to evidence and explicate the notion of the continuum within the literature. The emerging types of continua were subsequently used to frame the analysis of the data gathered at subsequent phases of the research and in developing the final conceptualisation of a community of provision.

## **Findings**

### ***Continuum review***

The notion of the continuum was associated with 194 concepts. Six categories were identified that unified these concepts (see Table 6).

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of concepts</b>	<b>Number of sources</b>
What is on the continuum	69	42
How we think about provision on the continuum	38	22
Aims for the continuum	13	4
Why there must be working together	18	11
How children are placed on the continuum	21	13
Challenges for the continuum	35	15

Table 6: Categories, concepts and sources for the synthesis arising from review

In exploring the category of what is on the continuum, it was evident that we cannot speak of a continuum as a single definable set of provision. Twenty-nine different types of continua were recorded. These were grouped under six headings:

- Continua of space: concerned with where support takes place, across settings, within settings and across the age range.
- Continua of staffing: concerned with who is providing the support, where they operate, their values and workload.
- Continua of students: described who is being supported.
- Continua of support: focused upon the quantity and type of support.
- Continua of strategies: focused upon quality and how that is developed and reinforced.
- Continua of systems: focused upon issues of governance, types of programmes, policy and rules and evaluation.

Given the nature of any single continuum, it is evident that a range of other continua are in play at the same time.

The notion of the continuum goes back over 40 years, though it represents thinking that was around before then. How the continuum is viewed is critical. The continuum is frequently represented as a triangle or two triangles meeting at their points or a rectangle. These visual representations frequently include arrows to represent movement or spread, with start/end points which represent the extremes of the continuum. These start/end points represent different responses to situations in relation to children, practitioners, administrators and policy-makers. Typically, the line of travel moves away from the special sector towards the mainstream, suggesting that expertise and resources reside within the special sector and that severity of need and intensity and amount of support increase as children travel from the mainstream to this sector.

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These lines frequently suggest coherence across the sectors; however, the continua include provision which comes from quite different theoretical positions; so, for example, mainstream provision operating within a constructivist or a social constructivist paradigm can be on the same continuum as a special school operating within a behaviourist or a therapeutic paradigm. Understandings of the continuum also vary within and between countries and professions. In many ways, our underlying assumptions about the continua and our place within them define the manner in which we operate; but it is also evident that the manner in which we operate informs our view of what the continua are and our place within them. The notion of the continuum can be seen to be put both ends on the defensive: perceptions of the lack in mainstream of the sort of provision that special schools offer results in the removal of a child from the mainstream school to the special school; thus, positioning mainstream as a source of failure and special as the place of failures.

As a response to the separation which results from diverse philosophies and practices, there are calls for creating seamless provision and unifying understanding and ways of working. This model of the continuum as a collective rather than linear response has resulted in the development of a number of different very non-linear representations (see Figure 1). The underlying message is that an effective continuum needs a spread of interconnected services and levels of services which are preventative, proactive and responsive at a group and individual level, and which share expertise and knowledge, spreading pressures across the system, being locally owned, cooperatively developed and responsive to top-down policy. The inherent contradiction in representing a continuum as non-linear underlines the limitations of the continuum as a metaphor for the complex environment out of which provision emerges, influencing the nature of that environment as it does so.

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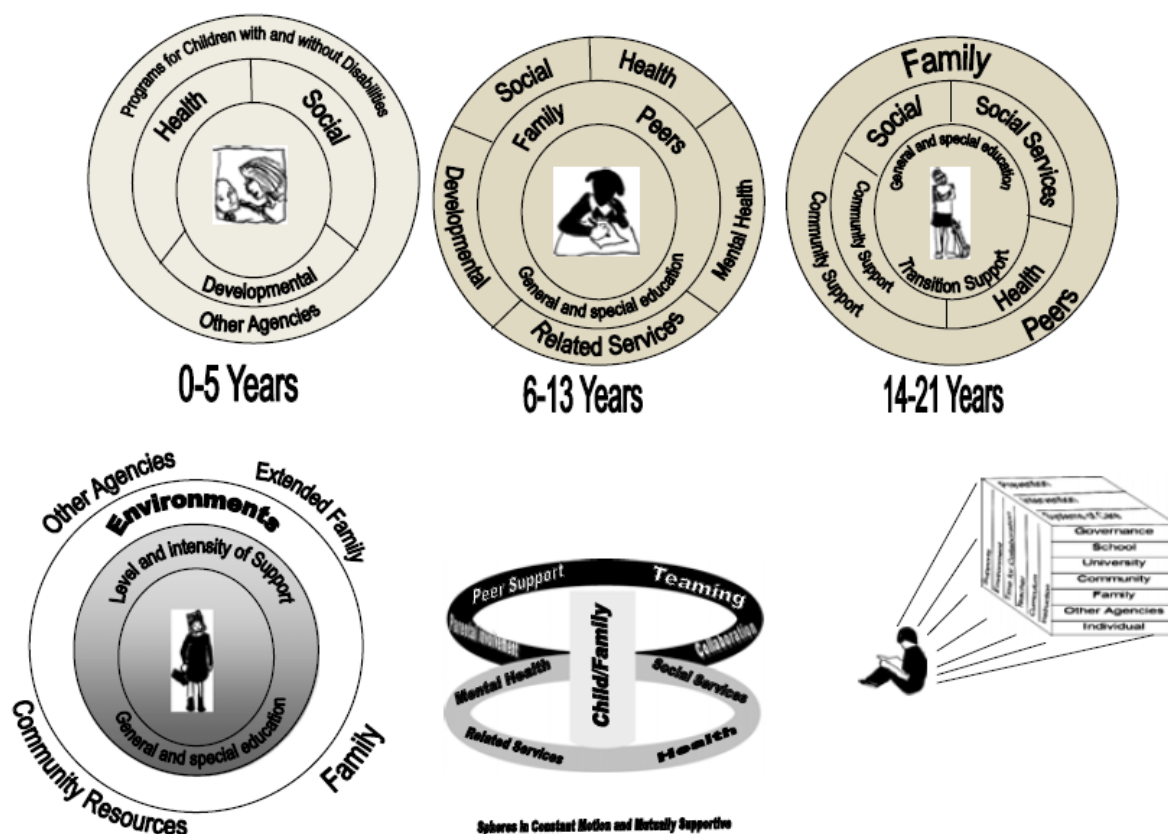


Figure 1. Non linear representations of the curriculum (National Association of State Directors of Special Education 1998).

The aims of a continuum can also be seen as contradictory. They fall in three broad areas: enhancing impact on the individual students; a focus upon inclusion in the mainstream; and effective use of resources. The continua were seen as avoiding stigmatising individuals yet focused upon distinct impairments; as increasing independence and seeking community integration; they involved taking the child out of mainstream so they can move back in; and they aimed to maximise the use of specialised staff, providing flexible individual support whilst reducing financial costs and encouraging core community services which reduce the need for separate provision.

Despite the aim to deliver provision on the basis of assessment of need, many models noted that the effectiveness of the continuum was very context dependent and lacked an evidence base. It was suggested that placement was not the same across authorities, and though a pupil's placement should be motivated by social and academic outcomes, instructional practices and accountability to the pupil, there was a danger that its focus was maintenance of particular resources, beliefs or settings. In addition, it was recognised that the full continuum cannot be an option in every local situation. Frequently, the

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concern was that the continuum does not facilitate flexibility and development but results in stagnation, with calls for systemic reform.

The breadth of continua identified within this review was considerable but did not seem to cover all possible areas of provision, either. A key question, therefore, is if we have multiple continua (some still unidentified), how are they woven together? If we regard them as a series of individual threads, do we not increase the chance that our focus opens up gaps between them through which people will continue to fall or through which people fear to fall? As Taylor (1988) suggested, new continua are open to similar critiques as the old continua. They become 'options' within bureaucracies administering and funding services. As with the original notion of the continuum, they emerge as a means for describing the pre-established systems and not as a means to represent a new model of provision or specifically to drive change.

### ***Emerging themes from the country reviews and visits***

The continuum as a metaphor was not strongly in evidence globally, being noted within only six countries' international reports; however, the issues, challenges and structures identified within the review of the theoretical underpinnings of the continuum were strongly in evidence. Despite a global shift to language of inclusion and integration, the classic continuum of mainstream classes, special classes, special schools, long-stay institutional settings and home support was in evidence across nearly all countries in the study. It was evident from countries which had closed special schools, such as Italy and Norway, that traditional segregated spaces for learning can re-emerge in any context if it is not explicitly focused on meeting the needs of all pupils who belong there.

A common pattern was to talk about grouping learners in a separate classroom, alongside peers and in separate lessons. There was also talk about flexibility of areas and time, and allowing part-time attendance in different classes or schools, as well as students continuing at a particular stage or level and extending the school year. There was frequent mention of reducing the number of children per class or increasing the number of staff or having specific teacher-child ratios depending on impairment category. Across countries, the emphasis upon separate provision became more evident at the transition from primary to secondary. This was explained as being a consequence of issues of responsibility, accountability and fear of litigation, and related to the changing curriculum, focus on academic outcomes, levels of secondary school teacher contact time and a perceived

increasing lack of empathy from children. The impact of context upon the emergence of special educational needs was rarely mentioned. Only in the Italian interviews was it a priority, where context was understood broadly, including the whole school, the children, parents and leadership, and their capacity to collaborate and cooperate.

Some countries recognised the importance of maintaining special schools as sources of expertise; however, few special approaches emerged from these reports. Many countries also recorded that there was an inappropriate mix of types of children with special educational needs in their special schools and a limited reach to special education. There was recognition too of a need to avoid children becoming lost within the system. Within the selected group of 10 countries, the placement and support that children were offered in policy terms interacted with the categories used in the identification of special educational needs. In some countries, these categories had a strong effect on the type of school a child attended; in other countries, this effect was weaker or had little or no influence. In general terms, the vignettes revealed differences in the likelihood of the same child being placed in mainstream or special schools (see Table 7).

	<b>Aus</b>	<b>Cam</b>	<b>Can</b>	<b>Cyp</b>	<b>Ire</b>	<b>Ita</b>	<b>Jap</b>	<b>Ken</b>	<b>Lit</b>	<b>Nor</b>	<b>Sco</b>
<b>Mainstream</b>	8	4	12	5	9	14	2	2	2	14	6
<b>Special</b>	5 <sup>1</sup>	4	2 <sup>2</sup>	8	3	0	10	10 <sup>3</sup>	12	0	4
<b>Negotiated</b>	0	0	0	1	2	0	2	2	0	0	4
<b>No school option</b>	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 7 School Placement overview based on vignette responses<sup>4</sup>.

Even if policy-makers wish to move from the traditional continuum, they face pressures from established settings, participants within the systems and their ways of thinking and working which resist any serious reconstruction of this provision. In Norway, for example (where people spoke with absolute conviction about the need for inclusion and the right for inclusion) a focus upon learning outcomes and traditional classroom methods overrode the need for a collaborative, less teacher centred pedagogy, with assumptions and

<sup>1</sup> One placement response was not given

<sup>2</sup> Whilst Canada (Nova Scotia) is primarily an inclusive system, the young person described in one vignette could be placed in a day treatment program.

<sup>3</sup> In these cases placement was possible in either a special class in mainstream or a special setting, and was seen as depending on resources present in the locality rather than more open negotiation.

<sup>4</sup> Given the additional final questions within the vignettes there were 14 possible examples for placement.

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practices carried over from an earlier policy context and long established theoretical positions. Specialist teaching relocated into mainstream schools had not been allowed to refocus, maintaining the old boundaries between special and ordinary.

Across countries, the level of resource associated with special was also seen to encourage a perception and use of 'special' as a solution and to act as a barrier to a mainstream response. It encouraged a view that someone else was responsible and accountable, and that support needed to be individualised and specialised. Frequently, certain children were seen as the responsibility of special education, even if both the class and special teachers had similar qualifications and formal responsibility for the whole class. Within all countries, it would seem that it is the needs and attitudes of the system and those with authority within the system which ultimately decide where the child is placed; and any new policy which encourages the system to focus upon how the child is placed provides an automatic excuse for settings to maintain their old ways of working.

The right to an education was the only right in evidence across many countries, but took a variety of forms; typically, its underlying meaning was a vague right to be schooled somewhere perhaps with support. From the 10 country reports, it was evident that three countries offered an absolute right to a mainstream placement, but not additional support. In most administrations, any formal or implicit right was only established after a label had been achieved by a child. Across the data, it was evident that the voices of children with special educational needs carry little weight in decisions about their educational lives, regardless of where they are educated.

This was even the case in Italy and Japan, where socialisation of children frequently emerged as a key aim of education, not just in relation to the social nature of learning but also in creating a unified wider community. Within the vignettes, only 2 out of 140 placements mentioned the involvement of the child; in none of the country visits were they involved within development or assessment of their Individual Educational Plans. In Ireland, it was suggested that the focus of many was upon achieving a quantity of hours rather than the quality of those hours. A focus on protecting the rights of individual children can, therefore, encourage and maintain poor educational practices.

The agency of parents was slightly more in evidence; however, they frequently spoke about a lack of support, having to mediate between services, whilst having a key role in accessing

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support for their children. In all countries, they often relied upon 'word of mouth' and their power was compromised to varying degrees; the socio-economic advantage of some was also evident in every system.

The number of categories of impairment or Special Educational Needs varied considerably between countries. Once all the obvious similarities were grouped together, there were 60 different categories which emerged across the 55 administrations. Only three countries made explicit reference to categories or themes being related to the child in context. A range of individuals and groups had responsibility for carrying out diagnosis and placement and a range of diagnostic models were in evidence. The need for early identification and prevention was much in evidence. However, delays in identification, assessment and intervention were frequently noted, as were high levels of bureaucracy and inconsistency or inaccuracy in assessment outcomes. The over-reliance upon medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes was noted as well as over medicalised placement procedures, which encouraged a teacher focus upon medical assessment. The need to focus on outcomes was recognised widely, with frequent mentions about standards of support or special provision, with calls for more data and robust research around impairment and around inclusion.

The emerging role of the class as the potential frame for the assessment of need and the focus of resource allocation and shared practitioner responsibility was a strong message from Italy and Norway. The class should not be seen as a particular group in a single space, but as a range of groups, who can work in different ways with different peers for different activities and come back together throughout the day for academic and social purposes. Creative, collaborative solutions were sought which began with the needs of the child who had the most difficulties accessing the curriculum, rather than with an assumption of what the average child could attain. The risk of replicating the traditional continuum within class structures was recognised, as was the need for a common curriculum accommodating all students. A powerful driver for exclusion was keeping the child in one place for longer, to revisit topics and subject, rather than trying something new with their peers. Exclusion persisted in the classroom if there was no collective capacity and pedagogic skill to engage all pupils in learning with their peers, particularly when the demands of planning, staffing and the formal curriculum inhibited the capacity and willingness of staff to engage in this way of working.



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The size of the class and the level of support they receive seemed to be based on local priorities rather than a collective understanding of what is needed to support a child in their learning. It was recognised in the country visits that planning is frequently left to goodwill, but that workloads need to reflect the time required to design inclusive approaches, and that systems need to avoid bureaucratic processes and provide clear job descriptions to support collaboration. Planning for inclusion and for the use of resources supporting inclusion is required at all levels and needs to be responsive to the plans coming up from the child, class and school. As was evident in both Italy and Norway, more localised control allowed more flexible management of resources, in a way that could be more responsive to the school context. Leadership was seen to operate at many levels within the system and needed to be encouraged to do so, rather than relying on top-down directives and charismatic or well-trained individuals to transform settings or systems.

In all four country visits, there was discussion of the need for greater health and education collaboration, and recognition that health provision was more likely to be situated within special schools. There was evidence of relatively simple agreements to enable services to work with each other, and recognition that health and education need to learn to speak each other's languages; information from health had to be 'translated' in order to have educational relevance and was only useful for a small minority of children currently identified with special educational needs. In Italy, Japan and Norway, there were also a number of practitioner roles which helped to straddle the divide between services, having training in social services and or health as well as education. There was also an expectation that people would work in different settings in Japan and a collaborative research focus for staff on sabbatical in Italy.

Despite an almost universal desire to increase practitioner education/training/development, special educational needs training was generally additional or included as specialisms either within initial training or via post graduate qualification.

The lack of explicit education related to inclusion and special educational needs was evident across all countries. Within Norway, it was evident that different routes for professionals can promote separation and difference, partly because of different traditions and underlying theoretical positions of the universities and partly because of the underlying differences in the professions for which they were being prepared. It was evident in Italy and Norway that the teaching of clinical descriptions of impairments did not lead to practice solutions in the class. A need for shared teaching and learning

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activities, collaborative working activities and collective grading was highlighted in Italy, whilst in Japan the practice of special school teachers working within the mainstream was seen to benefit both settings.

All the countries we visited provided considerable evidence of the teacher-at-the-front approach, even when special support was going on. In Ireland and Norway, and many international reports, it was suggested that teachers lack the skills for inclusion and special education. This belief was less in evidence in Italy and Japan. Across all the data, however, there was virtually no evidence of 'special' pedagogies, based, for example, upon a notion of particular learning profiles or needs associated with specific impairment categories. Instead, there were mentions of having experience in a particular communication form or providing pedagogical supports, particularly modifying the environment, differentiating, peer learning, team teaching and multi-modal approaches, individualised activities and technology.

Despite the use of similar language within the data, there did appear to be some different underlying assumptions. So, for example, there is mention of individual education plans though the term used and their meanings can subtly vary; specific techniques (such as ABA) were seen as being a special technique by some in Japan but as a useful classroom tool in Italy; in Ireland, specialist knowledge was seen as essential for some groups but its use was described as a matter of good teaching and not involving something fundamentally different; and in some countries, there was interest in developing a response-to-intervention approach, while in other countries there was a focus upon assessment for learning. Different countries also mentioned alternative assessments, alternative materials and resources, and assistive devices, and some suggested that as students entered their mid-teens, there was a shift towards vocational training. An adapted, special or individualised curriculum was frequently mentioned, but whilst in some countries (such as Japan) this had to be consistent with the regular curriculum, in others (such as Italy) it was flexible, with a broad focus upon developing various competences, abilities, skills and knowledge. In Norway, it was evident how easily individualised programmes can separate and segregate the pupil from their peers.

Administrations noted how they were trying to encourage changes in practice, some recognising the failure of past policies or their unforeseen consequences. Resource could go to the school or the child based upon individual assessments, or as block funding or

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using annual funding formulae, or as universal annual allocation for additional support, or based on ratios of service provision or pupil characteristics. There was evidence of different mechanisms at different levels within administrations, with responsibility spread across services and communities. Broadly, ratios of support staff or teachers to pupils were defined by resource availability. In one Norwegian authority, they were providing additional staffing for those schools that cut their applications for support and by implication were working in a more inclusive manner, whilst in one Italian authority they were looking to provide generous support to classes so as to avoid reliance upon certification of individual need.

Many countries identified issues associated with attitudes, either as a result of the use of categories, or within support services and unions, or because policies were being introduced without appropriate time scales and support for practitioners to evaluate their underlying assumptions. There was wide recognition of the need to address social disadvantage and provide equitable access to those on the margins of the dominant culture, particularly migrants, young disabled people, first nationals and girls. In many countries, a clear urban-rural divide emerged. The lack of employment opportunities after education was also noted, along with a need for increased resources, personnel and funding for support. There was mention of strategies to change attitudes, along with recognition of the need for structural changes to the system. A range of plans were in evidence at various levels within systems. But, it was recognised that policies aimed to include pupils continued to identify and isolate many of those pupils.

## **Conclusion**

A key observation which emerges from this research, of particular relevance to policy-makers, is recognition that current provision is only collaborative, representative and interconnected in small pockets. Many people are aware that they are operating in a discordant system, but often they are unaware of how much they are at odds with each other or with some underlying contradiction in the system, despite speaking about the same things, frequently using much of the same language. In particular, there is a fundamental disjunction in relation to models of thinking which different practitioners utilise, which is particularly evident between different services. Given the consequent tendency towards producing pockets of collaborative practice, exerting a great deal of effort in bringing together these different services in an attempt to create joined up or integrated services may be counter-productive. Closer working may be better served by identifying and

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training key personnel who can translate between providers rather than trying to unify bureaucratic processes where all communicate in the same language or collectively produce individual plans.

An opportunity presented by this research, of relevance to anyone interested in the development of educational systems, emerges from the lack of agreement about what 'special' is. It seemed evident that no two countries dealt with the issue of support for pupils with special educational needs in the same way. No two countries shared a view about who needs support, the nature of the support they provided or the nature of an appropriate curriculum. No two countries had the same mechanisms for assessment, resource distribution, in-class support or support service provision. There was no identification of a special pedagogy in international documentation, and people's descriptions of a special pedagogy were the same as their descriptions of good teaching for all. We are not merely reiterating that international practices are unified by international language or that official statistics cannot usefully compare much of the special educational provision. We are suggesting that the differences are such that they undermine any sense of a coherent whole. Even if we could cluster systems under broad headings for one of these issues mentioned above, we would have to place them in different clusters for other issues. The only unifying statements which can be made about special education are that:

- Children are marginalised within all education systems. (Who they are and why they are marginalised varies between systems.)
- Provision referred to as 'special' involves time and space additional to that provided typically.

Everything else is open to variation. For example, a seemingly reasonable claim that numbers involved in segregated provision can be measured (because segregation is a notion that can be agreed upon) falls down on a closer examination of the practice within a country which the statistics are meant to represent. Donnelly, Meijer and Watkins 2011 categorise nations according to the official data, and so Italy appears to have less than 1% of children and Norway between 1 and 2% within segregated provision; but when we spoke to researchers in those countries, they said that no one really knows the numbers. In Italy, for instance, they pointed to data suggesting that 5% of children in mainstream school are out of class the whole time, but practitioners said that the nature of the 5% is variable, and depends upon the values of the school and the tenacity of the parents, whilst in Japan they explained that children who are formally in a special class will spend some of

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the week in the mainstream class. It would seem that just as formal categories globally fail to accurately represent the children to whom they are applied, it is neither possible to say what degrees of segregated support countries provide nor is it possible to say why they report what they do.

Ironically, perhaps, the very limited agreement about what special is can create a fresh space beyond fixed positions of special vs inclusive. If it is universally agreed that mainstream marginalises people and that special education is additional time and space, we can ask how it is possible to create additional time and space within the mainstream so that marginalisation is minimised. The opportunity to achieve this seems to arise from a practice emerging within some countries, which calls for a reconceptualisation of the class in terms of space, grouping of learners and the management of resources. It is further supported by a predominant message from the interviews in the four countries; practitioners are seeking assessment which enables them to envisage their practice, a dynamic assessment rooted in the practices of teaching and learning and not within the traditional, individualised deficit mode.

Finally, there is a conceptual shift which emerges from this research. The full range of the theoretical continua identified in Phase 1 was in evidence across all the strands within this research. However, none of these continua operated in isolation from the others, though many interviewees spoke about aspects of continua as if they did. The range of continua in play and the recognition of their interweaving nature appear to undermine the validity of the continuum as a construct, failing to represent the complexity of provision that is required or provided. Given the spirit of much international and national law in relation to inclusion, and the subsequent logical need for a 'move towards greater commonality' (Norwich 2008), it would seem appropriate to shift from thinking about the individual students within an inclusive environment, and instead to focus upon the nature of the community space. A strong recommendation from the research is to develop an understanding of a community of provision. Aspects of this community are identified by the six groupings which the continua aim to encapsulate, space, staffing, students, support, strategies and systems, but the ethos and underpinning values are those which emerged from the wider research.

A community of provision<sup>1</sup> refers to the settings and services which work together to support learning, health and welfare for all children and young people within their locality.

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Based upon this review and the current policy environment, the community of provision recognises the inter-connectedness of services and the need for agreements between them; it acknowledges the significance of context and encourages collaboration at all levels; its representative nature encapsulates the aspiration of much international legislation for participation and inclusion for all within mainstream provision.

Despite the lack of coherence internationally, this research suggests that with a more manageable model of collaboration and a less contradictory notion of special, a reconceptualisation of education within a community of provision provides an opportunity for acknowledging and understanding the universal nature of local responses and encouraging the development of flexible, supportive, equitable and sustainable services.

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Note 1. For a detailed discussion and visual representations of this concept, see Rix et al. (2013). [Subsequent publication includes: Rix, J., Sheehy, K., Fletcher-Campbell, F., Crisp, M. and Harper, A. (2015) Moving from a continuum to a community –reconceptualising the provision of support. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(3) pp. 319–352.]

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