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Attitudes and Experiences of parents regarding inclusive and special school education for children with learning and intellectual disabilities

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Abstract: In a survey 840 parents of children with cognitive deficits who were educated either in special schools or in inclusive classes, they were asked to assess their children's school experiences. The results showed an overall high degree of satisfaction with the schooling, but there were marked differences among the parents' assessments depending on the degree of learning disabilities and on the type of school. Satisfaction with their children's social experiences and satisfaction with the special education curriculum depend on these two factors. All in all, more parents of children in inclusive classes were satisfied with their children's schooling than those with children in special schools. The analysis of the causes for discontent showed that dissatisfied parents had chosen the type of school under less favourable conditions and a larger part of them is still not convinced of this necessity of additional help. This applied to parents of pupils in inclusive classes as well as to those in special schools. Furthermore, parents of children with German as a second language showed a higher degree of discontent than others.

Key words: inclusion; evaluation of inclusion; parent appraisal of school experiences; social inclusion; cooperation with parents

1. Introduction

During the past twenty years, many countries with well-developed special educational systems for children with disabilities replaced the traditional teaching model of special classes and schools at least partially by inclusive education. The integration rate, i.e. the proportion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream education varies widely in the European countries (16.8 % in Germany and 85.2 % in Norway; European Agency, 2010). Due to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), this rate will increase across the board in the next years.

From the point of view of empirical research, the available assessments of advantages and disadvantages of the two forms of education have to be described as inconsistent and unsatisfactory (see for example Schiller, Sandford & Blackorby, 2008; Blackorby, Knokey, Wagner et al., 2007; Rouse & McLaughlin, 2007; Wagner, Friend, Bursuck et al., 2006; Zigmond, 2003; Karsten, Peetsma, Roeleveld & Vergeer, 2001; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Extensive research regarding the evaluation of inclusive education has been carried out in the German-speaking countries and shows that students with SEN achieve superior school performance in integrative educational settings (Wocken, 2007, 2005; Haeberlin, Bless, Moser & Klaghofer, 1991; Tent, Witt, Bürger & Zschoche-Lieberum, 1991). These results are consistent with results of international research (Marder, 2009; Myklebust, 2006, 2002; Buckley, Bird, Sacks & Archer, 2006; Baker, Wang & Walberg, 1995).

Empirical studies (e.g. Eberwein & Knauer, 2009; Pearce, Gray & Campbell-Evans, 2009) examining the implementation of special education in integrative settings emphasize the relevance of integration-related attitudes of the participating actors. A systematic review by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) showed that positive attitudes of teachers toward integration depend more on the severity of the disability of the children they are working with than on other individual characteristics of the teachers. Feuser (2005) found that successful

integration depends on the skills (Zarghami & Schnellert, 2004) and attitudes of the professionals and can only be realized through cooperation of all persons and entities (students, parents, teachers, school authorities, school administrators, politicians) (Acedo, Ferrer & Pamies, 2009).

For evaluating the adequacy of any kind of education, parent appraisal is of great importance, particularly in the difficult task of comparing inclusive education with special school education. The views of parents were assessed in several studies. In a systematic review, Duhaney and Salend (2000) remarked that parents perceived the integration of their children positively, but their worries and fears should not be overlooked. De Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2010) came to the same conclusion in their review of 10 studies conducted from 1998 to 2000. In Germany, the attitudes of parents towards inclusion were examined in trial studies (Dumke, Krieger & Schäfer, 1989; Preuss-Lausitz, 1990). In these studies, parents of children with disabilities judged integrative schooling very positively, even though the percentage of parents who had experience with integration was rather low. Breitenbach and Ebert (1996) surveyed 818 parents of children with intellectual disabilities in special schools. 60 % of the parents reported that their child would be optimally suited in a special school. A disadvantage of special schooling observed by 70.5 % of the parents was that their child has no contact with children without disabilities.

Several studies were carried out around the world analyzing the views of parents (ElZein, 2009). They affirm an optimal development of students with severe disability in inclusive schooling (Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline & Morrison, 1995; Ryndak, Downing, Morrison & Williams, 1996; Fisher, Pumpian & Sax, 1998; Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger & Alkin, 1999). Additionally, parents of children with behavioral problems or learning disabilities (Turnbull & Ruef, 1997; Gibb, Young, Allred, Dyches, Egan & Ingram, 1997; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; O'Connor, McConkey & Hartop, 2005) and the parents of the children without

disabilities (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000; Kalyva, Georgiadi & Tsakiris, 2007) report a positive experience with inclusive education.

Parents of children with mild disabilities had more positive attitudes towards inclusion than parents of children with severe disabilities (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Parents of children with a physical or sensory disability had the most positive estimations for inclusive education (Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003; Balboni & Padrabissi, 2000).

1.1 Aims of the study

Because parents can probably see the effects of remedial schooling more holistically than teachers, parent appraisal is of great importance for evaluating the adequacy of special education. Teachers are mainly focused on the children's progress in school performance, whereas for parents, social experiences and enjoyment of learning are at least equally important.

In Austria, the particular role and responsibility of parents has been emphasized in education acts granting them an essential role in the decision on the type of schooling their children will receive. In contrast with the other German-speaking countries (Klicpera, 2005), the choice between inclusive education in a regular school versus education in a special school has mainly depended on the parents' decision since 1993. This right to free parental choice of schooling exists irrespective of available funding and independent of the pupil's special educational status. Thus the proportion of Austrian pupils with special educational needs educated in inclusive classes has risen above 50 % (Buchner & Gebhardt, 2011). Inclusive education in Austria is essentially characterized by joint classes taught by a special educator and regular classroom teachers. The special educator is mainly responsible for supporting the children with learning disabilities and ensures that special needs students are adequately served within the inclusive classroom. Cooperation between the two teachers during instruction is a particular challenge (Huber, 2000). Various forms of organization are

possible: teachers may work together on the same topic applying different teaching methods, or they may separately teach each of the groups within the same class. However, separation should not constitute a large part of the total teaching time (Feyerer & Prammer, 2003). In order to keep the financial costs of this concept reasonable, each inclusive class should contain between three and five children with disabilities.

Since many classes in the educational system in Austria are characterized by an inclusive approach that is characterised by children with and without special needs working and learning together, we decided to use the terminus “inclusive education” in the following article. Nonetheless also in Austria not all children are included objectively and there is still great work that has to be done.

1.2 Research questions

This study is the first attempt since the introduction of inclusive education as part of the regular curriculum for Austrian schools to take stock on a broad scale and from the parents' point of view. Additionally, the study will provide a comparison between parents' experiences with inclusive education and special school education. The parents were asked their opinion on several essential topics:

- *Progress in school performance and general school experience:* How do parents' assess their children's progress in school performance?

- *Teacher-student relationship:* An estimation of this relationship in special classes and integrative classrooms is of particular importance. How do parents judge the quality of the teacher-pupil relationship on the basis of their own observations as well as their children's reactions?

- *Social and emotional experiences:* Do parents of pupils in inclusive classes have the impression that their children are under greater emotional strain than those who attend special school classes? Do parents of pupils in inclusive classes report more often about their children's social rejection by schoolmates than parents whose children attend special school classes?

Contrarily, possibilities for establishing social relationships should be greater in inclusive classes: Are children in inclusive classes more capable of establishing contacts with other pupils, especially those who are not disabled? Is it easier for children in inclusive classes to make friends whom they also meet outside of school hours than children who attend classes in special schools?

- *Parental participation and cooperation with the school:* Do parents of children with special educational needs feel sufficiently included in the special educational planning process? Do the parents feel informed by the school? Is there more intensive cooperation with the parents with regard to teaching or their child's progress? Does this cooperation depend on the type of disability or on the type of schooling?

- *Parental satisfaction with the choice of school type:* Have the parents been content with their choice of inclusive or special schooling retrospectively?

2 Method of Investigation

2.1 Sample

The survey was carried out in three federal states of Austria. In these districts all **first, third and sixth grade** inclusive classes and the corresponding grades in the special schools were selected. The questions were posed to parents of children with special educational needs, independent of whether they were taught according to the curriculum of regular schools (primary and junior secondary schools) or whether they were taught according to the curriculum of special schools. All in all, 26 school districts comprising 277 primary and junior secondary schools with a total of 1215 pupils with special educational needs attending the relevant grades and 78 special schools with a total of 716 pupils were involved in the survey.

Participation of parents of children with special educational needs in inclusive classes and in special schools: Altogether 59 % of the parents of pupils in inclusive classes (716 of 1215 equal to 58.9 %) took part in the survey. By comparison, a smaller percentage of the parents of pupils in special schools took the survey (356 of 716 equal to 49.7 %) participated. The participation rate was almost equal in the three federal states: Vienna 340 of 610 (55 %), Lower Austria 435 of 826 (53 %) and Styria 297 of 495 (60 %).

Sample description: The families represented different sociocultural backgrounds. They presumably are representative for the general population. Most of the children spoke German (851, 82,9 %) as first language, some of them Turkish (80 children, 7,8 %), another group was speaking Bosnian, Serbian or Croatian (43 children, 4,2 %), the remainder of the children (53, 5,2 %) spoke different further languages. Only 4,1 % of the mothers had an university degree, 13,8 % had completed a high school, 39,1 % a vocational training, 27,5

% secondary school, 7,5 % primary school and 8 % had attended special school education.

The mothers' educational level was very similar to that of the fathers.

As from parents reported family income was above average among 51 families (5,4 %), 729

families (77,2 %) had an average income and 164 (17,4 %) an income below the average.

Neither the first language of children nor family income was connected to the assignment of learning or intellectual disability (chi-squared-test not significant). Only the educational level of the mothers proved to be connected with this assignment.

Division of the sample according to the pupils' curricular placement and the degree of their cognitive disabilities: Headmasters were asked to specify the curricular placement of all pupils whose parents were included in the survey. They supplied this information for 83 % of all cases (889 of 1072). As a result, the curricular placement of 1047 pupils (701 in inclusive classes and 346 in special schools) was ascertained. The result for inclusive classes shows that 79 pupils (11 %) were taught entirely according to the regular school curriculum, 548 pupils (78 %) were taught partly (i.e. in some subjects) or entirely according to the general special school curriculum (GSS), and 74 pupils (11 %) were taught according to the special school curriculum for severely and multiply handicapped pupils (SMH). The result for special schools shows that 34 pupils were taught entirely according to the regular curriculum, 207 pupils were taught according to the GSS curriculum, and 104 pupils were taught according to the SMH curriculum.

In general, the curricular placement was based on a special educational needs diagnostic assessment. In order to simplify the discourse going forward in this paper, pupils who were taught according to the general special schools (GSS) curriculum will be called pupils with

learning disabilities¹, and those who were taught according to the **SMH** curriculum will be called pupils with **intellectual disabilities**.

2.2 Research tools

Questionnaires for parents: The questionnaires for both groups of parents (of children in inclusive classes and of children in special schools) were almost identical and touched on a variety of topics. To begin with, all parents were asked their assessments of the teachers' commitment and understanding of their child's specific needs. The parents were also asked to assess their children's progress in terms of school performance and to define the amount of parental assistance provided during homework assignments and home study. Another aim was to evaluate the parents' general impression of their children's social progress at school by means of eleven questions. A factor analysis (PCA with varimax rotation) showed that among these eleven questions, two factors were distinct, and that - as shown by reliability analyses - it was possible to form two reliable subscales:

- Good relationship with the teachers and the school, comprising five items (e.g. "has confidence in his teachers"; Cronbach's alpha = .71).
- Positive progress in school performance, comprising four items (e.g. "achieves quite good results within his own limits"; Cronbach's alpha = .60).

Another more extensive section dealt with students' social experiences at school and the behaviour of their schoolmates. In order to assess the relationship with schoolmates, parents were asked for information about friendships within the class and about social contacts. The parents were asked three questions about schoolmates' pro-social behaviour and about any

¹ The diagnostic criteria consider mostly the overall cognitive abilities of the children. Children with learning disabilities have overall cognitive abilities between an IQ of 85 and 70, the cognitive abilities of children with intellectual disabilities have an IQ below 70.

victimization of the student. This information fits well into two subscales, each comprising three items, and showing high internal consistency:

- Victimization: Frequency of negative experiences with schoolmates: (e.g. “having been ridiculed or mocked”; Cronbach's alpha = .82).
- Pro-social behaviour: Frequency of positive experiences with schoolmates: (e.g. “being helped; Cronbach's alpha = .83).

The subsequent short sections dealt with the parents' view of the student's emotional progress and progress in with regards to independence:

- Two questions about the child's mood after school (in a good mood vs. sad; well-balanced vs. irritable) fit well into a scale for the emotional reactions subsequent to school attendance (Cronbach's alpha = .87).
- Two questions aimed at the parents' assessment of their child's progress in independence in connection with adaptive skills.

Additionally parents were asked for their opinion about cooperation with the school in three different areas and about the necessity and implementation of support in the development of adaptive skills. Finally, we asked the parents if they were content with their choice of the type of school, if they regretted their decision and if they would make the same choice again. You will find at the end of this paper an example of the questionnaire's relevant parts. Since the questionnaire touched also other areas, only those necessary for understanding the results are reported.

3 Results

3.1 Parent estimation of progress in school performance and overall school experience

Assessment of the teachers' understanding of the children's specific needs, of the progress in school performance and of the amount of necessary homework: All in all, the majority of parents reported predominantly positive experiences. Two thirds of both groups - parents of pupils with learning disabilities and of pupils with intellectual disabilities - thought highly positively of the commitment and understanding on the part of the classroom teachers. The progress in school performance was also appraised as predominantly positive with no differences between parents of pupils with mild and moderate retardation. In summary, the two groups with different degrees of learning disabilities showed no differences.

If the type of school was taken into account, the type of school ($F(3,746) = 6.2, p < 0.001$) and the interaction of degree of learning disabilities x type of school ($F(3,746) = 3.9, p < 0.01$) proved to be significant (Table 1). These effects were particularly noticeable in the assessment of the amount of necessary home study (main effect of the type of school: $F(1,746) = 16.6, p < 0.001$; interaction of degree of learning disabilities x type of school ($F(3,746) = 3.8, p < 0.06$). The parents of children in inclusive classes and with a higher degree of disabilities reported that they did more home study with their children. Other effects of interaction were significant in the assessment of the classroom teacher's understanding and commitment ($F(1,783) = 8.6, p < 0.01$) and in the satisfaction with the progress in school performance ($F(1,765) = 4.6, p = 0.01$). Parents of children with learning disabilities thought that the classroom teachers in inclusive classes showed more commitment and understanding for than classroom teachers in special schools, but the reverse was true for teachers of pupils with intellectual disabilities. This means that for

pupils with intellectual disabilities, parents experienced a strong commitment of classroom teachers in special schools and of special educators in inclusive classes, whereas they noted that classroom teachers in inclusive classes were not particularly committed to pupils with intellectual disabilities. Lastly, parents of pupils with learning disabilities who attended inclusive classes were more satisfied with their children's school performance than parents whose children attended special schools; in the case of pupils with intellectual disabilities, however, it was the other way round.

Insert table 1 here

Reduction or increase of strain on the parents caused by schooling: The parents were asked to assess whether they felt less or more strain due to their children's school attendance. A clear majority of parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities reported that they felt schooling led to a reduction of strain (64 % vs. 49 %), but there was no significant difference with respect to the two types of school. When these assessments were subjected to an analysis of variance, these findings were unambiguously confirmed - the difference in strain caused by schooling was significant for pupils with different degrees of learning disabilities ($F(1,805) = 7.0, p < 0.01$); it was not significant for the types of school ($F(1,805) = 0.33, p = 0.56$). The interaction of the two factors also proved to be significant ($F(1,805) = 4.5, p < 0.05$). This stems from the fact that the two types of school had different effects on the parents. An increase of strain was felt by parents of children with learning disabilities if they attended a special school, but also by parents of children with intellectual disabilities if they attended inclusive classes.

Overall school experience: Answers to the general questions also showed that the majority of parents were aware of their children's progress and saw their school experiences under the current circumstances in a favourable light (see Table 2). The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed neither significant differences in the assessment of progress in school performance between pupils with learning disabilities and pupils with intellectual disabilities, nor any differences between the types of schooling, nor any interaction of the two factors. A post hoc univariate analysis of variance indicated a trend towards a more positive assessment of progress in school performance by pupils with intellectual disabilities ($F(1,712) = 2.8, p = 0.09$); this tendency was more pronounced with children who were taught in special schools (interaction of type of schooling x degree of disablement: $F(1,712) = 2.34, p = 0.11$) (Table 3).

Insert table 2 here

3.2 Parent estimation of social experiences

In order to analyse the nature of the social experiences with schoolmates in more detail, we carried out a multivariate analysis of variance with the intersubjective factors *degree of disablement* and *type of schooling*. Both factors proved to be significant (degree of disablement: $F(2,755) = 13.7, p < 0.001$; type of schooling: $F(2,755) = 4.0, p < 0.05$). Furthermore, a trend towards the interaction of the two main factors could be found ($F(2,754) = 2.7, p = 0.065$).

Parents seldom reported aggressive behaviour of schoolmates in the form of victimization. However, there was a difference between pupils with learning disabilities and pupils with

intellectual disabilities ($F(1,756) = 11.5, p < 0.001$). According to the parents' assessments, children with learning disabilities experienced victimization more often than children with intellectual disabilities. In the case of children with intellectual disabilities, there was an additional influence in the type of schooling (interaction of the degree of disablement and the type of schooling: $F(1,755) = 4.4, p < 0.05$). Parents of children with intellectual disabilities in special schools reported victimization much less frequently than in inclusive classes whereas no such difference was found for children with learning disabilities.

Parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities indicated more frequently that their children experienced friendly and pro-social behaviour of schoolmates than those of pupils with learning disabilities ($F(1,755) = 24.8, p < 0.001$). In this case neither the differences between the two types of schooling were significant nor the interaction of degree of disablement and type of schooling. At best there was the hint of a trend, since parents of pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive classes reported more frequently that they had experienced pro-social behaviour ($F(1,756) = 3.1, p = 0.078$).

Two additional questions served to assess how well the children got on with their schoolmates and how often they were meeting them outside school hours (Table 3). A multivariate analysis of variance with the interindividual factors *type of schooling* and *degree of disablement* was then carried out and showed that both factors - type of school ($F(2,860) = 8.6, p < 0.001$) as well as degree of disablement ($F(2,850) = 24.8, p < 0.001$) - were significant, but the interaction of these interindividual factors only showed a trend ($F(2,860) = 2.5, p = 0.08$). The majority of parents reported that their children got on well with schoolmates. Nevertheless, the estimation of the social relationships with classmates ($F(1,864) = 4.6, p < 0.05$) was more positive for pupils with intellectual disabilities than for pupils with learning disabilities (in both cases the marking scale ranged between 1 and 5,

"1" = very good, "5" = very poor). However, these assessments were different for pupils in inclusive classes and pupils in special schools and the interaction of these two factors at least showed a significant trend ($F(1,864) = 3.3, p = 0.07$). Getting on with schoolmates was more positively assessed by parents of pupils in inclusive classes than by parents of pupils in special schools. In addition, meeting schoolmates outside school hours was reported to be more frequent by parents of pupils in inclusive classes than by parents of pupils in special schools ($F(1,864) = 15.1, p < 0.001$).

Insert table 3 here

3.3 Retrospective parent appraisal of the choice of the type of schooling

All in all, 63 % of all parents reported that they did not regret their choice of the type of schooling. When we carried out an analysis of variance on the degree of regret in relation to the type of school the children attended, we found an influence of the degree of learning disabilities ($F(1,845) = 12.4, p < 0.001$). Although there was only a trend between parents of children in inclusive classes and children in special schools ($F(1,845) = 3.3, p = 0.068$), the interaction of the type of schooling and the degree of learning disabilities was significant ($F(1,845) = 6.3, p = 0.01$). As Table 4 shows, fewer parents of pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive classes regretted their original choice than did parents of pupils with learning disabilities in special schools. On the whole, the parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities stood by their original decision more firmly, regardless of whether they had decided on inclusive education or education in a special school.

The parents gave comparable answers to the question whether they would make the same choice again: the parents of pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive classes confirmed

their previous decision much more frequently than the parents of pupils with learning disabilities in special schools (Chi square = 28.4, df = 2, $p < 0.001$). However, there were no significant differences between the parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities.

Insert table 4 here

3.4 Differences between parents with low and high satisfaction

In order to examine the factors which had contributed to a negative assessment of the school experiences, we divided the parents into two groups according to their general statements. Parents who had reported that they regretted their original decision on the type of schooling (rather or very much) and that they would not make the same decision again were gathered in one group (the dissatisfied group, $N = 61$). The other group (the satisfied group, $N = 483$) comprised those parents who had not regretted their original decision on the type of schooling and would make exactly the same decision again. In the dissatisfied group only 6 % were parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities, but almost twice as many (13 %) were parents of pupils with learning disabilities (Chi square = 4.0, df = 1, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the proportion of dissatisfied parents of children who attended special schools (16 %) was greater than the proportion of dissatisfied parents of children in inclusive classes (9 %) (Chi square = 4.7, df = 1, $p < 0.05$). A comparison of parents of pupils with learning disabilities on the one hand with parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities on the other hand shows that parents of pupils with learning disabilities in special schools were more frequently dissatisfied with their previous decision (22 %) than those in inclusive classes (10 %) (Chi square = 8.8, df = 1, $p < 0.01$). Regarding satisfaction, there was no significant difference between the types of school for parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities.

The comparison between satisfied and dissatisfied parents of pupils with learning disabilities (Table 5) shows the following results:

- Dissatisfied parents had found it harder to accept the necessity of additional help for their child than satisfied parents and some parents are still not convinced of this necessity (Chi square = 84.5, df = 2, $p < 0.001$).
- Moreover, the dissatisfied parents were much less content with the counselling they had received from the school before making their decision on the type of schooling. They reported that the school counsellor had not quite accepted their opinions (Chi square = 67.6, df = 2, $p < 0.001$), and that the school counsellor had not made enough effort to fulfil their wishes (Chi square = 63.3, df = 2, $p < 0.001$).

The dissatisfied parents were also less frequently content with the cooperation with the teachers (Chi square = 52.0, df = 4, $p < 0.001$) and with the passing on of information (Chi square = 54.6, df = 3, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, the headmasters reported that the cooperation with the dissatisfied parents was not as good as with the satisfied parents (Chi square = 20.4, df = 3, $p < 0.001$). (This additional information results from a parallel enquiry addressed to the headmasters of the schools.)

Another striking result was that the dissatisfied parents reported German as their native language less frequently than satisfied parents (Chi square = 41.1, df = 1, $p < 0.001$); a large proportion of the dissatisfied parents came from Turkey. However, a comparison of the satisfied group with the dissatisfied group – excluding parents with German as a second language – confirmed most of the significant results mentioned above.

Insert table 5 here

4 Discussion

This representative survey attempts to evaluate the children's educational progress from the parents' point of view. The results show that such an evaluation must take the pupils' needs and difficulties into account. It must be emphasized that parents rated the special educational efforts by the schools in a mostly positive manner. This applies to parents of children with learning disabilities as well as to parents of children with intellectual disabilities, with relatively few differences between the two groups. According to the parents' reports, the majority of children liked to go to school and felt happy in their classes despite their low achievement (Leyser & Kirk, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2005). Concerning *social relationships within the class*, the parents of all groups reported considerably more positive experiences of pro-social behaviour of schoolmates than negative experiences such as victimization. Pupils in inclusive classes have an advantage with respect to social contacts within the class because they also meet their friends quite frequently even outside of school hours, independent of the degree of their disabilities. This result compares positively to other studies (e.g. Pijl & Frostad, 2010). Parents of pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive classes also gave a more positive assessment of the team spirit within the class. On the other hand, more positive assessments of the team spirit in special school classes were made by parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities. Regarding the emotional reactions subsequent to school attendance, there were no significant effects of the degree of cognitive deficits and the type of schooling. However, the parents of children with learning disabilities felt that school attendance caused less strain. They also felt that emotional reactions subsequent to school attendance were more positive for inclusive classes than for special schools.

On the whole, inclusive education received a more positive assessment by *parents of pupils with learning disabilities* (De Boer et al., 2010). This is not only borne out by the overall assessments but also by the parents' statements that they did not regret their choice of schooling and that they would make the same decision again if they had to choose. There was not much difference in the parents' assessments of the learning progress of children in inclusive classes compared with special school classes. These assessments were, however, not very consistent in that, for instance, parents of children with learning disabilities in special schools reported somewhat more frequently that their children were confronted with rather too little demands. Furthermore, as reported in an overall mark, parents of pupils in inclusive classes were more satisfied with their children's school performance than parents of pupils in special schools (Merz, 1982; Haeberlin et al., 1991; Tent et al., 1991; Hinz et al., 1998).

Parents of pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive classes also reported that the classroom teachers had more understanding for and gave more attention to their children than in special schools. However, as comparison shows, the special educators' commitment was assessed to be just as positive as that of the classroom teachers. Concerning progress in school performance, the parents of children in inclusive classes regard their own contribution, in the form of additional home study, as more extensive than parents of children in special schools. In the social sphere, children with learning disabilities in inclusive classes are rarely victimized, but rather frequently experience pro-social behaviour on the part of their schoolmates. Parents of children with learning disabilities in inclusive classes reported that they got on rather well with their schoolmates and that they were meeting them quite frequently outside school hours. In summary, the parents' experiences allow us to draw the conclusion that children with learning disabilities should rather be educated in inclusive classes than in special schools.

When looking at the *reports of parents of children with intellectual disabilities*, we see a different picture. Some of the positive experiences reported by parents of children with learning disabilities are missing. The reports show that pupils with intellectual disabilities in inclusive classes are confronted with rather too high demands on their capabilities and that this is much more often the case than in special schools. With respect to social relationships, victimization of pupils with intellectual disabilities is rare, and it is particularly in special schools that children experience much better protection against victimization than in inclusive classes. The little group size allows a better monitoring by the teacher, and the social expectations in special schools are better explained to and accepted by the pupils, whereas in inclusive classes the social life is not always carefully managed. Only some teachers are aware of the fact that they have to care about social life in class and that they are responsible for the socialization of their pupils toward peaceful interactions.

On the other hand, there is not much difference between the pro-social behaviour of schoolmates in special schools and in inclusive classes. The parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities reported that their children enjoyed such attention quite frequently. Although getting on with schoolmates received somewhat better assessments in special schools than in inclusive classes, pupils with cognitive deficits have much less opportunity to meet their school friends outside school hours.

Concerning the teacher-pupil relationships, the assessments of the teachers' understanding and commitment were similar for the classroom teachers in special schools and the special educators in inclusive education, whereas the classroom teachers in inclusive classes seem to give less attention to the pupils with intellectual disabilities. Parents of children with learning disabilities reported better understanding on the part of the regular classroom

teachers, whereas parents of children with intellectual disabilities mainly emphasized the supporting role of the special educators.

When analysing these results, it also became clear that the parents of pupils in inclusive classes have to be more supportive and have to contribute more to their children's progress in school performance, and that this applies particularly to parents of children with intellectual disabilities. In contrast, parents of pupils in special schools regarded the requirements made on them as relatively low.

On the whole, we found that *parents of children with intellectual disabilities tended to give more positive assessments of their experiences* (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Although there were no significant differences in the summary assessments of school performance between pupils with learning disabilities and pupils with intellectual disabilities, there were marked differences regarding the quality of the teacher-pupil relationship and the children's pleasure in attending school. This tendency towards a more positive view of the progress in school performance was even more pronounced for children who were educated in special schools.

There were marked differences in the parents' satisfaction with their previous choice of the type of school. These differences showed up not only in their statements as to what extent they regretted their previous choice, but also in their answers to the question of whether they would make the same choice again. Parents of pupils with learning disabilities tended to prefer inclusive education. Parents of pupils with intellectual disabilities did not show such a clear preference and expressed satisfaction with their previous choice of the type of school for their children. Therefore, one could also say that these parents generally kept to their original decision.

It is reasonable to conclude that inclusive education is preferable for pupils with learning disabilities, whereas pupils with intellectual disabilities can benefit from either of the two types of schooling. In any case, it is important to reconsider the procedures in parent counselling. Dissatisfaction with the communication between parents and professionals has been reported also by researchers from other countries (O'Connor et al., 2005; Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008). This applies in particular to counselling parents of children with German as a second language, who should be supported better and receive enough explanation about the special educational needs of their children at an early stage. Parents have the legal right to choose the type of schooling for their children, but this has not yet been fully realized. If, however, the legislation grants parents the choice of type of schooling, their freedom of decision should be respected and supported.

Finally although parents report a high satisfaction with their children's school experiences, an inclusive school system needs further development especially regarding students with intellectual disabilities. Classroom teachers in inclusive classes often don't realize that they are responsible for the learning process of children with intellectual disabilities too. They feel inadequately prepared to teach children with intellectual disabilities and therefore they delegate this task. In inclusive classes not only the special educator, but also the classroom teacher must have enough expertise in teaching children with different needs, also children with intellectual disabilities. This requires additional teacher training. Only if the classroom teachers are able to arrange a positive learning and social environment for all children, irrespective of their heterogeneity, parents will not be worried about their children's support and the next steps through an inclusive school system will be possible.

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Table 1 Parents' assessments of teachers, satisfaction with the progress in school performance
(arithmetic means, standard deviations in brackets)

	<i>Pupils with learning disabilities</i>		<i>Pupils with intellectual disabilities</i>	
	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes.</i>	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes</i>
Understanding and commitment of classroom teacher	1.63 (0.99)	1.83 (1.07)	1.80 (0.90)	1.47 (0.79)
Understanding and commitment of special educator	1.61 (0.99)		1.44 (0.80)	
Satisfaction with the progress in school performance	1.89 (0.94)	2.07 (1.06)	2.00 (1.00)	1.86 (0.96)
Extent of homework	2.40 (1.00)	2.62 (1.01)	2.17 (1.09)	2.77 (1.23)
Amount of stress (1=more stress; 3=less stress)	2.46 (0.6)	2.37 (0.6)	2.48 (0.7)	2.63 (0.6)

Table 2 Experiences in the classroom and with teachers and social experiences with the schoolmates

(mean values of factors, standard deviations in brackets)

	<i>Pupils with learning disabilities</i>		<i>Pupils with intellectual disabilities</i>	
	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes.</i>	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes</i>
F1: Positive relationship with teachers and school	1.66 (0.40)	1.61 (0.39)	1.71 (0.35)	1.76 (0.37)
F2: Positive progress in school performance	1.37 (0.43)	1.38 (0.45)	1.31 (0.40)	1.46 (0.40)
Victimization by schoolmates	0.82 (0.80)	0.84 (0.86)	0.72 (0.76)	0.41 (0.66)
Prosocial experiences with schoolmates	2.36 (0.70)	2.15 (0.83)	2.59 (0.69)	2.62 (0.70)

Table 3 Social experiences at school (arithmetic means, standard deviations in brackets)

	<i>Pupils with learning disabilities</i>		<i>Pupils with intellectual disabilities</i>	
	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes.</i>	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes</i>
Getting on with classmates	1.83 (0.81)	2.02 (0.86)	1.81 (0.79)	1.73 (0.72)
Meeting schoolmates outside school hours	2.44 (0.95)	2.72 (0.90)	2.87 (0.95)	3.29 (0.98)

Table 4 Regret of the original decision (arithmetic means, standard deviations in brackets) and readiness to repeat the decision on the type of schooling (percentages of agreements)

	<i>Pupils with learning disabilities</i>		<i>Pupils with intellectual disabilities</i>	
	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes.</i>	<i>inclusive classes</i>	<i>special classes</i>
Extent of regret (1=not at all; 5=very much)	1.67 (1.1)	2.10 (1.3)	1.56 (0.9)	1.49 (1.0)
Definitely the same decision again	76 %	55 %	70 %	77 %
Not sure	17 %	28 %	24 %	16 %
Not the same decision again	7 %	17 %	6 %	7 %

Table 5 Differences between satisfied and dissatisfied parents of pupils with learning disabilities
with respect to the following statements:

	<i>Satisfied parents</i>	<i>Dissatisfied parents</i>
Not yet convinced of special educational needs	2 %	39 %
School accepted parents' view	71 %	16 %
School tried to comply with the parents' wishes	65 %	24 %
High parent satisfaction with the passing on of information	51 %	26 %
High parent satisfaction with the parent-teacher cooperation	71 %	50 %
School finds parent cooperation satisfactory	69 %	38 %
Mother's native language is German	90 %	56 %