special educational needs and inclusion
multiple perspectives of preschool educators in the UK

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ABSTRACT
This article first offers an overview of policy contexts in the four countries of the UK. Second, it reviews recent research into perspectives on special educational needs and inclusion in the preschool years. Third, the rationale and research design of a study to investigate preschool educators' perspectives on these issues are outlined. Five key themes are discussed: their personal experiences; their professional development; their views of childhood; their thoughts on inclusion and exclusion, and their beliefs and practices around the roles of parents. The article concludes with discussion of the importance of greater cross-system understanding of curriculum, pedagogy and educational ethos and identifies the need for further research.

KEYWORDS comparative perspectives, early education, inclusion, professional development, special educational needs

introduction
The focus of this article is educators' perspectives on issues related to working with young children with learning difficulties in specialist and 'mainstream' generic settings. The article begins with an overview of recent UK policy developments, particularly in the area of the preschool curriculum. This is followed by a selective review of recent research into preschool educators' perspectives on special educational needs and inclusion, identifying recurring themes and common concerns. Third, the rationale, aims and research design
of the study are outlined. The article then discusses five factors, identified by a range of preschool educators in the four countries of the UK: their personal experiences; their professional development; their views of childhood; their thoughts on inclusion and exclusion; and their beliefs and practices around the roles of parents. These themes are discussed with illustrative extracts from questionnaires, email dialogues and face-to-face interviews. The article concludes with a discussion on the importance of greater cross-system and inter-setting understanding of curriculum, pedagogy and educational ethos and identifies the need for further research.

policy developments in preschool education in the UK

In recent years preschool education in all four countries of the UK has been the subject of intensive policy development. In England and Wales, a state-prescribed curriculum for children below the statutory school starting age was heralded with what was called Desirable Outcomes of Nursery Education on Entry to Compulsory Schooling, produced by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA, 1996). Later it was amended and made concrete in 2000 with government recommendations for a Foundation Stage curriculum with Early Learning Goals (ELGs) for children aged three to five years by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority/Department of Education and Employment (QCA/DFEE, 2000).

State-required baseline assessment was introduced in 1998 (SCAA, 1997) under the National Framework for Baseline Assessment. For the first time in England and Wales, four-year-olds (children below the age of compulsory schooling) were required to be assessed at school entry. The discomfort of practitioners and dissatisfaction of policy makers reigned until 2002 when necessary changes were made to adjust the point of nationally-reported assessment to the end of children's first year of formal schooling. The new Foundation Stage Profile from the QCA/Department of Education and Skills (QCA/DFES, 2003) was implemented for the first time in 2003.

In summary, the former curriculum and assessment policies (SCAA, 1996, 1997) – unpopular with the majority of early childhood educators – resulted in an assessment-led preschool curriculum that threatened the broadly inclusive nature of early childhood education provision. Other policy initiatives followed: the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998); the National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999); and the Codes of Practice for Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DfEE, 1994; DFES, 2001). Each had their own particular impact on early childhood education, but the collective effect of these policies was a narrowing of the curriculum and a reforming of provision so that it became increasingly less appropriate for many young children and militated especially against the inclusion of children with SEN.
In the 1990s, policy responses to concerns about educational standards plunged early childhood education into changes in practice at a pace and depth never before experienced. In the 15 years from 1988 to 2002, early childhood educators in England and Wales have:

- implemented a national curriculum and subsequent revisions;
- responded to rigorous and time-consuming inspection processes;
- implemented the Children Act 1989 which, among other things, placed particular emphasis on services for children in need under eight;
- interpreted expected outcomes of nursery education;
- worked with new Codes of Practice for the identification of children with SEN;
- implemented national baseline assessment of children on entry to school;
- worked in a climate of increasing expectations of children and adults;
- responded to new demands in relation to professional development;
- grappled with issues affecting the teaching of four-year-olds in school;
- worked within a developing network of diversity in provision through Early Years Development and Child Care Partnerships (EYDCPs);
- implemented the National Literacy Strategy;
- implemented the National Numeracy Strategy;
- implemented the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance;
- and implemented changes in assessment from baseline assessment to the Foundation Stage Profile (Nutbrown, 2002).

No less than 15 different policy initiatives in as many years have challenged early years educators in England and Wales. Within this context of continual change there has been great concern that an over-emphasis of 'academic' achievement (particularly in literacy and numeracy) was resulting in a neglect of children's emotional well-being (Roberts, 2002). The pace and extent of policy development has left no element of state-funded early childhood education provision untouched. Early childhood education has been in the spotlight with a major Sure Start initiative creating new demands and offering career opportunities to many early years professionals, to work in particularly disadvantaged communities where educational achievement is low and young children and their families experience multiple difficulties.

Across the UK, policy makers have moved – with increasing awareness – to incorporate preschool education provision into policy developments. It has become clear that early childhood education and care is a major factor in the economic development of a country and its capacity to foster lifelong learning for its citizens (OCED, 2001). In Wales, the National Assembly for Wales (NAW, 2003), published detailed radical proposals on the development of a statutory curriculum to establish a Foundation Phase for three- to seven-year-olds. In The Learning Country, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning for
Wales said of the proposals:

The implications are profound and far-reaching. The opportunity to transform the life choices of all our youngest children and to lift standards and expectations in the early years is exceptional. (NAW, 2003: 8)

The proposals in Wales included a learning continuum from birth to seven (NAW, 2003: 14) and a national assessment continuum (NAW, 2003: 18). Proposals for assessment highlighted individual achievement of over-predetermined outcomes:

Robust, on-going assessment is essential if children are to be motivated and challenged to achieve high standards. The current arrangements for baseline and statutory teacher assessment should continue in the Foundation Phase to support staff in their drive to continuously improve standards. By observing children carefully to note their progress, rather than focusing on the attainment of predetermined outcomes, staff should be able to plan a still more appropriate curriculum that supports children’s development according to individual needs (NAW, 2003: 17)

Of the education of children with learning difficulties the proposals for Wales asserted that:

Substantial research evidence suggests that children do not begin to benefit from extensive formal teaching until about the age of six or seven in line with their social and cognitive development. An earlier introduction can result in some children underachieving and attaining lower standards. Introducing the Foundation Phase in Wales would allow more time for children to follow an appropriate curriculum. It would help them to gain the important skills and attitudes that lay solid foundations for future learning. It could help prevent underachievement and raise overall standards. It could also prevent some children being labelled too early as having special educational needs, as there will be scope to give time and appropriate support to overcome potential difficulties within mainstream provision. (NAW, 2003: 14)

In Scotland, the Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5 (Scottish Office, 1999) was based (among other things) on the premise that:

Having regard to the best interests of children means working with parents to recognise and give priority to meeting the individual needs of all children . . . (Scottish Office, 1999: 2)

The Curriculum Framework for Children stated that:

A commitment to social inclusion is at the heart of current policy on early education and childcare. This is promoted through broadly-based and integrated support for children and families, involving education, health and social services and based on the guiding principles of meeting the needs and best interests of the child and their family and ensuring that every child feels included. (Scottish Office, 1999: 55)

The curriculum for preschool provision in Northern Ireland, from the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI, 1997), emphasized the
characteristics and needs of young children and saw the inclusion of children with learning difficulties as an enriching experience for everyone. It stressed the potential of additional support:

Such integration, however, requires careful and detailed planning before and following admission. The adult and parent(s) concerned should seek the help of the appropriate professionals in identifying the special needs so that, if necessary, individual learning programmes can be devised for the child and appropriate resources provided. Care should be taken to ensure that no pre-school setting admits more children with special needs than it can provide for, bearing in mind the needs of other children in the setting and the staffing ratio. (DENI, 1997: 11)

The Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance in England (QCA/DfEE, 2000), meanwhile, was:

. . . intended to help practitioners plan to meet the diverse needs of all children so that most will achieve and some, where appropriate, will go beyond the early learning goals by the end of the foundation stage. (QCA/DfEE, 2000: 5)

The guidance was based on several principles including that:

. . . no child should be excluded or disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, special educational needs, disability, gender or ability. (QCA/DfEE, 2000: 11)

With regard to ‘children with special educational needs and disabilities’ (QCA/DfEE, 2000: 18) the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance for England encouraged multi-agency and multi-professional working and the close involvement of parents and the removal of barriers to inclusive practices:

Practitioners will need to plan for each child’s individual learning requirements, including those children who need additional support or have particular needs or disabilities. The focus should be on removing barriers for children where these already exist and on preventing learning difficulties from developing. Early years practitioners have a key role to play in working with parents to identify learning needs and respond quickly to any area of particular difficulty, and to develop an effective strategy to meet these needs, making good use of individual educational plans, so that later difficulties can be avoided. (QCA/DfEE, 2000: 18)

The various curriculum policies of the four countries of the UK will be set against an international background which contextualizes the gradual movement towards inclusion. It is to this international scene that we now turn in order to further illuminate developments in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

inclusion in the early years: European viewpoints

Consensual ideas about who or what is ‘special’ change, sometimes rapidly; all such definitions belong to particular historical moments and are reflected in
contemporary policies . . . it goes without saying that other interpretations may well be made, dependent upon cultural determinants. (Clough, 2000: 5)

The current curriculum policies in the four countries in the UK find parallels in many other European countries as educators, parents and policy makers seek answers to the difficult questions surrounding the education of vulnerable pupils – vulnerable because they are young and because some of their peers and some adults in their living and learning communities may perceive their ‘difference’ as an insurmountable or unwelcome ‘difficulty’. Throughout this period of rapid policy development, what has remained constant is the important need to understand and provide for young children with learning difficulties, whatever their specific needs might be. The 1997 Green Paper for England and Wales put it like this:

There are strong educational, as well as social and moral grounds for educating children with special educational needs with their peers. We aim to increase the level and quality of inclusion within mainstream schools, while protecting and enhancing specialist provision for those who need it. (DfEE, 1997: 15)

The Salamanca Statement: Framework for Action for Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994: 17) called for inclusion to be the norm and the conference adopted a ‘Framework for Action’ which would require all children to be accommodated in ordinary schools, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. According to the framework, national and local policies should stipulate that disabled children attend the neighbourhood school ‘that would be attended if the child did not have a disability’. The statement insisted on the provision of education for all ‘within the regular system’.

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building on an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 1995: 8)

There were economic as well as sociological, political and educational goals embedded in the Statement; it was bold and important, but:

In this multinational urge for inclusion lies the danger of physical inclusion but curricular and emotional exclusion unless children are included for and of themselves, by teachers who are professionally and personally equipped to provide appropriate education for all. For inclusion is about a radical deal more than physical location. (Clough, 1998: 5)

Inclusive education practice should be developmentally and culturally appropriate (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; Vakil et al., 2003;) where any necessary specifically tailored support is the taken-for-granted ingredient of
planning for all children's learning. Where this is achieved Nutbrown (1998) has argued that early education at its best is, de facto, inclusive education.

A thematic review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in 12 countries carried out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001) identified, as a key element of successful ECEC policy, 'a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support'. Such a policy, it suggested, features ‘an inclusive and flexible approach to diversity, without compromising quality’. The OECD review suggested that such an approach means:

. . . mainstreaming children with special educational needs, whenever this is deemed in the best interests of the child. When inclusion is not feasible, more targeted programmes and projects can be developed to provide equality of educational opportunity and promote social integration for children living in disadvantaged communities. (OECD, 2001: 130)

The nature of children's difficulties influences the disposition and capacity of early childhood educators to include children in generic preschool settings, and what is sometimes called ‘challenging’ behaviour is no less a matter for concern in kindergartens and preschools than it is in the education of older pupils. Emotional and behavioural difficulty (EBD) is, of course, often defined by virtue of the environments in which children are placed. As Angelides suggested:

. . . the role which schools and teachers play in the development of behaviour problems is major and substantial. This perspective gives rise to the interest in schools as units, and teachers and pupils are members of those units, and not as individuals with separate unique characteristics. They are, of course, unique individuals but, at the same time, they operate as integral parts of the same institution, under the same culture, so their behaviour must be studied in relation to the specific organisational context. (Angelides, 2000: 57)

It is often the case that including young children with EBD presents educators with more difficulties than does the inclusion of children with physical impairment. Croll and Moses pointed to ‘widespread expressions of support for the principles of inclusion and a continuing level of support for separate special school provision’ (2000: 1). They identified ‘support for inclusion as an ideal' but ‘relatively limited influence of such an ideal on education policy’ (2000: 1). Inclusion depended on the capacity of mainstream schools to meet the needs of children with various difficulties though this was often dependent on the ‘type’ and ‘severity’ of those difficulties.

Some 20 years after Italian legislation introduced a national policy on inclusion and virtually eliminated schools for students ‘with disabilities’, a survey on the attitudes of Italian teachers revealed their clear support for the concept of inclusion and willingness to teach children with learning difficulties, but less than 25 percent thought they had sufficient skills and training (Cornoldi et al., 1998).
Learning and development of all children – and this is particularly crucial in the early years – depends upon and is influenced by many factors: settings, teachers, environments and communities are just a few of those human factors which impact on the successful inclusion of children in mainstream settings. Such variation can explain why inclusion worked for some of the time but not consistently for all of these students (Berry, 2002).

Denmark has pioneered many projects of integration. The integration of pupils with various learning difficulties into mainstream classrooms and preschool education is voluntary and used by 98 percent of preschool age children with 1.25 percent of primary age pupils attending special schools and classes which are for pupils with ‘more serious disabilities’ (Amtsrådsforeningen, 1998).

In 2000, it was reported that the number of pupils referred to special classes and schools had increased by approximately one-third since 1990 (Egelund and Hansen, 2000). This rise was accounted for by the growing number of children diagnosed as having ‘severe emotional disturbance’ in the form of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Egelund, 2000: 93).

Poulou and Norwich (2000) pointed to the need for teacher professional development to support their work with pupils with EBD and a US study also commented on the level and appropriateness of teachers’ qualifications to teach young children with specific learning needs.

Only a minority of teachers have completed any early childhood education programme, much less a merged early childhood/early childhood special education programme that would provide the knowledge, skills and experiences necessary for working effectively with young children with developmental delays. The need for ongoing staff development for preschool teachers becomes even more urgent in light of their limited access to special educators in many early childhood programmes. (McDonnell et al., 1997: 272)

A study of 141 Special Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in England (Crowther et al., 2001) found that 72 percent relied on 'occasional training events' or professional development days as their only form of SEN training; none had specialist route Masters degrees and 13 percent had certificate level qualifications in SEN. Of teachers in the Netherlands, Karsten et al. (2001) observed that where positive developmental progress of pupils 'at risk' are observed, this strengthened the case for the professional development of teachers and the provision of support for teachers actively promoting inclusive schooling.

In the early years, parental involvement is broadly accepted to be key to the successful and meaningful education of young children. The OECD concluded that parental ‘engagement’ builds on parents' unique knowledge of their children' and further explained:

Parental engagement is not an attempt to teach parents to be ‘involved’ (they already are) or to hold them solely responsible for difficulties a child may have. In
democratic ECEC institutions, the approach of professionals is to share responsibility for young children with parents, and learn from the unique knowledge that parents from diverse backgrounds can contribute. (2001: 117)

The issues identified briefly here also echo those of a recent study (Nutbrown and Clough, 2003) which highlighted five key themes in the relevant literature which crossed geographical and cultural borders:

- There is a climate of policy change across Europe;
- A multi-national commitment towards and inclusive response to education of children with learning difficulties has been established;
- A commonality of concern exists about the education of children with EBD;
- The exposition of inclusive ideologies continues in parallel with the perpetuation of exclusive practices;
- Parents are variously involved in their children's education, and professionals' perceptions of those roles differ with their experience and expectations.

The above comparative study of preschool approaches to teaching young children who are disabled or who experience learning difficulties identified four themes from a survey of preschool educators working in a variety of forms of preschool education in four European countries (Denmark, Greece, Italy and the UK) (Nutbrown and Clough, 2003). In this article, we report findings from the UK participants in a second, similar survey. Drawing on the perspectives of preschool educators in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, this article reports some initial findings as they relate to five emerging themes.

**Methodology**

Data were obtained from a total of 94 preschool educators from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Respondents provided 68 questionnaire responses, 22 email dialogues and four face-to-face interviews; these form the basis of the findings reported in this article (see Table 1).

Participants were volunteers who were contacted through a range of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Questionnaires</th>
<th>Email dialogues</th>
<th>Face to face interviews</th>
<th>Total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Sources of data for the study
professional networks and development programmes. Thirty potential participants were contacted in each of the four countries, making a maximum response rate of 120, we suggest the return of 94 responses indicates the high interest and concern of professionals for the issues the study seeks to address. We make no claims as to the representative nature of the sample but our aim was to take some 'snapshots' of views and practices from volunteer participants and to ensure that professionals in a wide range of settings and services were included. Participants were thus from a range of settings and approaches, covering fee-paying, charitable and state provision and using a range of curricular and pedagogic approaches.

Questionnaires were administered both by post and by email. Participants were given the choice of whether to add their name and contact details or return anonymous responses. Email dialogues comprised a series of extended email exchanges (over about three weeks) that began with pre-prepared questions and also included follow-up questions in response to what participants wrote. Face-to-face interviews each lasted about 90 minutes and were largely life-historical in nature.

Interview and questionnaire schedules and email dialogue protocols were based on those developed in an earlier study (Nutbrown and Clough, 2003). All three methods of data collection addressed similar questions: career history; experience of working with children with learning difficulties; professional development; opinions on inclusion; views on parental roles; and involvement. Questionnaires were brief, with 10 questions in total. The face-to-face interviews and the extended email dialogues addressed the same themes as the questionnaires but these two methods enabled us to probe more deeply into the responses given by research participants and so, in some cases, build a richer picture of respondents' thinking, values, beliefs, as well as practices.

Data were coded, categorized and analysed using a computer analysis package, NVivo, which enabled us to interrogate the data, thus identifying the five key features discussed here as our central findings.

**five key themes**

Five key themes emerged from the three data sets about which all participants reported interesting views and concerns. These were:

- educators' personal experiences
- professional development
- views of childhood
- inclusion and exclusion
- the roles of parents

The remainder of this article uses extracts from the data to discuss these themes.
educators’ personal experiences

Respondents were from a range of settings and backgrounds. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents across three types of preschool provision in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents across three types of preschool provision in the four countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>LEA/foundation stage</th>
<th>Independent fee-paying</th>
<th>Steiner Waldorf</th>
<th>Montessori</th>
<th>Pre-school/playgroup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Across these settings and services respondents had a wide range of roles, responsibilities and backgrounds, and the sample included preschool educators working within a variety of curricular and pedagogic approaches. These included: local authority Foundation Stage nursery and reception classes; independent fee-paying nurseries; Steiner Waldorf kindergartens; Montessori nursery schools and voluntary-run community preschool playgroups.

All but three respondents said they had some experience of working with children with learning difficulties – most with just one or two children, others having worked with many children with a variety of learning and developmental needs. The learning needs and difficulties most commonly listed as exceptionally demanding were:

- EBD (including ADHD)
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- Multiple and Physical Learning Difficulties

Three respondents said they had specific responsibility for children with learning difficulties and all respondents, though their specific roles and responsibilities varied, shared the common experience of daily contact with young children in their work setting. The majority of participants in the study were working in provision that could be called ‘generic’ if not ‘mainstream’. For example, Steiner-Waldorf Kindergartens and Montessori nursery schools would not be considered ‘mainstream’ but their provision for all children could be regarded as ‘generic’ rather than ‘special’ – as applied to the term SEN – in their overall disposition to the education of children with learning difficulties alongside their chronological peers.
We were told a number of stories about the development of professional careers during the life-historical interviews and email dialogues. A preschool playgroup leader from England told us:

My sister was deaf, she went to a Deaf School and was residential from around about seven. I was nine then, and I . . . well, I ‘lost’ my sister. She learned, yes, no questions about that, but she lost so much – her family relationships, confidence with neighbours, she’s still timid when she shops and meets strangers. When I started working with children – after I had my own – I decided that I would move heaven and earth to keep children with problems like hers in their own local schools. I’ll take any child in the playgroup and fight tooth and nail for whatever they need to help them stay with us and go to the school next door.

Such career decisions are not always so directly related to key personal life events but accounts such as this are not uncommon and parents' experiences can offer a powerful voice in support of the inclusive project (Perera, 2001). Clough has suggested that routes to inclusive education are not necessarily ‘accidental’ and that there may well be, for some, a purposeful seeking out of work in SEN and inclusive settings (Clough and Corbett, 2000).

Professional development

Professional development opportunities for preschool educators was an issue which generated much comment and surprisingly few felt appropriately equipped for working with children with learning difficulties. The majority reported that the main part of their understanding and knowledge was derived ‘on the job’ through experience in teaching young children with learning difficulties as and when such children joined their settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>High level</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Derived from experience</th>
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<tr>
<td>England</td>
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<td>Wales</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typical comments were:

I’ve spoken with the speech therapist and occupational therapist when they have visited about individual children. (Nursery nurse in Northern Ireland)

I’ve spoken with children’s social workers and health visitors and the early years adviser. (Playgroup Co-ordinator in Northern Ireland)
I've had no professional development really. Occasional training but not always when required. (Preschool leader in Aberdeenshire)

I've had Autism Awareness training, however, I don't feel qualified or really informed enough to give the support children with SEN deserve. (Nursery teacher in Wales)

A few respondents felt their professional development was of a high level, such as:

I've had a lot of training over my career. Specific things like developing children's language skills, supporting children in the Autistic Spectrum, and general stuff on the Code of Practice, Target Setting and Action Planning. (Early Years Centre Manager in England)

I've had training through the local education authority and the EYDCP as a SEN Co-ordinator and opportunities to work with experts in Special needs. I've also followed Steiner Curative Therapy training. All of these experiences are useful. (Steiner-Waldorf Kindergarten Teacher in England)

I did an M.Ed and specialized in SEN and young children. Fantastic, I learned so much and became my own 'expert'. I still read so much, particularly around managing behaviour and particular EBD issues. (Nursery Teacher in Scotland)

Most early years practitioners in the study who reported that they valued their professional development in the field highly were experienced professionals who had studied at postgraduate level; having been awarded diplomas or Masters degrees in areas related to early education, special educational needs and inclusion.

views of childhood

Some interesting concepts about childhood emerged in the data. Respondents' views of early childhood were categorized into two broad areas. First, childhood as a vulnerable state where adults must protect and shield children from risk. Examples of this view included comments such as:

All young children need to be nurtured. Childhood is such a vulnerable time, whatever children's needs, we must protect them from threats to their bodies, and souls. (Steiner Kindergarten teacher in England)

Little children are so at risk aren't they? It's such a responsibility to try to protect them from all sorts of horrors, we have to try to do that for all of them in the early years, Special Needs or not. (Teacher in Northern Ireland)

This is an important time of calm and quiet discovery, the environment should be such that children can learn without distraction or worry. (Montessori Teacher in England)

Second, childhood as a time of discovery, of oneself as well as of knowledge of the world, where adults have the responsibility to support and encourage.
Typical comments in this category were:

I think it’s part of my job to get each one of them to have a go – be bold! So I push them a bit to try things – even if they struggle and they might have SEN or something – but I want them to take a risk, they don’t need mollycoddling!
(Nursery teacher in Wales)

I think disabled children should be given opportunities like the rest, let them try things, it’s no good keeping them confined in case they have trouble. (Day Nursery leader in Scotland)

inclusion and exclusion

An earlier study (Clough and Nuthbrown, 2002) found that early years educators suggested that the Index for Inclusion (Booth et al., 2002) was a useful tool for school and, hence, professional development around issues of inclusive cultures and practice. The Index maps out a process which schools and other educational settings can follow in order to change their culture towards the inclusion of all who belong. The process of institution-based work on the Index could lead to real personal and professional change, as one teacher said:

It’s been a lot of work but getting the children involved and the parents was really good – made a difference to the way we think about things now – I think. I would say that we’re – most of us – at the point where we ‘think’ inclusion now – first.

And another said:

It was painful at times. I had to confront and admit some personal prejudices.

Such work is about examining and changing cultures as well as individuals and the process of such change can be a vital and dynamic part of professional development. Experience of working with the Index can also bring about a change in personal attitudes and responses too, and positive attitudes towards inclusive education are key in establishing successful inclusive systems, (Maga et al., 1998).

When we asked the preschool educators in our survey whether children should be included, a small few were unequivocal advocates for full inclusion:

Absolutely, there’s too much segregation in society young. Children should learn about differences and – before prejudices are formed – they can experience living together with others who are different. (Teacher in Northern Ireland)

Table 4 shows the three categories of response from the participants who said they believed either that: all children be included; or that children should be included ‘in principle’; or that children with learning difficulties should not be included.

Of the few who were unequivocal about the importance of inclusion for all, one said:
Yes, I feel the only way forward is through integration. (Nursery Nurse in Northern Ireland)

**Table 4: Educators’ Beliefs on Inclusion and Exclusion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>All children should be included</th>
<th>In principle, but depends on difficulties</th>
<th>No inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with a previous study of European educators (Nutbrown and Clough, 2003) the most commonly-held view was positively for inclusion in principle but many respondents set out conditions around support, resources and the effect of other pupils. We have referred to such a view as the ‘yes – but . . . ’ factor. Some said:

Yes – but depending on the nature of their individual challenge and the ability of the teacher to support effectively that special need in her setting. (Steiner-Waldorf Kindergarten Teacher in England)

Yes, when children with SEN are in mainstream classes it promotes their overall development, however, consideration to the adult/child ratio should be given, for example, the classroom assistant may be needed so as not to hinder other children’s progression. (Playgroup Assistant in Northern Ireland)

Yes, in some cases, but not all. It must be beneficial to the SEN child but not disruptive to the other children. (Nursery Nurse in Wales)

Not necessarily, however it is often good for both sides to support and be supported by each other. It is wonderful to see how accepting and naturally supportive non-SEN children can be – they also learn patience, tolerance and generosity. (Steiner Teacher in England)

Six respondents said that children with learning difficulties should not be included, arguing:

No, some children cannot tolerate the presence of their peers and become very distressed. (Playleader in Scotland)

No, because they’d be better off in a specialist centre. (Assistant teacher and SENCO in Montessori school England)

Many of our ‘yes – but . . . ’ respondents identified the availability of adequate support for the child and staff as the key issue which makes for successful inclusion. Resources for such support have been earlier identified as crucial
(Croll and Moses, 2000) although it is often as much a matter of professional willingness and responsiveness as of effective use of additional support resources (Karsten et al., 2001). Emanuelsson (2001) suggests that it is teaching not children that needs support. Whether the need for support is part of educators’ constructions of what is needed effectively to include pupils with learning difficulties or part of the reality of effective education provision, participants in the study confirmed that issues of support are often a major concern when inclusion is under consideration.

the roles of parents

As might be expected in a survey of early childhood educators, there was broad agreement that, in the early years, parents should be involved in their children’s learning and development programmes (see Table 5). Examination of their comments uncovered differing views of what such involvement meant.

As much involvement as possible, as this gives parents a greater understanding of what is being achieved and then parents can reinforce these values in the home. (Montessori teacher in England)

There should be close links with the group and the home. Activities which we can use on the advice of the educational psychologist can help parents continue work at home. (Nursery Nurse in Scotland)

As much involvement as possible, they know their children better than a specialist. (Day nursery manager in Scotland)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Full involvement</th>
<th>Some involvement, but…</th>
<th>Not involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some behavioural difficulties have been explained by a lack of parental support for children at home:

Some parents struggle too, with their own literacy and lifestyles. That creates difficulties for their children. (Preschool playgroup worker in Wales)

Arguments for the non-involvement of parents, giving them information but not consulting them as partners, were based on views that parents themselves struggled with many problems. A small number of participants felt that their involvement in preschool would exacerbate existing difficulties for the
children and staff. In all cases where such comments were made the children cited were identified by respondents as having EBD. One teacher said:

Sometimes it's just so painful for parents to hear the awful things their children do, and what professionals say about them. I just wonder if it's better for them not to be so involved in all the meetings and things. I feel sorry for them, especially when they've got other difficulties themselves. (Nursery teacher in England)

And another:

Oh! Sometimes they just make it worse, I know that's a horrid thing to say, but if I could just get on with it sometimes, but some parents make me feel it's my fault their children behave so badly! I s'pose they don't mean to, and, well, one particular mother, she, well, she just has to get at somebody – so it seems that it's me. Wears you out though . . . (Nursery teacher in Wales)

These views were not common, and the following expressions were much more typical of the overall view in our sample:

Parents are their children's primary educators. I really believe that – they're not with us that long. Of course parents must be involved. (Playgroup worker in Northern Ireland)

Overwhelmingly, it was suggested that parents should be included because:

- parents need information about processes, systems and intervention strategies;
- parents have ultimate responsibility for the care and education of their children;
- fundamentally, parents spend more time with and have the most intimate knowledge of their children.

The literature on parental involvement in preschool education in general supports the latter view and as such the view of participants in our survey comes as no surprise.

**conclusion**

In this article we have reflected the views of 94 early childhood educators from a range of settings and services in the UK on the inclusion of young children with learning difficulties. We are cautious about any claims to the generalizability of our findings, but the data reported here, mirror those of a wider European study (Nutbrown and Clough, 2003) and the related literature lead us to four broad conclusions:
different policy responses in the four countries of the UK seek to achieve similar goals of inclusion

Whilst all curriculum policies in the UK support and promote to varying degrees the inclusion of children with SEN, the language and emphases of such policies differ, as do strategies for promoting learning in the early years. This is perhaps most obvious in a comparison between England and Wales. In England, academic progress is deemed important from three years old with steps, planned learning goals and focused assessment targets whereas, in Wales, the proposed policy response is to delay formal learning until children are seven years old in order to reduce the likelihood of early failure.

preschool educators are broadly supportive of inclusive early education

As we have seen, few professionals in this study argued against inclusive practices, though many attached caveats to their pro-inclusive stance that related to support, professional development and the desire to balance the needs of all children. Future research is needed that addresses what we have called the ‘yes – but . . . ’ factor.

preschool educators’ responses and emphases vary according to professional background and experience of systems and settings

Attention to the voices, for example, of Steiner-Waldorf kindergarten teachers, shows clear and particular values and beliefs about children in the context of a nurturing environment. It is striking too, that a pro-inclusive stance is often to be found in the voices of educators from Northern Ireland, perhaps influenced by many years of working in a divided society.

preschool educators have strong views on inclusion of children with learning difficulties and are willing to share these views with openness and honesty

We have learned from them, how they variously ‘make’ the policies of the countries in which they work into meaningful realities. To the fore in their thinking are the needs of all children; and their inclusive (or non-inclusive) practices are developed and informed by their views of childhood and their beliefs about the roles of parents in the education of young children.

Finally, this study shows that there is still much to learn about the ways in which various policies of UK countries are realized in practice and how practitioners’ views are embodied in their setting-based work. This is a task for future research.
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