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The placement process of children with ASD in early-age educational provisions in Israel from a phenomenological perspective

Rachel Ravid

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Education (EdD)

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Department of Education

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*“Do not be angry when I say something different from your needs.
Do not be angry when I say something opposite from what you know, when I say I do
not know.*

The truths are different: yours, mine, his, hers . . .

Different are yesterday’s and today’s truths.

And different will be tomorrow’s truths, yours and mine”

—Janusz Korczak

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Abstract

The placement of young children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is portrayed in the literature as complex, mainly due to difficulties matching the setting type with the child's condition. Most studies focus on placement's outcome; however, this phenomenological study explores placement as a process evolving through social interactions between parents and professionals. Therefore, the process for young ASD children within the Israeli context is explored from the perspectives of both parents and kindergarten teachers. The findings are interpreted based on Schutz's social phenomenology.

Data include semi-structured interviews with five mothers and four teachers, visual tools, documents, emails, telephone conversations and home-school communication notebooks. A detailed analysis of each case study is followed by a cross-case analysis.

Findings suggest the placement activity offers little choice and is emotionally charged. Nevertheless, parents and teachers are actively involved, advocating for the child's needs. Additionally, both agencies relate their actions to their "life-world" experience as parents or educators of ASD children.

Knowledge within the placement activity creates boundaries between parents and professionals. Parents describe themselves as experts in their own field, whereas teachers and local education authorities see themselves as the experts and parents as informants and as passive recipients of services. Consequently, parents perceive local education authorities as alienated from their needs, not offering sufficient information or support. Informal agencies, mainly other parents sharing the same experiences, are perceived as offering missing information and support.

Findings suggest that placement should be regarded as a socially evolving process whereby parents and professionals negotiate the appropriateness of a solution, relying on each agency's "life-world" experience raising and educating an ASD child. Conceptualizing the process as such depends on developing a systemic change in professionals' attitudes and actions towards parental involvement through educational programs that strengthen their notions of self-efficacy when working with parents.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The rationale for the present thesis

Decision-making about the early-age placement of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) Israeli children is a multifaceted activity that includes various interrelating components such as the implementation of the Israeli placement policy for special needs children (SEN) along with the disorder complexities, unique parental experiences with raising an ASD child and the characteristics of other agencies involved in the placement process. This is a source of friction between parents, professionals and local education authorities acting as key agents in the activity. Most research, global and local, has focused on the achievement of the final outcome in the placement process; however, little is known about placement as a process of social interrelating.

Decisions are events that contain a break or a cut; the act of cutting expresses an end and a beginning, a closure and an opening (Vallega-Neu 2003). Participating in a decision-making activity requires experiencing it, being exposed to and taking a position within it. Hence, the experience of being in a decision differs from one individual to another according to the objectives, manners and trajectories by which a decision is experienced and perceived.

In some cases, people find themselves in decisions they neither control nor make and that transform their lives, no matter what stance they take towards what happens in them. As these decisions occur, uncertainty unfolds with respect to unexpected future consequences. However, despite the uncertainty, people are called to be responsive to and responsible for what happens during and because of these decisions.

For parents of young ASD children, this is exactly the case. They are thrown into a chaotic situation, one in which they constantly need to organize, construct and effectively regulate and manage theirs and their children's lives, and, consequently, they face complex and difficult choices regarding care and treatment on a daily basis. One of these choices is that of the early-age educational provision for the ASD child. The choices parents make in general and, in particular, those regarding early-age placement, are at the core of this thesis and are perceived as representing parents'

experience of their sense of agency in terms of their responsiveness to and responsibility for different aspects of the placement process for their ASD child and are thus defined as a decision-making process.

Previous small-scale pilot research suggested the uniqueness of each parental choice and difficulties in attempting to generalize the process of decision-making using theories of rational choice relating mainly to the placement's final outcome considering criteria used to evaluate optional placement decisions (Ravid 2009). Furthermore, the choices made by parents are complex and involve emotionally and socially derived considerations which go beyond financial factors or calculations of return on investment. Recommendations drawn from this research have focused on the need to further examine parental agency within the school-choice process in terms of parents' ability to exercise control and regulate activity during the early-age school placements, thus involving planning, acting and evaluating of past and present experience as well as foresight (Biesta & Tedder 2007; Pacherie 2006, 2007; Gallagher 2012).

The pilot research focused only on parents' perspectives, and lacked holistic insight into the placement activity as a dynamic social process involving the act of interrelating as a means to reach the desired outcome. Therefore, I shifted the perspectives (theory and methodology) of the present study, exploring the phenomenon in question from two different perspectives: that of the parents and that of the kindergarten teachers. Thus I emphasize the social issues involved in the placement activity and not the final placement decision.

Additionally, I have focused on the assumptions that the placement activity as experienced by both parents and kindergarten teachers uniquely represents their own lived experience in the "life-world," a term introduced by Husserl and Schutz and later adopted by Van Manen (1990). Thus, I related the activity of early-age ASD placement to the question of how parents and kindergarten teachers experience their authentic "everydayness" in general and, in particular, how they construct and reconstruct their social realities while participating in the placement process. The use of the life-world as a methodology enables a better understanding of diversities among both parents' and kindergarten teachers' actions within the placement activity. Since the meanings each person attaches to the action and school choice

itself represent his or her own lived experience, what would be an appropriate early-age school-placement action or choice for one is inappropriate for another. Thus, diversity and uniqueness are celebrated and yet are related to common features of the experience of raising a child with autism as well as educating him or her.

After conducting the pilot research, I realized that in order to fully investigate and portray the essence of the placement activity for young ASD Israeli children, I would need to regard the activity as a multi-dimensional phenomenon—unexpected, authentic and uncertain—that required an in-depth exploration from different perspectives. This understanding has led me to adopt a holistic, naturalized pre-reflective perspective on how things and persons come to appear in the phenomena. Therefore, the present study adopts the existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach and key methodological elements.

In the following passages I explore the contextual framework of the research, focusing on the Israeli Special Education policy with respect to early-age placement of children with special needs, and examining how parental agency is perceived and what provisions are available for children diagnosed with ASD.

1.2 Israeli special needs education policy

In order to fully comprehend the phenomenon in question, we must consider the specific characteristics underlining the Israeli special education policy regarding the placement of a special needs child within the official educational system. Therefore, in the following passage I briefly address these formalities. The Israeli educational system follows the compulsory Education Law of 1949 and the State Education Law of 1953. These resolutions state that every child between the ages of five and eighteen must receive an education subsidized by the state. The law requires parents to place their child in an educational institution and holds them responsible for their child's truancy (a criminal offence that can carry severe penalties).

The Israel Special Education Law was enacted in 1988 to legally secure educational rights for special needs (SEN) children. This law requires the state to provide SEN children with an appropriate education between the ages of 3 and 21 within the least restrictive educational environment. Gumpel (1996) states that the main objective of the Special Education Law was originally to try to explain and codify all aspects of

placing a SEN child in a segregated setting, preventing arbitrary decisions that might subvert both parents' and SEN children's rights to an equal educational experience. However, following the passage of the Special Education Law, concerns were raised about the difficulties imposed on parents and institutions when seeking to place a child with special needs in an inclusive educational setting. Therefore, in 2002, following pressure exerted by parents through various political lobbyists, an amendment to Article 7 of the law was approved. This amendment expanded the state's responsibility to include SEN children in inclusive settings. Consequently, a special inclusion committee was established whose function is to determine the additional services necessary for a SEN child within an inclusive setting. Such services may include academic support in terms of guided additional learning sessions, psychological consultation, and assistance in class. Furthermore, the child's learning as well as his or her social and emotional behaviour are guided by an individualized education program (IEP) which the educational staff is required to design and present to parents and supervisors (Eldar et al. 2010).

As for the educational placement procedures, the law clearly states that when deciding on placement of an SEN child in any educational provision, a committee must be assembled to determine the placement based on a number of reports on the child's development in key areas.

The placement committee is assembled within each local municipality towards the end of the school year, and functions for a limited time. It includes seven members: the chairperson, a representative of the local educational municipality; two state educational representatives; educational psychologists on behalf of the local authority; a pediatrician; a social worker and a representative of the parents' association.

Parents have some rights while participating in the placement committee: the law allows them to briefly express their views about the placement options or to invite other persons to help them advocate for their views. However, parents are not allowed to participate in the conversations following their presentations, during which the decision is reached. Interpreting the official stance on parents' involvement within the placement committee, Meadan and Gumpel (2002) state that the law reveals a tightly controlled education system which attempts to exclude the

family of the special needs child entirely from the decision-making on their child's educational placement. However, some placement committees do allow parents to fully participate in any discussion concerning their child's placement.

In addition to making their oral presentation before the placement committee, parents are given a short document attached to the formal report completed by the kindergarten teacher. The document includes a paragraph that clarifies the rationale for the document and two open-ended questions with a limited space for answers. Parents are asked to add their remarks to the kindergarten teachers' report and to briefly portray how the child describes his or her experience within the kindergarten. After completing this document, parents are asked to approve the content by signing their names.

Once a decision is made on the right of the child to receive special educational support within a segregated or inclusive setting, parents are informed orally and via an official document. However, if parents reject the placement they can appeal the decision within 21 days. The right to appeal an official placement decision empowers parental agency, encouraging parents to actively participate in the placement process by expressing their preferences for their child's placement.

However, the final decision on the specific placement of the child is made later, and is a mutual decision of the local municipality and the state educational institution. The criteria for the final placement of a child with special needs are mostly unclear and sometimes arbitrary; in most cases, the decision is made according to age criteria, resulting in a highly diverse population within the kindergarten. This situation often leads to confrontations between parents, kindergarten teachers and institutions. At this stage, parents may have a limited influence on the specific placement of their child; however, this depends on the availability of alternatives.

1.3 The structure of Israel's early-age educational provision for ASD children

The Israeli educational system offers four formal early-age educational provisions for all SEN children and for ASD children in particular. The next description is based on Israel's SEN Law (1988) and the official ALUT (the Israeli society for autistic children) website and is presented in Table 1.1. Each educational framework focuses its educational approach, instruction methods and resources on a category of

impairments such as language, physical, emotional, cognitive and communication impairments. Kindergartens oriented towards educating children on the PDD (pervasive developmental disorder) spectrum are of greatest interest, since they are well funded by the state and have a longer school day, and function almost throughout the whole school year, with minimum holidays. Overall, mobility between the various settings depends mainly on a child's impairments; in rare cases, children are moved from one setting to another based on their level of function within social contexts.

Table 1.1: Characteristics of educational provisions for young ASD children.

Educational provision (focus or type of kindergarten)	Description
<i>Communication impairments</i>	These kindergartens focus on advancing the ASD child's communication and social abilities. They only include children diagnosed on the PDD spectrum and usually consist of 7 children, who have a similar diagnosis background. These kindergartens receive generous funding from the state for a wide range of care options (speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, etc.). The kindergarten staff includes varied SEN specialists and volunteers. Children attend these kindergartens from 7:30 a.m. until 5 p.m., receiving over 9 hours of intensive care each day, subsidized by the state. Furthermore, these kindergartens remain fully open during holidays.
<i>Language impediments</i>	These settings cater to children with specific language disorders. They are not exclusively designed for children with ASD, but are sometimes selected by parents as an educational alternative. The number of children is usually around 12, and they are staffed by one kindergarten teacher, an assistant and a small number of interdisciplinary personnel assisting once or twice a week. The population is particularly heterogeneous, with children having different cognitive, emotional, and linguistic abilities. State funding for these nurseries is lower, as is the number of hours the children spend there, from 7.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. During holidays, these kindergartens are closed.
<i>Developmental delay (easy, moderate to severe)</i>	These setting cater to children with substantial developmental disorders. They are similar in their function and budgetary support to the language-impairment-focused kindergartens detailed above.

Educational provision (focus or type of kindergarten)	Description
<i>Inclusive</i>	<p>Three kinds of setting exist: in the first type, parents are given the opportunity to include their child individually in a regular educational setting, accompanied by a personal assistant throughout the schoolday, but with an extremely minimal care framework with the basic pool of care treatments funded jointly by the local authority, the Ministry of Health, 'ALUT' and the parents themselves. The second type is characterized by larger groups of various special-needs children in a regular setting, forming almost one third of the kindergartens' population. In this inclusive setting, the kindergarten teacher is supported by a SEN kindergarten teacher who specifically instructs along with a multi-disciplinary professional staff the group of the SEN children. The SEN children participate in all of the shared activities but are provided with additional instruction at times, limiting their shared co-existence.</p> <p>The third type is characterized by the neighbouring location of regular settings next to SEN settings. These provide opportunities for the children to socially interact during play-time hour or other social activities. These activities are not subsidized by the state and are dependent on the goodwill and efforts of the staff within the regular or segregated setting.</p>

1.4 Summary

This chapter, although it highlights the contribution of the Israeli SEN law to protecting the SEN child's and family's personal and civil rights, raises concerns about three main issues. First is the notion that the Israeli SEN education system is motivated by reliance on the psycho-medical paradigm (Skidmore 2004). Thus, the placement of SEN children is mostly determined by their impairments rather than their function within social contexts. Second is the notion that the parental role within the placement activity is devalued—parents are expected to be passive participants in the placement activity. Third, the incoherent policy towards parental involvement, as well as the complexity of the disorder, and the question of what constitutes a high-quality early-age setting for the ASD child highlight the complexity of the placement activity in terms of the process of interactions between

multi-agency forces, leading to the final placement decision. In this thesis I seek to describe and interpret this complexity.

The purpose of the research is the following:

To describe in detail and to interpret the phenomenon of early-age school placement of ASD Israeli children, from the perspectives of parents and kindergarten teachers.

Accordingly, the following overarching research question has been formulated:

What can be learnt about the placement process for early-age ASD Israeli children?

The research question encompasses the following sub-questions:

1. How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive their experience of early-age school placement as a decision-making process?
2. How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive their role and action in the placement activity?
3. How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive the role and action of other agencies (formal and informal) in the placement activity?
4. How do parents and kindergarten teachers perceive the role of knowledge in the placement activity?

The methodology chosen for this study relies on the foundations of the qualitative approach, using the existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach combined with multiple-case-study strategy. The sample for this study included five parents and four kindergarten teachers.

In the next chapter, I review key theoretical elements that have helped me further understand the phenomenon in question.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical review of the different issues related to the phenomenon in question as well as the philosophical framework, adding contextual meaning to the social experience of early-age ASD school placement. The literature review relates to the complex features embedded within early-age school-choice activity. Such features include the child's characteristics; the experiences, perspectives and roles of parents and kindergarten teachers within the process; education authorities' perspectives in terms of placement ideology; and the placement activity as an act of choice involving distribution of knowledge through social interactions.

2.2 Autism definition and prevalence

Autism is a pervasive, lifelong developmental disability characterized by a triad of impairments in reciprocal social interaction, social communication and imagination. These three features are often accompanied by repetitive and stereotypical behaviours (Wall 2010) and in some cases aggressive and self-destructive behaviours (Altieri & Von-Kluge 2009; Glazzard & Overall 2012). The disorder is referred to as autistic spectrum disorder (Lord & Risi 2000; Wetherby & Prizant 2000) because it presents a continuum ranging from individuals manifesting relatively mild autism to individuals manifesting autism with intellectual disability and other relatively severe symptoms (Scheuermann & Webber 2002).

The current prevalence rates of autism within the USA are roughly estimated at 11.3 per 1,000—or one in 88 children (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2012). With regard to the functioning level of ASD children, 50% are defined as high-functioning (Crosland & Dunlap 2012). High-functioning ASD children are usually described as having within or above the normal range of intelligence (Potvin et al. 2013). There is debate about whether to regard high-functioning ASD and Asperger's disorder as one diagnostic category since both are characterized by difficulties in socialization and restricted/repetitive behaviour. However, children with Asperger's disorder do not show delays or deficits in the development of

communication and cognitive abilities (Kozlowski et al. 2012; Thede & Coolidge 2007).

In the case of high-functioning ASD children and Asperger's disorder children, the debate on whether to include them within regular settings is essential, as children in these two diagnostic categories can benefit from such placement since they are more active within social interaction and display a greater capacity for social-emotional expressiveness and responsiveness (Scheeren et al. 2012; Bauminger et al. 2003).

Within the Israeli context, the current prevalence rate of autism for children under 12 years of age is 4.5 per 1,000 children. This demonstrates a moderate rise when compared with the dramatic rise in the USA. The significantly lower rate is presumably related to a well-functioning diagnostic program that includes extensive screening and a firmer interpretation of the ASD diagnosis. Other explanations relate to the high awareness and services given to parents, along with the considerations of genetics and environmental influences (Davidovitch & Hemo 2011).

2.3 The experience of having a child with autism

In this thesis I relate parents' experiences of raising an autistic child to the placement activity. Therefore, in the next sections I will review key features of the challenges parents experience while raising a child with ASD. This empirical discussion will shed light on the effect that parents' personal narrative of raising a child with disability has on the placement process.

Learning that one's child has a disability is traumatic for parents (Pianta et al. 1996). It introduces information and experience about a child and about parenting that challenges parents' "possible self" relating to existing beliefs and feelings about and expectations for the born child and the image of parental role and identity (Rix & Paige-Smith 2008).

The long journey towards accepting the child's diagnosis evolves through a process whereby parents' internal representations of the child and their own selves as parents before diagnosis are integrated with internal self-representations of the self and the child after the diagnosis (Milshtein et al. 2010). Thus, a new model of representations is created, suited to the current reality of accepting the child as he or

she is, rather than the typically developed hoped-for child (Pianta & Marvin 1992). This model is associated with the parents' and the child's wellbeing (Milshtein et al. 2010), as well as with the parents' ability to adapt and better cope with the daily challenges of raising a child with autism.

Research suggests that autism symptoms are a source of parenting stress (Seltzer et al. 2001; King et al. 2009; Hastings et al. 2005; Higgins et al. 2005; Sivberg 2002), in particular for mothers whose children are preschoolers and older (Hastings and Johnson 2001; Kasari and Sigman 1997; Bebko et al. 1987). Child characteristics in terms of child behaviour problems and impaired social functioning behaviours have been found to be associated with higher parenting stress (Beck et al. 2004; Ornstein-Davis & Carter 2008). In addition to impaired social skills, mothers have been found to be especially affected by children's difficulty with self-regulating skills such as eating, sleeping and emotion regulation, which are apparent in daily childcare tasks (Ornstein-Davis & Carter 2008).

The complexity of the child's condition mainly in terms of his or her communicative and social competence, along with extreme deficiencies in behavioural regulation, places demands on the parents as they go through their daily routine and during their search for the appropriate educational placement for their ASD child. These demands are mainly social, such as negative attitudes and poor acceptance of their children by members of society (Lee 2009). In the case of high-functioning ASD (HFASD) children, social stigmatization is more evident since there is a gap between high cognitive appearance and social deficits. Experiencing social stigmatization and social exclusion is recognized by Gray (2002) as an additional stressful element for the family of ASD children. His research on the perceived (and often real) stigma of autism among parents of included HFASD children recognized a wide range of parental feelings and coping strategies in response to social stigmatization.

According to Gray (2002), parents reported being criticized about their competence and child-raising abilities, and feeling embarrassed and being avoided by members of their larger and closer social circles. Consequently, they displayed a tendency to develop different coping strategies to meet social stigmatization. The strategies ranged from participating in every communal social activity in order to "prove they're normal," to demonstrating near-total avoidance of any involvement in social

activity which might expose them to criticism or condemnation. Parents also described feelings of social rejection within the inclusive provision, which resulted in a complex relationship with the educational staff and with the parents of the typically developed children.

Coinciding with Gray's research, Ornstein-Davis and Carter (2008) note that parents of young children with HFASD were more worried and concerned about their young child's impaired social ability than their cognitive and verbal functioning or their specific communication skills and atypical behaviour. Their interpretation of their findings relies on developmental psychology, stressing that since the study was conducted on parents of young toddlers with ASD, these parents did not yet have clear expectations for age-appropriate language and developmental functioning and that limitations in these areas were therefore not considered stressful. However, impaired social functioning is much more evident for parents of young ASD children, since typically developed young children easily and readily demonstrate social interactive learning skills. Thus, parents' eagerness and urge to place their children in an early-age inclusive provision is rationalized.

In conclusion, then, beginning with a child's initial diagnosis, parents relate to the particular stress situation associated with raising a child with autism. This stress is often reinforced by the complexities of the autistic disorder and the reactions of others to the child's condition. The disorder can challenge parents' personal as well as public selves; it shakes their feelings of confidence and their ability to go about daily life. Furthermore, the social-impairment features of the disorder result in parents feeling stigmatized, criticized for their parenthood skills and socially excluded from their community. Consequently, such parents must compromise continually in order to maintain a stable, structured daily routine. It is likely that the complex experience of raising a child with autism is also reflected in the parents' decision-making process regarding their child's early-age educational placement, focusing on the issue of the appropriateness of the available provision for the child's needs and characteristics.

2.4 Autism and early-age school placement

In this study I seek to describe and understand the complex nature of early-age school placement of ASD children. The following components within the placement activity are perceived as challenging to both parents and professionals: the range of impairments within the disorder, the increase in the prevalence of autism (Crosland & Dunlap 2012), the fact that there is no confirmed cure for autism (Woodgate et al. 2008), and the deviant and unstable developing patterns resulting in difficulties predicting the impact of interventions and the trajectories of the child's future development (Delmolino & Harris 2012). In light of these challenges, choosing an educational setting that best suits the ASD child's needs becomes the main purpose of the agencies involved in the activity.

Callahan et al. (2008) recognized shared ideological assumptions among parents, teachers and school administrators about the values of educating children with ASD. These include the importance of the following factors: the maintenance of an individualized instruction program, the gathering of data to better assess the child's progress, the implementation of an empirically based teaching technique, collaborative work among all interdisciplinary staff, and the development of long-term goals such as preparing young children with special needs to participate in their community and develop social competence and effective learning strategies (Odom 2002; Hemmeter 2000).

If regarded as a choice activity, the placement activity then becomes a situation in which parents negotiate their ideology of what constitutes a high-quality ASD-oriented setting with the institution's vision of such a setting and what is offered within. Such processes may involve compromise on the part of the parents, who may need to forgo their vision of the ideal provision. They also raise queries about whether and how parents' perceptions of the quality of educational provision for their ASD child differ from institutions' perceptions, and why (Delmolino & Harris 2012).

Overall, because ASD children are highly diverse, there is no single universal program of intervention: what is appropriate for one child is not appropriate for another, and what is appropriate for a given child at a certain point in time may not be appropriate for him or her at another. Educational systems therefore need to

recognize the appropriateness and effectiveness of the provision for the child as well as the parent seeking to maintain a tailor-made program following discussions between parents and professionals (Wall 2010).

2.5 Inclusive education

Traditionally, children with SEN were referred to segregated settings that focused on their particular impairments or to integrated settings where they were placed in self-contained settings within mainstream educational environments (UNICEF 2012). However, over the past 20 years the shift towards more inclusion has strengthened, heightening the need to ensure the right for education to all. Additionally, the increased number of children defined as having ASD and in particular HFASD has reinforced the need to include them within their natural environment. This section elaborates on key issues embedded within the ideology and practice of inclusive education.

Inclusion has become a global agenda underpinned by several international conventions and statements such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education (1994), which required participant nations to ensure that all their educational policies instruct that SEN children attend the educational settings within their natural community (UNESCO 1994). As we have seen, such a requirement is also stipulated in the Israeli SEN law and policy regulations. Overall, inclusive education as an educational reform is used in wider contexts as a key driver of social integration and cohesion in societies that are progressively diverse socially and culturally (Armstrong et al. 2010).

There is much confusion about what inclusion is: the scope of definitions range from describing inclusion as solely related to SEN children within mainstream settings to regarding it as a social ideology change that accepts and respects diversity within social structures (Odom et al. 2004).

Jones (2004) defines inclusion as a dynamic process, based on four philosophical grounds: inclusion as a principle promoting the *ethos* of valuing diversity, inclusion as an end product of a non-segregated early-age education, quality of educational provisions for children with or without special needs, and a broader standpoint viewing inclusion as a social movement and reform. Thus, the main drive for

including SEN children within regular settings is justice-oriented, propelled by the concern that children's rights are compromised by segregated special education (Lindsay 2007).

However, inclusion above all signifies the education of all children within their communities, and implies the need for these settings to consider their structures, teaching philosophies and approaches and for the use of support and guidance to better respond to the needs of all children attending the setting (Cole 2005; Runswick-Cole 2011).

Within the Israeli context, the discussion about what inclusion is mainly focuses on the right of SEN children to be included within regular settings. Therefore, in accordance with other global education policies, there is a shift in the perspective on what is the optimal provision for all children with special needs and mainly children manifesting HFASD—focusing on a continuum of inclusive services.

The move towards more inclusion is supported by legislation. Paragraph 3 in the original SEN law states that a special needs child is entitled to free special education within a special education institution in his or her local municipality. Paragraph 7 of the revised law clarifies that when deciding on the placement of an SEN child, the placement committee will prefer a placement in an educational institution that is not a special needs one. This amendment highlights the importance of developing a regular educational setting that is accessible to children with diverse special needs. Furthermore, it specifies the state's responsibility in terms of the availability of inclusive placement and funding of added educational services, which in the past were freely given only to children attending segregated settings. This thus becomes an added factor to be explored in the decision-making process.

Although the ideology of inclusion is supported by legislation, concerns are being raised about practical issues and the effect of inclusion on the SEN child's wellbeing. Lindsay's (2007) meta-analysis of the literature (published between 2001 and 2005) focused on an examination of the effectiveness of inclusive education or mainstreaming on a wide range of SEN children from preschool to the end of compulsory education. This exploration has produced inconsistent evidence, with a marginal positive tendency towards supporting inclusion. However, research on

preschool inclusive education (Odom et al. 2004) reports positive outcomes mainly in terms of developing communication and social skills for children with diverse disabilities. Similar outcomes were also revealed among typically developed children, who were more sensitive and empathetic towards the difficulties of others.

These studies mainly highlight the social and emotional contribution of the peer group in an inclusive setting to the SEN child's wellness, since they are considered providers of age-appropriate, more competent and positive models of cognitive, communication and social competence than would usually occur in traditional special education settings (Guralnick 2001). Finally, exploring inclusion in an ecological context, Odom et al. (2006) highlighted the essential contribution of educational inclusion to the child's sense of belonging within his or her local community, suggesting that being included within preschool regular settings has extended children's experience and broadened their social interactions within their community.

On the whole, inclusive practices are most important and effective during early childhood, when the chances are greater of promoting the child's wellbeing and his or her inclusion within the community (Odom et al. 2003; Stahmer et al. 2011). However, a positive contribution to the child's wellbeing depends on the quality of the educational program and the extent to which 'within child' factors and 'within learning environments' factors are balanced. Thus, the criteria for determining high-quality inclusive provisions for ASD children are the presence of a highly professional staff; the ability to identify the child's unique needs and accordingly accommodate learning environments' features; the presence of staff who are knowledgeable about learning and developmental theories, and of autism and its impact on the child within a wider social context; a low teacher-to-child ratio; small group size; positive interactions between adults and children; and effective communication and partnership with parents and other professionals (Buysse & Hollingsworth 2009; Guldborg 2010).

When parents consider an inclusive education for their ASD child, their beliefs about and experience of inclusion are seen as influencing their school choice (Swick & Hooks 2005); however, studies on their perspectives are inconclusive. Some parents reported approving of inclusion, emphasizing the desire for their child to live as

normal a life as possible and perceiving segregated settings as limiting their child's academic and social development (Swick & Hooks 2005), while others expressed concerns and doubts about inclusion's contribution to their child's development (Leyser & Kirk 2004). It is difficult to assess why parents are so diverse in their approaches to inclusion; however, one can assume that the benefits of inclusion vary from one parent to another according to each parent's personal narrative, domain of interests and relevancy, access to available information and previous educational experience.

According to two studies, one by Leyser and Kirk (2004) and the other by Kasari et al. (1999), several factors have been found to influence parents' perceptions of inclusive placement. The first is the child's diagnosis: the nature and the diagnosis of the disability. For example, parents of children with ASD chose self-contained settings within a mainstream setting rather than fully inclusive settings, mainly due to the complexity of the disorder. When choosing these options, they sought to attain academic and social interactions between the ASD children and their age peers, along with individualized and specific structured intervention within the self-contained setting. These findings are consistent with Flewitt and Nind's (2007) research highlighting parents' decisions to adopt a combined provision, enabling their child to participate in general education activities while still receiving specialized services within the self-contained provisions.

The second factor relates to parents' demographic characteristics, such as their occupation and education levels. Parents with postsecondary education were found to be more supportive of inclusion than parents with only a high school education. Additionally, the former expressed more criticism of the teachers' skills and the specialized support offered within the inclusive settings. Their support of inclusion along with their careful examinations and negative response to the specific support available within inclusive settings were mainly related to their ability to access valuable information, and to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion (Leyser & Kirk 2004).

A third factor is the child's age. Kasari et al. (1999) indicated that parents of the youngest children were the most supportive of full inclusion but at a later stage were found to be more supportive of mainstream solutions. This change might be

associated with parents' developing acceptance of their child's special needs, the existence of fewer inclusive options, and a limited knowledge of inclusive educational opportunities.

The fourth factor relates to parents' perceptions of the regular education system and their experience with it. Parents of children who were in segregated settings were more supportive of inclusion, whereas parents of included or mainstreamed children were less so. The latter perception suggests that parents acknowledge the gaps between the ideal and the real, the philosophy and the practice. Consequently, parents' disappointment in policy implementation leads to questioning what is educationally right for their child.

Another debate concerns parents' involvement in their child's current education; this involvement is defined in terms of the extent of their knowledge regarding their child's current mainstream placement. Leyser and Kirk (2004) note that in response to their survey some parents reported being unaware that their child was in a mainstream setting. These parents reportedly had the least amount of information about their child's mainstream placement. Nevertheless, they expressed the most supportive attitudes towards inclusion.

The last factor relates to parents' perceptions of the effects of inclusive education on the child's academic and social development. Parents recognized the main benefits of inclusion: social and affective outcomes for their children, and positive effects on other children, who will be more likely to be sensitive to and accept diversity within their community. They further saw segregated settings as limiting their child's academic development (Swick & Hooks 2005). However, although they desired peer interaction, they still expressed concerns about their child's emotional wellness and fears of their social rejection.

In conclusion, the data presented by the studies previously reviewed suggest that parents responded to inclusion with ambivalence. Despite their satisfaction with the inclusive setting, they expressed mixed feelings about what was educationally best for their child. Most parents of ASD children commented that their child's current educational needs could not be adequately met in a fully inclusive setting. Parents expressed worries and concern about their child's ability to function in a typical

unstructured kindergarten environment, with many children and only one kindergarten teacher; about the kindergarten teacher's ability to maintain close, individualized interaction with their child; and about the kindergarten teacher's special training; and they expressed a high level of stress and worry about the possibility that their child would face social rejection (Kasari et al. 1999). Overall, parents were more supportive of a continuum of placements, which offer the regular social environment with added special input (Flewitt & Nind 2007), thus attaining both academic and social goals.

According to Greenbaum and Fried (2011), Israeli parents of children with special needs constantly express their support for the implementation of the principle of learning within the least restrictive educational environment. Parents of high-functioning children request fully inclusive educational provisions with added support for the child and his or her family. Parents of children functioning on a moderate level request mainstream placement options such as segregated settings next to or within regular kindergarten or school. Other parents of low-functioning children expressed their support for segregated placement decisions.

Along with parents' perceptions of and attitudes towards inclusion, teacher practice has been found to be essential to the effectiveness and promotion of inclusive education. Thus, within teacher practice, the following elements have been identified as having a relatively strong effect: the characteristics of general educational pedagogy implemented within the classroom to assist and empower the child with SEN and to optimize his or her learning experience; collaboration with other teachers and the school administration; special teachers supporting the general teacher within the class; teamwork that develops, implements, supports and mutually reflects on the child's IEP; and a positive ethos, with value-based commitment to inclusion (Lindsay 2007). Thus, teachers' positive attitude towards inclusion has been recognized as an important predictor of successful educational outcomes among ASD children (Rodríguez et al. 2012).

Teachers' attitudes have been found to influence their behaviour towards and approach to inclusion. Thus, it is presumed that these attitudes influence their perspectives on the appropriateness of an early-age setting, whether inclusive or segregated, for the ASD child. Lindsay (2007) notes that in most studies teachers

have mainly expressed a positive attitude towards inclusion; however, there is no clear indication that they support the policy of full inclusion. Among the various factors influencing their attitudes is the nature of the child's disability, with more teachers expressing positive attitudes towards children with sensory and physical disabilities than towards children with learning disabilities who exhibit various behavioural and emotional difficulties. Another factor is teachers' beliefs, experiences and specific training (Rodríguez et al. 2012), resulting in a developing sense of professional competence. Other factors influencing their attitudes towards inclusion are resources (human- and technology-based) enabling better coping with emerging difficulties while teaching a child with special needs. In terms of human resources, teachers stress a need for comprehensive support from administration, parents, colleagues and professionals (Horne & Timmons 2009); the classroom as a physical environment that supports the SEN child's learning, as well as that of the other children; and organizational adaptation (teacher assistant time, scheduled planning time, smaller class sizes, special education teacher support that supports the SEN child's wellness; Marshall et al. 2002; Avramidis & Norwich 2002; Horne & Timmons 2009), leading to a sense of self-efficacy among teachers and resulting in the establishment of positive attitudes toward inclusion.

Overall, this chapter has highlighted the complexity of defining inclusion and the difficulties in implementing inclusive ideology within educational systems. Accordingly, when contradictions occur between inclusive ideology and its practice, resources and positive experience may be limited, resulting in fewer high-quality inclusive early-childhood settings (Frankel et al. 2010; Hodkinson 2010).

2.6 Parental involvement within educational settings

Parents' involvement in the placement decision for their young ASD child is one of the key features explored in the present thesis. Therefore, in the following section I review the literature on parents' involvement in their children's education and the link between parents' engagement and the educational benefits for the child. The aim of this review is to support the assumption that the placement process as a social one involves interactions between parents, professionals and institutions. Furthermore, it will shed some light on the debate on parents' role as decision-makers, as explored in section 2.6.

Nowadays, educational systems are attempting to become more democratic and collaborative and to integrate parents' voices into the educational activity. The assumption is that parents' involvement in their children's education supports children's optimal learning and development (Mapp 2003; Epstein 2002).

The main theoretical basis for the exploration of parents' involvement within their children's experience of school is Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model. According to this model, the environment in which the child is active is composed of different, interrelated systems. This environment greatly influences the child's wellbeing. Within it, two main systems—the home and the school—are regarded as the child's direct living contexts. Interrelationships between these two contexts—microsystems constitute the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model. As long as these two systems provide sufficient opportunities for the child's wellbeing and learning development, the child will gain benefits in terms of educational success, and social and emotional competence.

Hence, through the on-going interrelating of the two systems within the mesosystem, children assume parents' and teachers' instructions and apply them to learning situations occurring within school and within their daily life routine. This adaptation also promotes the acquisition of normative behaviour within family, school and community (Durand 2011).

The main contribution of the ecological approach lies in the claim that as long as the systems in which the child grows work together and support each other, the child's development is empowered. Lack of collaboration or conflicts between these two systems might negatively influence the child's wellbeing and educational success. On the other hand, systems that jointly address the child's needs have a greater influence on the child's wellbeing and development (Greenbaum & Fried 2011).

Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2010) argue that parents' motivation to be involved in their child's education depends on three major sources. The first is parents' motivational beliefs related to their parental-role construction and their notion of self-efficacy for helping the child succeed. The second is parents' perception of invitation to involvement, and thus their response to the extent to which opportunities are created and offered by the educational systems. These invitations to involvement reflect the

social norms and values applied within school systems with regard to parental involvement. The third source is personal life context variables such as the family's culture and circumstances, parents' perceptions of their personal skills, and own knowledge regarding subject matters or other learning issues, as well as the time and energy needed to engage in such activity (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). These appear to frame their type and level of involvement, and thus their ability to choose and involve themselves in activity that might contribute to the child's success and enhance their own self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005).

Jones (2004) integrated five parental involvement models into a singular model that represents levels of increasing empowerment for parents in early-age settings. Accordingly, drawing on the work of others, Jones identified six levels describing parents' role in their child's education: the 'obstructive model,' the expert model, the transplant model, the consumer model, the empowerment model, and the negotiating model. This singular model represents a shift from perceiving parents as passive recipients of information to perceiving them as equally important partners in their children's education (Murray 2000).

Epstein (1986, 1996) describes the roles taken by parents to support children's success in school learning activities and how teachers can activate these roles within various partnering activities (Kroger & Lash 2011). I find his review of teachers' roles relevant when exploring parental involvement in the placement process and, in particular, the issue of role and power within the placement activity; therefore, I will briefly relate them. Teachers' efforts to strengthen parents' involvement in their children's education include empowering parents' role as teachers, supporters of school activities, advocates, decision-makers, volunteers, homework directors, and collaborators. However, this model does not sufficiently specify what teachers actually need to do in order to gain partnership from parents. Furthermore, doubts are raised as to issues of the educational systems' dominance. Thus, when teachers don't sufficiently account for the life-world experience of parents, they are likely to misinterpret parents' motives and perspectives with respect to their involvement in their children's education. Consequently, the value of partnership with parents dissolves in practice. However, the shift in power within the institutional relationship

occurs when teachers learn to appreciate parents' individual and unique perspectives on their role in their children's education. This appreciation is reflected in viewing the parent within his or her cultural context and as one who can offer knowledge and expertise rather than as an individual to be educated or changed (Cairney, 2000).

Since the present thesis is contextualized within the state of Israel, it is important to highlight the issue of parental involvement as it is addressed by Israeli legislation. This legislation, although declaring that it prompts parental involvement in education, defines limited regulations with respect to the status of parents and families as individuals within the educational system. The main two issues that have received acknowledgement within the law are the right to choose an educational approach and the right to participate in regulations regarding the child's education (Dorner Committee 2009)

As for the latter, besides allowing parents to participate in the placement committee, there is no obligation for partnership with parents before and after placement procedures. Consequently, the gap between ideology and practice yields a policy in which instructions are unclear, ambivalent and contradictory (Greenbaum & Fried 2011). This is mainly apparent in the placement committee procedures, where the system's authority comes to fruition. After parents present regarding their preferred placement for their child, they are asked to leave. The official discussions about the child's placement are held behind closed doors. Furthermore, parents are not presented with the official protocol of the closed discussion. Greenbaum and Fried claim that the committees' conduct lacks transparency and deprives parents of their right to be involved in determining which setting their child would attain.

Overall, parents' involvement in their ASD child's education is reflected in their role while making decisions regarding their child's educational placement. Their involvement becomes crucial due to the complex nature of the school-choice activity that integrates the child's characteristics, family context, and the values of parents, educators and school systems (Delmolino & Harris 2012). Thus, the placement process adopts the features of a multifaceted activity by which parents constantly need to negotiate differences of opinion about the child's placement.

2.7 Parental early-age school choice

The process of making decisions about the placement of an ASD child has been found to be highly emotionally stressful (Tissot & Evans 2006; Swick & Hooks 2005). In addition, the stress experienced by parents of ASD children has been found to be greater and more intense than that experienced by parents of children with other types of disability (Parsons et al. 2009). However, although they experience stress, it is recommended that parents of young children, with or without SEN, have the right to make choices about treatments and educational options for their children, since they are regarded as key agents in their children's progress and success (Gray 1998; Sandall et al. 2005).

Rational choice theory assumes that people are rational decision-makers who have well-ordered preferences and complete information regarding the gains and loss associated with each alternative (Schwartz et al. 2002). While going through the decision-making process, they compare the alternatives along a single scale of preference, value or function. Following the comparison stage, they choose whether, when and how to maximize their preferences—values or utility (Macy 2006).

In an ideal context that allows freedom of school choice, where parents are considered full partners in their child's educational process (Duncan 2010), they are also regarded as consumers of educational services trying to maximize their choices. This act of maximizing is grounded in the future benefits gained from the decision, and is based on clear value preferences and on calculations of the costs versus the benefits and probabilities of success of the various options (Bosetti 2004). However, according to Hatcher (1998), the factors influencing parental decision-making are complex, involving considerations beyond financial determinants and calculations of 'return on investment,' thus implying the emotional affect embedded in the choice activity.

One of these factors is the definition of the school-choice activity as a social process (Coleman 1988), which highlights the activity's multifaceted nature along with its richness and complexity. Accordingly, individuals who have social networks that provide them access to relevant and valuable information regarding their choice will be able to make the most well-informed choices. They will also be able to maintain

control over the choice situation, subsequently reducing their sense of stress (Smerkar & Goldring 1999).

Bosetti (2004) adds that in order to make an informed decision regarding their child's educational placement, parents rely on their personal values and subjective expectations of the educational framework, as well as on their social and professional networks to collect information. Foot et al. (2000) suggest that parents' preschool choice can be predicted based on the theory of 'planned behavior.' Thus, parents' preferences, knowledge, beliefs and expectations make up the final decision-making. Furthermore, parents' beliefs are related to the desirability of the provision and the sets of relevance differentiating one provision from another. These beliefs derive from many sources. First are behavioural beliefs—including parents' knowledge values and preferences with respect to the characteristics of the provision, including care and safety, educational goals, meeting of parents' needs, convenience, knowledge of the different provisions available, and so forth. Second are normative beliefs that present the ability to rely on social networks as a resource to support parents in their decision-making process. Third are beliefs about opportunities and resources that would enable the parent to make the desirable choice, and thus parents' sense of perceived control over the choices they aim to make.

In section 2.5 I discussed parents' perceptions of inclusive placement versus segregated provision for their young ASD child. As noted there, this debate on the question of what better suits the child's needs is inconclusive. It involves emotional stress and demands negotiation between parents, professionals and institutions. However, although conflicting views are expressed as to the final placement decision, parents succeed in identifying the issues most relevant to them when evaluating an educational setting. Whitaker (2007) identified the five highest-priority issues: the effect of the setting on the child's attainment of social skills, staff understanding of the child's difficulties, the ability of the staff to sufficiently address the child's behaviour, the level of structure offered mainly in terms of home-school relationships, and the child's happiness.

Within the school-choice activity, information is defined as a necessary commodity that must be obtained (Payne et al. 1993; Tversky & Kahneman 1981) and gradually accumulated by parents through a cumulative experience, while being repeatedly

exposed to problems in the decision-making process (Macy 2006), rather than a means to reach the right decision.

This is most evident in the early-age school-placement activity for ASD children, during which parents constantly seek more information in order to maintain control of the uncertain within the undefined limits of the activity. Information about various features of the placement process is gathered through various social-exchange situations and activities. It is further constructed through repeated individual and guided experiences and the use of problem-solving strategies where inconsistencies appear.

This process of constructing knowledge of the placement procedures and options available sometimes comes at a price—it can be time-consuming, may have financial implications and can lead to emotional stress and unease, which can in turn result in decision fatigue. Thus, the more choices a person needs to make by consciously considering alternatives, the more resources and energies are consumed, resulting in a process that becomes burdensome and that subsequently leads to impairments in self-regulation, resulting in breakdown of self-control and ultimately in ego depletion (Vohs et al. 2008). This places further stress on the adaptive and affective aspects of the process. Furthermore, the complexities of the human environment and the limitations of human information processing suggest that people are mostly motivated by the need to satisfy rather than to maximize. To be satisfied is to peruse the good-enough option, the acceptable one that does not demand an extensive use of energy and time (Schwartz et al. 2002).

Research suggests that choice situations become risky when there are too many options to consider. In this case the choice situation becomes confusing and less attractive; thus, people sometimes prefer others to make the choice for them (Beattie et al. 1994). Subsequently, in post-decision situations this may result in dissatisfaction with the outcome obtained, bringing about a negative emotional reaction. However, people experiencing a situation in which the choice is limited to fewer options express greater satisfaction and pleasure with the choices they make (Schwartz et al. 2002). When a choice situation involves varied options, it might also result in disengagement and an almost arbitrary choice, made in order to complete the process and resulting in regret and loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky 1979).

Thus, when the decision taken leads to disappointment in a situation in which options are few, people tend to blame the situation for the disappointing outcome. However, in situations that offer several alternatives, people will tend to blame themselves and their own actions, bringing about depression and a sense of a personal failure (Connolly & Zeelenberg 2002). Thus, a debate is raised about whether the large number of choices available increases our control over the decision. The main assumption is that fewer options available will have a positive effect on a person's sense of control over the choice.

Another aspect describing people's motives for acting while making decisions is the extent to which they differ as maximizers of opportunities (Schwartz et al. 2002). Although in some situations maximizing has been related to adverse outcomes, mainly emotional ones, it is also regarded as an adaptive strategy, in which active coping strategies are used to better manage and regulate complex situations, using problem-solving methods and relying on social support. Furthermore, not being satisfied with the "good enough" motivates the individual to greater achievements, by actively engaging with the better rather than accepting a situation as it is.

Overall, the dynamic nature of school-choice activity, which embeds in it various components that at times are vaguely apparent or that contradict one another, frames it as a complex and at times uncertain activity that involves risk-taking. However, parents are expected by the official educational system to make rational choices regarding the best interests of their ASD child; thus, they are supposed to make conscious considerations among alternatives—weighing information about currently available options so as to select the option that seems to be more promising (Vohs et al. 2008). However, the experience of having a child with autism, the unstable development path of the disorder, the lack of complete information about procedures and availability of placement options, and the dilemma regarding the question of what is the right placement for the child convert the early-age school choice into an uncertain and risky activity that in some cases offers no pure choice. Under these complex conditions, adopting a rational choice framework seems inappropriate.

2.8 Kindergarten teacher's role as a professional within SEN settings

The kindergarten teachers' role in the placement process has not been directly addressed either in international or in local studies. This is surprising and disappointing, since in practice great responsibility is given to Israeli kindergarten teachers for coordinating various placement procedures, trying to maintain collaboration between all agencies involved while following state regulations. In the following paragraphs I try to reconstruct the kindergarten teachers' role within the placement process through the perspectives of their life-world experience as a SEN teacher, kindergarten teacher or childcare service provider.

Teachers' practice in special education and inclusive provisions incorporates three main constructs: planning, management and instruction. Additional tasks such as interactions with parents, professionals and state officials expand the scope of their responsibility (Hess et al. 2006). The latter are at the core of the present study. It is likely that placement for young ASD children is emotionally intensified when interactions among these agencies occur. Hence, in situations where conflicts and dissonance occur between parents' decisions and the views of other agencies, recommendations or philosophies, tension and stress arise.

These conflicts challenge the role of the kindergarten teacher and raise questions about the ways professionalism is being implemented during the placement process. But these are not the only sources of tension special education teachers experience. Other elements such as time-consuming administrative paperwork, lack of administrative support, inadequate resources, extensive time spent in meetings, limited opportunities for individualism and decision-making, and highly diverse classroom populations have been identified by SEN teachers as adding to their level of stress and feelings of burnout (Fore et al. 2002).

The nature and severity of ASD have also been found to add to the complexity of the kindergarten teachers' role. In research done in Hebrew by Fleischman et al. (2005), three main conflicts were identified as influencing the work of Israeli SEN kindergarten teachers. The first focused on the kindergarten teachers' level of emotional involvement in, investment in and expectations for the child's therapy, indicating tension between the constant need to attend to the child's and the family's needs and the intensified emotional load attached to this need. The second focused

on the need to gradually lower expectations regarding the child's progress. Last is the tension caused by wanting to do the best for the child by applying various treatment strategies, which are at times rejected by the child. Another aspect found to emotionally affect kindergarten teacher practice was the complex nature of the interactions with parents who at times did not share the same expectations of the child's education as did the kindergarten teachers. This research, although highlighting important themes regarding SEN kindergarten teachers' experience, was limited in its scholarly contribution due to its small scale.

Other stressful factors recognized within childcare services are relevant to the present study and might contribute to the understanding of considerations, affecting kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the placement process as well as perceptions of the parent's role. According to Schmitt and Todd (1995), stress factors in the work of childcare services include working conditions, client-factor and life events and daily hassles. Furthermore, factors such as the number of children in the classroom as well as the diversity of age and ability of the children and the presence of discipline problems have been found to be among client-related issues (Baumgartner et al. 2009).

Parents may also be a significant client factor contributing to a kindergarten teacher's level of stress. Parents who demonstrate a high level of involvement in their children's lives, and who demand daily information on their child's progress along with requests for constant discourse interaction with the staff, might be seen as adding stress to the kindergarten teacher, resulting in rejection and avoidance. Passive parents may also cause great worry for kindergarten teachers who highly care for the child, resulting again in harsh feelings towards those parents.

Overall, the complexity of the kindergarten teachers' role in a SEN provision is increased by their interactions with the children, parents, and other professionals. These interactions as well as the gaps between ideology, policy and teacher practice are presumed to have an influence on the major issues I seeks to explore here, mainly regarding the role of the kindergarten teachers and parents in the placement process as contextualized within the Israeli SEN educational policy.

In conclusion, until now the literature review has mainly focused on the individualistic features of the decision-making regarding the placement of a young ASD child. However, since the present thesis is designed to explore the placement process as a social process that involves social distribution and construction of knowledge, the following section elaborates on Schutz's social phenomenology as a means to explain the social aspect of this phenomenon.

2.9 Schutz's social phenomenology

The literature reviewed so far has portrayed the placement process as complex due to its varied interacting components (e.g. the complexities of raising a child with autism, the lack of predictability as to what best suits the child, the motives and purposes of other agencies involved in the activity, and the extent to which effective communication is held between these agencies).

I emphasize two major themes here. In the first, it is presumed that parental experience within the placement activity differs among parents, thus emphasizing the subjective nature of the placement activity. Therefore, there is a need to first understand the sphere of the subjective experience and only then relate this to the intersubjective sphere by which understandings are being conceptualized as existing within a social context. In the second, the role of knowledge within the placement activity is highlighted, suggesting that it becomes a commodity and a means by which social position and power are obtained and underlined.

Schutz's social phenomenology (1970) addresses the above themes and therefore was found to best contribute to the understanding of the placement activity. In short, Schutz's theory conceptualizes social reality as structured within intersubjective relations in which people are constantly engaged in an on-going process of making sense of the world, through interactions with their fellows. These interactions within a shared realm of experience are based on different subjective perspectives of the phenomenon in question and allow the construction of mutual understanding and consent (Schutz 1970; Zur 2008).

The "life-world" is a key concept intertwined within the research subject of this thesis—the life-world of both parents and kindergarten teachers. Schutz's life-world refers to an everyday way of being in which individuals are active and, through the

process of the epoche of everyday life, suspend possible doubts about the familiar world in which they live. This style of lived experience forms the basis of human social life. Thus, the life-world is the whole domain of everyday experience, orientations and actions by which personal goals are pursued (Schutz 1970).

The existence of a person in the world is influenced by his or her *biographically determined situation*: mainly his or her physical and socio-cultural environment as he or she defines it. A situation is defined as biographic since it is a consequence of an individual's private and unique life history stored. Thus, one's biography includes intentions, which are immediate purposes and are defined as possibilities for future action; these purposes are translated into action programs and define which aspects in the life-world are relevant. They are organized in systems of relevance according to which objects and phenomena in the life-world are given meaning (Schutz 1953/1967). In the context of this study, both parents and kindergarten teachers bring to the placement activity their stocks of knowledge at hand, which are their interpretations of their present and past experiences (Schutz 1970) of raising and educating an ASD child. These experiences are further related to their 'purposes at hand,' which construct their system of relevance when needed to build and activate a plan aimed at reaching a desirable placement. Additionally, biographically determined situations highlight the social nature of the placement activity since they are based on the interrelating individual's and others' experiences in the world. This is used as a familiar framework in which an individual perceives reality and acts accordingly.

According to Schutz, the life-world is first based on pragmatic knowledge aimed at guiding the individual towards efficient regulations of everyday dilemmas. This pragmatic knowledge is only a means by which a person accomplishes his or her intentions. Thus, as long as it is perceived as practical, the individual will continue to maintain it without doubting its existence. The common-sense tendency not to doubt the knowledge one holds was named by Schutz the Epoche of the natural attitude (Zur 2008). This means that an individual during his everyday life doubts the possibility that the world and the objectives within it might be different from the ones appearing in his or her consciousness (Schutz 1945/1967).

Parents and kindergarten teachers are presumed to be interested in the pragmatic interpretation of the placement activity, looking at the practicalities enabling a desired placement decision. They are further presumed to be seekers of information about the chances or risks that the situation at hand might have for the outcome of their action. These interpretations create their system of relevance, which changes across time and experience within a social realm. Parents, for example, might at first prioritize an inclusive setting; however, through their interactions with professionals and visits within segregated and inclusive settings, they might change their intentions, doubting the suitability of the setting to the child's specific needs as well as their own.

Each person possesses unique domains of interest; these are organized as systems existing on a bi-polar sequence (Schutz 1970; 1945/1971). At one pole is the *imposed system of relevance*: deterministic systems which place the person in a passive position, not being able to control them; as a consequence the person is not motivated to learn more about them. At the other pole is the *intrinsic system of relevance*: systems which are based on the imposed ones and are a consequence of interests of the individual, chosen spontaneously in order to solve a problem or to design a program according to which he or she acts. These systems, although possibly restricted, leave the person with a sense of perceived control. They integrate biographically determined situations and action planning in a subjective and dynamic manner. The person re-examines, clarifies, and constructs them in light of his or her intentions and purposes. The intrinsic knowledge is specific and applied only in situations in which it is relevant. It has a thematic nature and is at the core of consciousness.

In the case of parents of young ASD children, both the complexity of the disorder (Hodge 2008) and the philosophy and policy implementation of the educational systems in terms of the appropriateness and the availability of the desired setting impose considerations, which are at times not relevant to parents. These impose limitations on the parents' ability to regulate their action effectively while undergoing placement procedures and result in parents defining the placement activity as uncertain and involving risk-taking, which emotionally charges the activity.

The concept of intersubjectivity, which Schutz elaborates on, is found to be significantly related to the present study. Schutz (1953/1967, 1962/1966) regards intersubjectivity as the essence of the life-world in which one person always meets another in a meaningful socio-cultural context. The process by which intersubjective knowledge is created is regarded as the general idea of *reciprocity of perspectives*. Intersubjective knowledge highlights an individual's knowledge of the existence of the other. According to Schutz's social phenomenology, social constructs are based on the idea that although individuals are able to access common things, they may attach different meanings to them. These differences are a consequence of each individual's unique intentions and biographically determined situation. In order to rise above these individual differences, a person must assume that if she or he and the other change places they will have access to the same things and regard them similarly (idealization of interchangeability of standpoints), that is, be able to see another person's perspective as if one were standing in their shoes, stressing the sense of empathy in the activity. Unless proven otherwise, he or she further needs to assume that the other shares the same assumptions and that those differences in perspectives are irrelevant to their immediate intention; thus, an idealization of congruency system of relevance leads to construction of a dialogic activity. In the context of this thesis, it is presumed that parents and kindergarten teachers share a common goal—the child's wellbeing. They further seek to interact with each other in order to reach a desired outcome; however, questions are raised as to their ability to interpret the placement activity through the eyes of the other—getting to know the other in order to be able to reach out to him or her.

In conclusion, then, Schutz's definition of what is a social phenomenon helps in identifying the guidelines for such activity and contributes to the characterization of the placement activity as such. Accordingly, a social phenomenon (in this case the decision-making process) is therefore something which is typically recursive that people commonly share as a consequence of the intersubjective process of social negotiation and constructs. This is a situation that enables the self to act (rather than being passive), taking into account what one presumes the other's definition or interpretation of the situation to be, while also interpreting the actions of the other according to schemas one assumes the other holds (Schutz 1940/1978, 1953/1967).

2.10 The choice activity according to Schutz

Schutz's debate on the issues of rational choice and freedom of choice is an essential theoretical construct for the present research since it provides an interpretation of situations which are perceived as lacking choice between alternative outcomes and are described as complex, involving social transactions and emotional stress. Therefore, the next sections will elaborate on his analysis of rational choice and freedom of choice.

Schutz claims that the act of choosing is not always a matter of choosing between two or more possibilities. Accordingly, in his view, the choice situation is composed of chains of partial decisions, which are adoptively taken while one goes through various levels of the decision-making process. Hence, in each level of the decision-making, immediate small-scale alternatives are being weighed and either chosen or rejected based on relevant information gathered. For example, at any stage of the decision-making process an individual can return to earlier steps in order to revise them, which emphasizes the significant contribution of individuals' ability to reflect on their actions. Therefore, the act of being free to choose is defined not just in terms of the alternative available, but also in terms of being able to act by planning or constructing any task previous to its performance.

Schutz goes on to define the knowledge needed to characterize a choice as a rational one, stating that that rational choice is made possible only if the individual has adequate knowledge of the outcome and the different means needed to obtain it. Accordingly, he defines the aspects of sufficient knowledge: knowledge of the outcome within the framework of the activity; knowledge of desirable and undesirable implications of the outcome; knowledge of the technicalities by which the final outcome will be obtained; knowledge of other means that might interfere with the main method chosen; and knowledge of the individuals' ability to access and use these methods and technicalities.

2.11 Summary

In this chapter, I presented a review of the key theories that helped me describe and interpret the phenomenon of early-age school choice. Since this phenomenon is assumed to involve social interactions among agencies involved, in particular,

kindergarten teachers and parents, in the literature review I elaborated on the various aspects of the school-choice activity through their perspectives as contextualized within the Israeli SEN placement policy.

In summary, then, in the literature review I attempted to illustrate the following:

- The complexity of ASD, along with the rise in prevalence locally and globally, highlights the necessity of high-quality early-childhood intervention that prevents social exclusion in the future. Therefore, a wide scope of placement options are being offered, ranging from segregated settings through mainstream programs to fully inclusive settings.
- Parents' and kindergarten teachers' experience is related to their school-choice activity, in terms of the ways they perceive their role in it and the suitability of the setting to the child's specific needs. Thus, ASD is challenging to both parents and kindergarten teachers.
- The activity of early-age placement focuses attention on the debate regarding the effectiveness of inclusive education. The success of any inclusion depends on attitudes of teachers and educational systems as well as parental involvement. Thus, gaps between ideology, practice and implementation of policy limit the success of inclusive education. The level of such success also influences parents' attitudes with respect to placing their ASD child within an inclusive setting.
- Parents' involvement in their child's education is essential to the child's progress and wellbeing. In terms of parents' motivation to become involved, three main sources were described as affecting their level of involvement: personal beliefs, educational system attitudes and actions towards parental involvement, and parents' personal life context.
- The decision-making regarding the placement of young ASD children is portrayed in the literature review as complex, a process that draws together the complexity of the child's condition, the lack of clarity of what in fact is the right placement, the different meanings parents and professionals ascribe to the placement final outcome, and the role of knowledge within. Consequently, I found rational choice theory not to fit the explanatory framework of the study and shifted towards

Schutz's social phenomenology as supporting an understanding of the activity within its social context. Thus, I emphasized key concepts such as lived experience, intersubjectivity, biographically determined situation, levels of expertise, domains of interest, reciprocity of motives and perspectives and system of relevance as contributing to the understanding of how knowledge is mutually constructed and shared through social interactions.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

This chapter provides a discussion integrating theoretical and practical aspects of the research design, the design of the research instruments, the process of collecting data and the strategies used to analyse the data. Further discussion addresses sampling procedures, reliability and validity procedures and ethical issues.

3.1 Methodological framework

The present research explores the placement process of young ASD children in early-age educational settings from the perspectives of parents and kindergarten teachers. The paradigm of the research relies on the assumption that the placement process, which involves decision-making on the part of parents, is a phenomenon that is subjectively and uniquely experienced and perceived by different agencies, such as parents, kindergarten teachers and institutions, involved in the activity. This phenomenon portrays the dynamic interplay between one's inner, mental world of thoughts, beliefs and emotions and the outer world—the social, normative and ideological world outside the self (Korobov 2010). With these assumptions in mind, I focus my research on the active, dynamic and constructive processes of human interaction within the activity of early-age school placement. I examine what emerges in such interactions, describing and later interpreting what is constructed in relation to what and how one's self interrelates with the norms, rules and ideologies of the outer world that are thought to constrain such interactions.

Therefore, I opted for a qualitative research approach which focuses on matters within their natural setting, allows for the interpretation of the meaning of things through the eyes of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln 2005), and attains a vivid and rich description of the context in which the phenomenon in question exists (Patton 1980). In the following paragraphs, I review key elements of the qualitative research approach and relate them to the phenomenological framework chosen for this study.

The constructivist-qualitative inquiry emphasizes a holistic approach to the phenomena (Stake 1995). The aim is thus to understand phenomena as wholes in a multidirectional and interconnected method, with a focus on describing and perceiving the world as complex and interconnected. Furthermore, phenomena are

always understood within their context; therefore, parts are always understood in light of their relationship to the whole in which they take place (Shkedi 2005). With this sense of wholeness, the uniqueness of individual cases and their contexts and their role in constructing the experience of the phenomena is emphasized (Stake 2005).

The constructivist-qualitative epistemology emphasizes that a phenomenon can only be understood from the insider point of view, and, that the values of the participants are thus crucial to the researcher's interpretations of it; therefore, great importance is given to narrative authentically told as stories by the participants. These narratives create structured framing to phenomena experienced by individuals, enabling them to practice a sense of agency by giving causal description of events and changing their lives accordingly (Shkedi 2005).

The present research focuses on situations, encounters and interactions occurring within the activity of early-age school placement. These are considered to be "meaning laden" and exist within a realm of a partly shared life-world where individuals participate in shared forms of activities (Husserl 1982). These encounters and interaction can occur under relatively accommodating, democratic and socially supportive conditions; however, they always occur in a specific situation characterized by cultural, individual and material aspects which should be taken into account throughout the research stages. Moreover, these aspects are not static but are constantly changing, mutually influencing processes of alteration and development (Sages & Lundsten n.d.), demanding that the researcher take a sensitive and adjustable approach to describing and interpreting the phenomenon in question. Thus, knowledge is constructed in ways in which experience and interactions are interwoven, creating a web of meaning reflecting the complexities of the phenomenon in question (Shkedi 2005).

The present research was constructed and implemented using hermeneutic phenomenology as a method. In the following sections, I briefly review the essence of the method, looking at several concepts underpinning the approach in theory and practice.

Phenomenology was referred to by Heidegger as an interpretive conceptual and methodological approach to the understanding of a person's experience of existing (as cited in Mackey 2005). Hermeneutic phenomenology, therefore, involves uncovering lived experience through the interpretation of meaning acquired in texts created from the narratives of those being studied (Newman et al. 2010), thus unfolding the epistemological assumption underlying the approach, that language is essential to understanding experience since individuals develop meanings of their experience primarily through language (Holroyd 2007).

Another main assumption is that each individual is born into a given context framed with certain cultural, language and values characteristics; therefore, he or she is understood as "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1927/1962). Consequently, one's life-world experience can only be interpreted within his or her framed historical situation.

The concept of the life-world is directly related to the methodological framework of the present study. It is defined as the realm of original self-experience that we encounter daily, emphasizing the individuality of experience (Hodge 2008).

The hermeneutic approach highlights that the different meanings of human makings are always accessible to us, because we ourselves are meaning-giving individuals who are part of a shared life-world that is saturated with meanings constructed across time and space that have become part of the legacy of the society (Guignon 2012).

Moustakas (1994) specifies the description of hermeneutic science as one that involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meanings underlying its surface appearance are fully understood. The aim is to seek a coherent and holistic description of an experience and the underlying dynamics or structures that correspond with that experience. Gadamer (1976) notes that the hermeneutic process involves a cycle through which an individual brackets preconceptions in view of the text, which leads to the creation of new preconceptions. Thus, one's knowledge is constantly transformed and reformed. Van Manen (1990) stresses the importance of being reflective throughout the whole process. Thus, the reflective interpretive process includes not only a widespread description of the experience as it appears but

also a reflective structural analysis and interpretations of the underlying conditions representing the substance of the experience (Moustakas 1994).

Van Manen (1990) established a framework for hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. This suggested framework is relevant for me because it is related to pedagogical practice. The hermeneutic framework is characterized by a dynamic interaction among six research activities:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which is of interest to the researcher and by which one is dedicated to the world.
2. Investigating experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualised.
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon.
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.
5. Constantly relating pedagogy to the phenomenon.
6. Constant balancing of the research data and context by considering the part and the whole.

Giorgi (1997) describes the philosophical phenomenological method as including three interconnecting steps: the phenomenological reduction, the description and the search for the essence. These are reviewed briefly in the coming section.

The phenomenological reduction is the minimum condition necessary to claim phenomenological status for one's research. Furthermore, it greatly contributes to the researcher's ability to produce precise, reliable and valid findings. To practice phenomenological reduction means to bracket past knowledge about the phenomenon in order to present it in its fullness, face it freshly and describe it exactly as it is experienced; furthermore, it means considering what is given precisely as it is given, as presence or phenomenon.

To describe a phenomenon is to give linguistic expressions to the object of any given act, precisely as it emerges within the act. Through the mode of language one is able to communicate to others the phenomenon as it is presented. The description is the expression of the given as given, whereas explanations, constructions and

interpretations relate to factors external to the given as influencing the phenomenon. An adequately rich description would include an intrinsic account of the phenomenon. Accordingly, the researcher must present responsibility and commitment to accurately presenting the experience of school placement as it is given.

Summarizing this section with relevance to the present study, the existential phenomenological world has a contextualized outlook of a certain phenomenon, which is therefore regarded as a pattern that occurs from a certain context (Thompson et al. 1989); thus, the individual's experience and the world are regarded as co-constituting. The aim of the researcher is to describe the phenomenon from a first-person view and to later interpret it using the principles of the hermeneutic phenomenology in order to capture a pattern as it occurs. The research strategy is holistic and is designed to relate descriptions of specific experiences to each other and to the overall context of the life-world. Consequently, a thematic description is given to the phenomenon in question.

3.2 Research strategy: The case study

In order to present an in-depth description of the phenomenon in question, I selected a multiple-case-study strategy. Stake (1995) defines the case study as the study of the particularity and the complexity of a single case within a certain context. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) describe the case study as a single case of a restricted system, one that provides a unique and detailed description of how and why people act within a certain context. These two definitions seem to be in congruence with the aim of the present study to deeply explore, describe and later on reflect on the phenomenon of early-age school placement as experienced by parents and kindergarten teachers. Thus, each parent or kindergarten teacher is regarded as a social unit to be described and interpreted. Furthermore, it is important to note that the present research is concerned with examining the subjective experience of school choice with its significance to each parent or kindergarten; therefore, the meaning and the essence ascribed to the phenomenon differ greatly from one person to another. Thus, the present research is mainly an intrinsic one looking at how to attain more knowledge and reflect upon a particular case (Stake 1995). However, it is also a multiple-case study in which several case studies are described and analysed in

order to explore the phenomena; the data gathered from multiple cases are often richer and more convincing (Yin 2003). According to Yin (2003), the single- and multiple-case designs are alternative options within the same methodological framework; therefore, the handling of each case is similar to the handling of all cases. The current research overlaps with Yin's (2003) typology, which recognizes three types of case studies in terms of their outcomes: exploratory, descriptive (providing narrative description), and explanatory (examining a theory).

In light of the phenomenological methodology, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) state that a good case study is one that is thorough and that either disconfirms our expectations or discloses things that were not expected. Above all, it creates doubt about previous assumptions, preconceptions and theories, enabling us to practice *epoche* and phenomenological reduction. However, their main concern is with how to generalize and produce a general statement that contributes to the scholarly community with structured theoretical constructs. Therefore, single cases can be related to other cases, in order to produce a more generalized statement.

In the following passage I discuss the question of moving on from a single case to a more general claim, focusing on two approaches: analytic induction and quasi-judicial approach as debated by Smith et al. (2009).

Analytic induction attempts to develop theoretical explanations from a set of cases; it is a repeated and circular process by which the researcher reflects on and modifies her thinking in light of each piece of data attained and assessed in each of the studied cases. The aim is to produce a final theoretical statement, which is a general model true to all cases. This is reached by exploring a certain theoretical construct against each of the cases, but with each case the theoretical construct is revised in order to fit the case. Each case suggests ways of modifying and improving the construct and achieves better case interpretation. Thus, there is a notion of steady process by which an improved theoretical construct gradually develops through the study of individual cases (Eckstein 2000).

In the quasi-judicial approach (Bromley 1986), single cases are written up and are constantly considered in relation to each other. This act of interrelating between the cases provides highly circumscribed accounts of an individual's experience;

however, it produces a low level of generalizations within relatively narrow areas of scientific and professional concern (Smith et al. 2009).

The present research adopts both approaches in addressing the multiple-case studies: the quasi-judicial approach, looking at issues that have emerged within one case and exploring them through other cases, on the one hand, and seeking to reach a refined, valid, general construct following a cross-analysis among all cases, on the other hand.

3.3 Sampling

The sampling strategy used reflects the demands of taking a phenomenological approach, the need to maintain contact over time, the intimate context of the interview, the detailed interview, the sensitive and personal experience related to the subject of the research, access to personal and varied material, and access to provisions. Therefore, the cases I chose the present research were the ones that were available and accessible to me; these were parents and kindergarten teachers I had previously met and worked with. In order to trace additional participants I used snowball sampling, by which those already participating in the study acted as gatekeepers and, therefore, were asked to recommend others. However, regarding parents as gatekeepers imposed some difficulties, mainly where parents expressed concerns about the participation of other parents. Since the topic of the present study carries emotional weight, the use of the snowball strategy enabled me to reach parents who were concerned about being exposed to formal agencies yet felt the need to share their experiences. Being referred to the research by other parents who reassured them about the purposes and ethical implication of the study was comforting for them.

Langdridge (2007) characterizes the differences between the rationale for the sampling in descriptive phenomenology and the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) hermeneutic approach. The main method of sampling in descriptive phenomenology is maximum variation sampling, that is, a method whereby the researcher seeks participants who have a common experience but who have different demographic features. In such variation it should be possible to determine those aspects of the experience that are consistent across the phenomenon.

In the other types of phenomenological studies, mainly the IPA and hermeneutic phenomenology, the main basis for the selection of the participants is that they allow the researcher access to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study (Smith et al. 2009). The participants thus represent a perspective rather than a population and, therefore, there is a tendency to reach a homogeneous sampling group. Furthermore, since the studies are idiographic, there will be little attempt to generalize beyond the specific sample (Langdridge 2007). However, generalizing a common theoretical construct from such a small, homogenous sample to a larger population is dangerous.

Overall, the small and homogenous sample is consistent with the aim of the present study to develop a thick and detailed description of the experience of a small number of people who share the same experience. However, dividing the sample into two groups—parents and kindergarten teachers—allows us to understand the phenomenon from two perspectives (Smith et al. 2009).

As for the size of the study, since the IPA and hermeneutic phenomenological research are idiographic, they are concerned with understanding a particular phenomenon in specific contexts and, therefore, these studies are conducted on a small sample. The detailed case-by-case analysis of individuals' transcripts is a time-consuming activity; therefore, analysing a larger number of cases is constrained by time limitations (Smith et al. 2009).

The present study included five parents of young ASD children and four public kindergarten teachers. Contextual information about the participants involved in the research is presented in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2. Each of the cases presented produced a thick description with a unique perspective on the phenomenon. This allowed a unique interpretation stressing the complexity and wholeness of the placement process. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 detail contextual information on parents and kindergarten teachers involved in the research.

Table 3.1: Contextual information for parent participants.

Name	Biographical background	Child name, age, diagnosis	Previous provision	Current provision
Ruth	Married, in her early thirties BA in computer engineering Lives in a major city northern part of Israel	Josh, only child, age four Defined as having ASD and suffering from severe epilepsy	Regular nursery up until the age of two ASD nursery up until the age of three: subsidized by parents, the Israeli welfare and health offices	ASD public kindergarten
Sara	Married, in her early thirties Ultra-orthodox Housewife Lives in a small ultra-orthodox community	Isaac, age four, youngest of two children Defined as having ASD	Regular nursery up until the age of two ASD nursery up until the age of three: subsidized by parents, the Israeli welfare and health offices	ASD public kindergarten
Shelli	Married, in her mid-thirties Social worker Lives in a small countryside community	Jacob, age six, oldest of three children Defined as having ASD	Private regular nursery until the age of three SEN public provision—language impairments—until the age of five Mild developmental delayed kindergarten—until the age of six	ASD Public kindergarten including a day of mainstreaming within a regular kindergarten in neighbouring kindergarten
Yelena	Married, in her mid-thirties Russian immigrant Housewife Lives in a town in the northern part of Israel	Lee, age five, her only child Defined as having ASD	Private nursery until the age of two Rehabilitative day care nursery—until the age of four	ASD public kindergarten
Noga	Married, in her early thirties Social worker Lives in a small agriculture village	Dan, age five, oldest among three children Defined as having ASD	Regular kindergarten until the age of three SEN kindergarten until the age of four	ASD public kindergarten including a day of mainstreaming within a regular kindergarten in their community

Table 3.2: Contextual information for kindergarten teacher participants.

Name	Biographical background	Role	Years of experience	Education
Yael	In her mid-thirties Married, two children, elementary school age Lives in a small community in the northern part of Israel	Leading ASD kindergarten teacher	13	BA + Teacher certificate
Danielle	In her early thirties Married, two young children Lives in a small community in the northern part of Israel	Leading ASD kindergarten	7	MA + Teacher certificate
Izabel	In her mid-thirties Orthodox Jew Married, four young children Lives in a city in the northern part of Israel	Leading ASD kindergarten teacher	10	BA + Teacher certificate
Miriam	In her fifties Married, grown children Lives in a kibbutz	Leading ASD kindergarten teacher	25	Teacher certificate

3.4 Ethics

The authentic and in-depth expositional nature of the phenomenological procedure gives rise to ethical concerns (Thompson et al. 1989). Therefore, I took the following measures.

At the commencing of the research enquiry stage, I made an official appeal to the department of education in order to obtain university ethical approval for the research (Appendix 1). Later, when participants were first addressed, I informed them of the purposes and procedures of the research, including the audiotaping of the interview. They were also informed of what is expected of them as participants and were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, non-identifiability and non-traceability (Cohen et al. 2007). Furthermore, before beginning the research, participants were

asked to agree to participate in the present research, signed a consent form (Appendix 2), and were reassured that they were free to leave the study at any time.

Since all interviews with kindergarten teachers were held outside the kindergarten's space, no permission from official educational representatives was needed; however, their supervisors were verbally informed and the teachers were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 2). All documents used in the present study were given to me directly by parents. No official documents were requested from the kindergarten teachers; therefore, no formal consent was needed.

Throughout the entire research I was committed to protecting parents as well as kindergarten teachers from discomfort and harm (Fontana & Frey 2005). I took a variety of measures in order to ensure each interview was conducted in a relaxed and secure manner. The issue of invasion of privacy was covered throughout the entire research. Parents were addressed only through other parents, and before any interaction took place, they were asked to consent to their participation. Furthermore, during the interview, attentiveness was required in order to recognize situations in which a participant expressed the need not to reply to certain questions and maintain privacy about particular aspects of his or her life; therefore, I did not ask any intrusive questions (Langdrige 2007).

The hermeneutic approach poses great ethical challenges for the enquirer since it involves relating to one's personal life-world experience as well as to the other's experience within context. Thus, the researcher must interpret findings with integrity and creativity (Clegg 2004). Furthermore, she must detach herself from the position of patronizing the other, bracketing her previous knowledge and experience as well as judgmental remarks. Thus, a constant process of reflexivity was interwoven within the research process. Furthermore, in order to better understand relationships and stories within their context, I gathered varied texts supporting the authentic nature of the research and enriching the notion of wholeness with regard to the phenomenon in question.

The present thesis involved a delicate relationship between me as both an enquirer and a professional and the parents as participants. Both sides were motivated by a shared, although essentially different need. I, as a researcher, wished to gain a better

description and understanding of parents' placement experiences as deriving of their own experiences, and the parents sought to obtain valued and reliable information about placement procedures and options and to make their voices heard. Therefore, ethically the research setting and in particular the interview setting needed to be carefully planned according to the expected outcome defined by the agents taking part in the interview. Thus, the framework of the research was clearly presented to parents, defining the content, the structure and the process in terms of the beginning and closure of the research. Consequently, I managed to distinguish between my role as the researcher and my role as a professional who has daily encounters with the formal educational management system.

The interview itself carried a closure part according to a model defined and used by Westcott and Kynan (2006) in interviewing children who had experienced sexual abuse. The interview session always ended in a manner that did not leave the interviewee distressed. Near the end of each interview session, I gave parents the opportunity to summarize their experience mainly using metaphorical terms. Furthermore, they were given the opportunity to ask questions and were thanked for their participation. Finally, I explained future expectations, stressing that any kind of interaction would be documented and considered to be integrated within the research as long as it supported their life-world experience. Since the nature of the research was one in which I felt I was learning about the phenomenon from and with the parents, I felt obligated to say that I was available for future support and sharing of information. However, only one parent stayed in touch for several months.

3.5 Methods of data collection

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and, in addition, employed other research tools in order to obtain a thick description of the phenomenon in question (Table 3.3). However, the use of the various tools differed according to the characteristics of the participants. In the next paragraphs I review the methodological procedures and focus mainly on the semi-structured interview, as it was the main source for obtaining a rich and first-hand description of the experience.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews are in many cases the main source for gathering valuable information. Through interviewing other people, we learn to understand their experiences and the meanings they attach to them within diverse cultural contexts (Fontana & Frey 2005; Seidman 1991; Gubrium & Holstein 2002). Silverman (2005) regards the act of interviewing as a social encounter between the researcher and the respondent and adds that through qualitative interviews the researcher can recreate events in which he or she did not participate. Overall, interviews involve a complex and active understanding of human nature, language and social influences and interactions (Tomlinson 1989).

For this present research I selected a semi-structured interview. In order to maintain the reliability of the interview, the researcher must ensure that the design of the questions allows spontaneous and open reactions from the interviewee, while maintaining relevance to the research agenda (Tomlinson 1989).

The semi-structured interview schedule was designed in a constructive and flexible manner, minimizing my involvement and maximizing the interviewee's opportunity for openness. Accordingly, I presented an initial access question and then followed up with a non-directive line of questioning, facilitating the interviewee's elaboration and expansion of the viewpoint they began expressing. Giorgi (1997) stresses that interview questions should be generally broad and open-ended so that the participant has a chance to express his or her viewpoint extensively. The aim is to reach a concrete detailed description of the participant's experience and actions that is as faithful as possible to what happened as experienced by the participant.

The process of planning and developing the research interview guide started with identifying most concepts embedded in the research topic, then focusing on the domain and sub-domains and finally designing the interview questions to gradually progress from open to closed framing, ensuring that they correspond with the research questions. Table 3.3 demonstrates the types of questions I used while interviewing the participants. Questions were constructed and phrased according to a model introduced by Smith et al. (2009).

Table 3.3: Example semi-structured interview questions.

Type of question	Example
Descriptive	Could you describe your child? Could you describe the kindergarten he presently attends? Could you describe an interaction with an institutional representative while going through the placement process? Can you describe the feelings you felt during these interactions?
Narrative	Can you tell me about how he came to attend this kindergarten? How do you usually act when making a decision?
Structural	Can you describe the procedures you had to go through during the placement process? Can you tell me who helped you while going through the process?
Contrast	What are the main differences between the previous kindergarten and the current? What were the main differences between the two kindergartens you had visited?
Evaluative	What would make you feel good about a kindergarten?
Circular	What do you think others think about the ways you reach a decision?
Comparative	What do you think your decision would be if you had more options to choose from?
Prompts	Can you tell me more about the ways you chose to advocate for your child's needs?
Probes	What do you mean by "sewing each parents a suit that perfectly fits him"? What do you mean by saying "I am willing to compromise but just in a good taste"? Explain meaning of phrase

However, although the semi-structured interview in the present study was carefully planned using techniques to elicit responses from the interviewees, in practice the course of each interview was largely set by each respondent, so that it was more of an open dialogue session (Langdrige 2007). The dialogue needed an opening question followed by a discourse balancing issues raised by parents and subjects raised by the researcher. It seemed or implied that parents were looking for a person with whom they could share without fearing judgmental remarks, their feelings about the experience of raising a child with autism and about the notions following the experience of school placement. Furthermore, they considered the researcher a source of information. Since I am quite familiar with the various settings available,

they aimed to get more reliable information about their quality and about how they should act when interacting with institutions. This raised ethical issues about the positioning of me, the researcher, as an expert in my field and demanded an expression of objective stance (see section 3.8). Thus, the course of the dialogue was set by the respondent (where the path of the interview would lead was mostly unknown to and unexpected by me), and the direction in which the interview would lead was mainly unforeseen. In most cases I felt I did not obtain sufficient data; therefore, I initiated further interactions with parents in which they could express themselves both orally and in writing. In other cases I chose to stop the procedure and to settle for the data I had obtained. In situations where additional interviews were held, I rephrased the questions to better suit parents' characteristics. Furthermore, based on initial reading of the transcripts, I recognized issues that needed further clarifying and extension and initiated phone conversations or email exchanges aimed at shedding light on and validating the emerging themes.

3.5.1.1 The interview context

It is the researcher's role as interviewer to provide a context in which the respondents freely describe their experience in detail; therefore, interviews were held either at the respondents' homes, in neutral places or by phone. In addition, if I felt that situational factors affected a respondent's ability to cooperate and respond, I stopped the interview and continued at a more convenient time or place. In any case, this decision was made with the respondent, mutually. This was mainly apparent when interviewing Danielle, Sara, and Ruth, who related their time limitations to their other parental responsibilities.

Thompson et al. (1989) remark on the issue of role, position and equality while conducting an interview. Since the subject of the study is the interviewee's experience, the interviewer is never in a position of knowing more than the interviewee. Thus, the aim is to create an activity that is of equal positioning and, furthermore, one that empowers parents as experts on their experiences. The context and the characteristics of the on-going interview's interactions reflect the ideal characteristics of any interactions between parents and official representatives of institutions, focusing on how to empower parents' sense of agency while interrelating with others sharing their experience of raising a child with autism.

In order to facilitate a dialogic process that made possible reciprocity of perspectives and an interchange of standpoints, I clearly defined the situation of the interview activity before it started.

To facilitate body language, discourse and emotional expression, the interview should ideally be a relaxed and enjoyable situation for both interviewer and interviewee. I achieved this atmosphere by adjusting the events within the activity to the interviewee's pace, and allowing free verbal expressions, which did not always correspond to the topic of the interview. Furthermore, I ensured that questions were simple and clear, allowing parents access to the activity. In times when parents expressed stressful reactions, I tried to react tactfully with both body and language.

According to Finlay (2006), three aspects of embodiment may be attended within the interview process: bodily empathy, embodied self-awareness and embodied intersubjectivity. Bodily empathy involves the participant's involvement and the embodied relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Embodied self-awareness involves the researcher's acknowledgement of his or her embodied response, and embodied intersubjectivity requires the researcher to attentively address embodiment between him- or herself and the respondent.

All semi-structured interviews began in July 2010 and lasted until the end of August 2010, the period of summer vacation. Following these interviews, I conducted phone conversations during the first 3 months of the school year, since parents as well as kindergarten teachers were less available then than before. In one of the cases the phone conversations lasted longer, until March 2011. All interviews and phone conversations were recorded and later transcribed in Hebrew. Shuy (2005) comments on the advantages of telephone-interview procedures, such as reduced interviewer effects, better interviewer uniformity in delivery, control over the quality of questions, researcher safety and greater cost efficiency.

3.5.1.2 Reflection on the interview process

After each interview session, I followed a self-evaluative procedure, reflecting on what I had learnt about the participant's experience and about the procedures and future plans for future inquiry action. The main reflection addressed whether questions asked had allowed the interviewee to provide a detailed, subjective

description of the experience, neither leading nor guiding parents and kindergarten teachers to interpret their experience while describing it. Therefore, I avoided “why” questions and instead focused on specific events, enabling each interviewee to provide a fuller and more detailed description of the experience as it was lived. The use of “why” questions frequently leads the interview along a more abstract path, isolating both the interviewee and the interviewer from the experience as lived (Smith et al. 2009). Furthermore, I reflected on whether the line of questioning had imposed a certain theoretical construct on the description.

One of the main challenges in conducting a phenomenological interview is the need to avoid interpretations and to bracket previous assumptions (Langdrige 2007). While conducting an interview there is a temptation to examine previous interpretations, connections and other insights. However, one needs to treat the data collected as an autonomous body; therefore, preconceived theoretical notions about the phenomenon must be bracketed. This enables an understanding of the respondent’s lived experience. Finally, one should monitor the effect of the interview on the participant, recognizing whether the line of questions causes stress and unease, for instance. These notions can be expressed verbally and non-verbally, and the researcher should be sensitive to these reactions.

3.5.1.3 Online interviewing

In the present research, interactions with two of the mothers were also conducted by email. This was especially valuable since they were geographically distant and were less available for further face-to-face interactions. According to Langdrige (2007), with online interviewing as well as with phone conversations there is a separation between self and other; consequently, there is no ability to perceive the existence of the other through a variety of senses available. However, Ruth, one of the mothers, found this to be a convenient and a satisfying way to describe and interpret her experience of school placement. She chose to write emails, especially late at night once her son was asleep. In her emails she vividly described and reflected upon events. Her writing was regulated, well planned, missing the authentic descriptions and the notion of addressing the phenomenon as given.

3.5.2 Documents

In the present study various documents were used to enrich the data collected. These were used as a source of textual material for the phenomenological analysis.

Researchers most often seek to identify themes and stories in these sources of texts as they try to shed light on the phenomenon in question (Langdridge 2007). For example, home-school notebooks shed some light on parents' expectations and feelings following the placement of their child. Letters written by parents to the placement committee described how they perceive their child and the appropriate placement for him or her.

3.5.3 Visual tools

In the present research, visual tools, such as pictures, metaphoric cards and a drawing made by one parent of the ideal kindergarten space, were used to obtain a thicker description and to support emerging themes within the phenomenon of school placement. For example, Ruth presented me with a picture of her son with his previous kindergarten teachers, described the picture in detail, and later interpreted and reflected on why this picture had an enormous impact on her. When she drew a sketch of what she had imagined the kindergarten would look like from the inside, she focused mainly on areas that were of great concern for her since they related directly to her son's epilepsy. Sara, who describes herself as a spiritual person, was thrilled when asked to use metaphoric cards to reflect her coping strategies. Gillies et al. (2005) claim that the use of non-verbal data production is crucial in situations where feelings and experiences are not available for verbal description. Furthermore, experiences might be limited in their richness by formal language that can often produce stereotypical and normative representations of feelings.

Table 3.4 summarizes the distribution of the research instruments for each case.

Table 3.4: A distribution of the research instruments.

Name	Research tools
Ruth	Documents (official educational reports , letters sent to the placement committee, memos written by the mother preparing her for different interactions), semi-structured interviews, constant email exchange, phone conversations, pictures, a sketch of the ideal kindergarten, home–school notebook, brief conversations with the kindergarten teacher
Sara	Semi-structured interview, brief phone conversations, brief email exchange, symbolic cards, home–school notebook
Yelena	Interview in her house with other people present: husband, the child, volunteer, trainee student Home–school notebook, semi-structured interviews with the kindergarten teacher Izabel
Shelli	Semi-structured interview Documentation of a group meeting she had with trainee students telling them about her experience
Noga	Semi-structured interview, phone conversations, one of them with the husband
Yael	Semi-structured interviews Brief conversations within the kindergarten Pictures Phone conversations
Izabel	Semi-structured interviews Brief conversations within the kindergarten Phone conversations
Danielle	Semi-structured interviews Brief conversations within the kindergarten Phone conversations
Miriam	Semi-structured interview Phone conversations Social story presented to both parents and children Transcript of the first parents conference Brief conversations within the kindergarten

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

The present study involved several interrelating phases of data collection. Table 3.5 outlines the process of collecting data.

Table 3.5: The data collection process.

Stages	Aims
First stage of interviewing: July 2010 Documents involved	Description of the school placement phenomenon before the actual placement decision is made
Phone conversation and email exchange: August 2010	Description of the experience of school placement once a decision is made
Phone conversations, email exchange and other documents: September–December 2010	Reflections on the placement choice
Added information voluntarily submitted by the participants (face-to-face casual conversations, phone conversations and email exchange): up until March 2011	Reflections on the placement choice and future placement options and procedures Collecting valuable information contributing to the thickness of the data already obtained— stressing the reliability of the data previously collected

3.7 Analysis Procedures

The phenomenological approach is holistic; therefore, before beginning any analysis one must read through all the data. The aim is to maintain a global sense of the data. The global sense is important for determining how the parts are interrelated, constructed and organized within the whole (Giorgi 1997).

Hermeneutic inquiry always has a circular structure, which is constantly concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole; thus, to understand any given part, one must look to the whole, and to understand the whole, one must look to the parts (Smith et al. 2009). It starts out from a general sense of the experience, uses that background of understanding in order to interpret the phenomenon in question, and on the basis of these concrete interpretations revises its initial general sense of what things mean (Guignon 2012). This process of analysis is iterative, enabling the researcher to move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data rather than completing a hierarchy of steps. One's relationship with the data changes according to the hermeneutic circle. Entry into the meaning of a text can be made on a number of different levels, all of which relate to one another, offering different perspectives on the whole–part coherence of the text.

Giorgi (1997) describes several steps for the analysis stage.

Dividing the data into parts: While reading the transcripts, the researcher constitutes meaning units. This stage involves emic analysis in which meaning units are expressed in the participant's own everyday language. However, the main principle guiding this step is that the meaning units must be determined by the criteria that are consistent with the scientific discipline. The phenomenological approach is "discovery-oriented"; therefore, one needs an attitude open enough to let unexpected meanings emerge. Thus, a good analysis is one that is sensitive to the discipline and to the phenomenon being researched.

Organization and expression of raw data into disciplinary language: Once the meaning units are recognized, they have to be rediscovered, examined and probed so that the disciplinary value of each unit can be made more precise, in order to establish a more narrow description than that of everyday life. In this etic analysis stage, the meaning units have to be articulated in terms relevant to the discipline being exploited.

Expressing the structure of the phenomenon: In the last stage of analysis, the researcher seeks to apprehend the essential structure of the concrete lived experience from the perspective of the discipline. What is important about these structures is not so much the parts but the interrelationships among the parts.

The present research analysis followed the general path of the hermeneutic circle as embedded in Giorgi's steps for analysing data and Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA guidelines.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the hermeneutic analysis circle approach, stressing the repeated shift between the whole and its parts. In view of this flowchart, I outline the various analysis stages I followed in the present thesis.

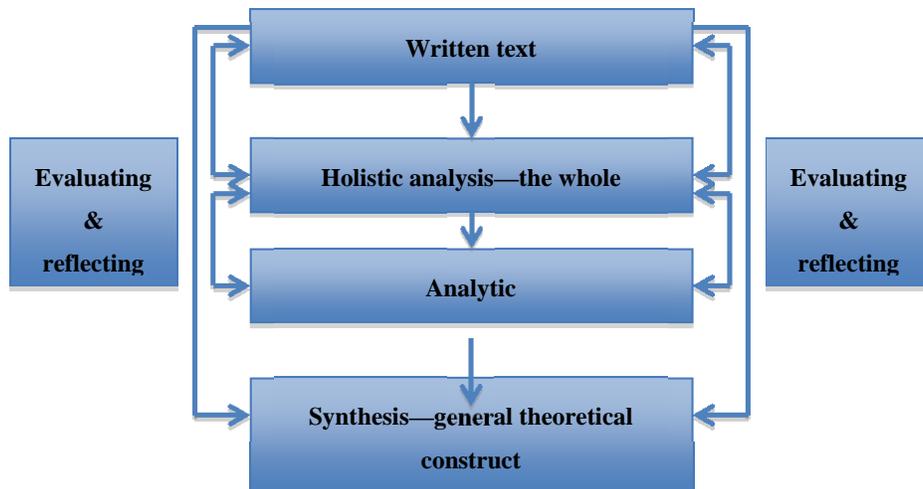


Figure 3.1: The hermeneutic circle of the present research, as designed by the researcher.

The procedures of the data analysis included several stages.

The first stage involved an etic analysis, which began with repeated sessions of reading and rereading the various transcribed texts provided by all participants, obtained through the use of varied research strategies and tools. This helped me immerse myself in the original data, enabling me to enter the participants’ world, focusing on their descriptions and understanding of the phenomenon in question (Smith et al. 2009). This stage involved recollection of the participants’ voices and body movements as observed during the interview activity.

In the second stage I took notes, focusing on examining and exploring semantic content and language. This process of initial note-taking ensured a growing sense of familiarity with the texts produced by the participants (Smith et al. 2009). The comments on the texts were descriptive at first and later developed into interpretative comments. These were directly related to the participants’ explicit meanings.

In order to understand the complexity of each case, in the third stage I used spider maps (see Figure 3.2 for an example). These helped me reach a chronological account of parents’ placement experiences and a holistic mapping of interrelationships and patterns in the parents’ stories.

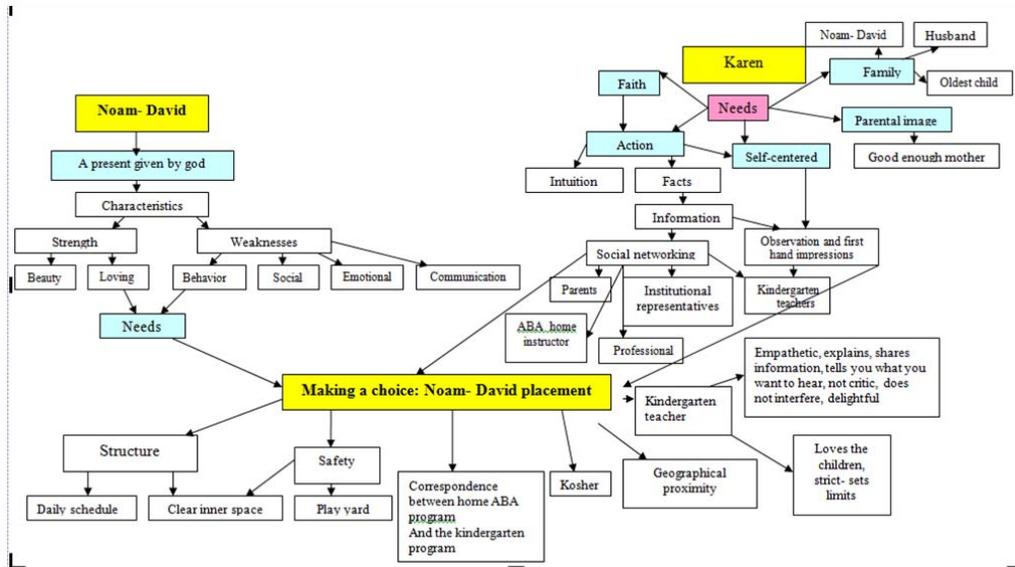


Figure 3.2: Spider map, Sara.

Subsequently, I wrote a story to characterize each participant’s placement experience. Additionally, each story was given a heading—a quotation portraying the meaning each participant ascribed to the activity. These are illustrated in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8: Participants’ story headings.

Participant name	Story heading
Yelena	“They know much better than I do what is good for him”
Noga	“When we act together our son gains the most”
Shelli	“We made the right choices, which suited at that time”
Sara	“I had a clear direction, I really wanted this kindergarten”
Ruth	“I want the best for him, but what if I don’t know what the best is?”
Izabel	“They need support and guidance while making a placement decision”
Miriam	“One should believe in the child’s ability to progress and work without hesitations towards that goal”
Danielle	“Parents should listen to the committee”
Yael	“We are all in this together”

The fourth stage, the developing of the emergent themes, involved returning to the transcripts and recognizing meaning units, phrased in the language of the participant

and supported by quotations from the transcript. This was still done on an emic level, and relied on the stories created at the previous stage and additional analysis procedures based on the IPA guidelines.

The fifth stage involved searching for connections across emergent themes within each case. At this stage I tried to produce refined structures that best characterized participants’ stories.

The sixth stage involved a paralleled etic cross-analysis procedure within each of the categorized cases—parents and kindergarten teachers—seeking common patterns across cases. This stage was directly related to relevant theoretical constructs.

The seventh stage included specifying and refining the emergent cross-analysis themes into more abstractly described themes.

Table 3.9: Emerging themes: Cross-analysis.

Main themes and subcategories		
Personal experience	Personal “understandings”	Practical implications
Experiencing responsibility	“Understandings” of the placement process as a choice situation	Defining the framework of the placement activity
Experience of stress and ease	“Understandings” of the child	Taking action:
Experience of dilemmas and conflicts	“Understandings” of coping and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being the child’s advocate
Experiencing a sense of exclusion and a sense of belonging	“Understandings” about parents’ role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shopping around for alternatives
Experiencing hope and having turning points in life	“Understandings” of the appropriate placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactions with formal agencies
Experiencing uncertainty	“Understandings” about the kindergarten teachers’ role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactions with informal agencies
	“Understandings” of formal interactions with local education authorities	
	“Understandings” of the role of knowledge	

The final stage of the analysis included a cross-analysis of all the cases, looking at common patterns, trying to express both the interrelating components of the phenomenon illustrated in Table 3.9 and the structure of the phenomenon as evolving

from personal experience to conceptualizing personal understandings that resulted in activating a plan scheme empowered through social interactions, as illustrated in Figure 4.1 and Figure 5.1.

3.8 Research validity and reliability

In the following paragraphs I discuss the procedures aimed at reaching reliability and validity. In order to establish a comprehensible validation of the research study and to ensure in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln 2005), I employed a triangulation process using multiple data sources (Yin 2003). Denscombe (2007) emphasizes that triangulation is crucial to good research since it enables the researcher to view phenomena from more than one perspective. Thus, exploring the phenomenon of early-age school placement of ASD children through the use of a variety of research instruments helped me grasp the essence of it, as it is uniquely perceived by each participant.

The interviews were conducted in Hebrew; therefore, after being transcribed word for word, they needed to be translated into English. In order to accurately and authentically describe the experiences as given, I translated the text with the guidance and help of a colleague who is both a native English speaker and an English professor. Together we ensured that the participants' statements were translated as accurately as possible.

Before analysing the various transcripts, I handed them to three different individuals who were asked to read them and to search for themes or structures of experience (Hoogsteen & Woodgate 2013). These individuals had different disciplinary approaches: a consumer behaviour analyst, a trainee teacher's pedagogic instructor and a psychologist familiar with phenomenological inquiry. By approaching them I sought, first, to give my analysis deeper and varied meanings and understandings, and, second, to ensure that my analysis procedures as well as my interpretations were accurate and could be generalized later into an abstract theory.

Following the final stage of the emic in-case analysis in which themes were phrased in the words of the participants, I gave the document, including the suggested analysis, to an unbiased person to read who later remarked on a judgmental approach

towards one of the participants. Subsequently, I reread the analysis and decided to change the manner in which it was presented, thus practicing my bracketing skills.

Finally, I initiated and maintained an interpretive dialogue with a colleague who was familiar with phenomenological inquiry in theory and practice. The dialogue helped facilitate my bracketing by raising various doubts and questions about the phenomenon. For example, in Yael's case, the colleague raised questions about how she perceives parents' role in the placement process: does she really empathise with them? And in the case of Danielle, are her actions rooted in her behaviouristic approach? And why has Sara found it most appropriate to place her child in Danielle's kindergarten? Maybe what suits one parent doesn't suit another?

Chapter 4:

Findings and Analysis

In the previous chapter, I described the methodology used in this study. The chapter concluded with a review of the data analysis procedures. Accordingly, in this chapter I describe the data and the analysis of its structure and components. Section 4.1 introduces participants' stories, and section 4.2 presents the cross-analysis of all cases, emphasizing the complexity of the placement activity in terms of structure and 'within activity' components.

4.1 Parents' stories

Yelena: "They know much better than I do, what is good for him."

Yelena's son (Lee) attended a regular nursery until he was two years old. However, from the time his diagnosis was finalized, she began to have doubts about the appropriateness of his placement. She was then addressed by the director of a daycare centre for ASD toddlers. Following a consultation with her social worker, she decided to place him in the suggested setting in spite of the long drive from her own town. She explains why she didn't visit the new nursery's facilities before their arrival: *"I actually wanted to visit but couldn't find the time."*

At first she travels with her son back and forth each day; eventually, after having exhausted herself, she demands that the local authority supply transportation and an escort: *"The nursery last year, it was a war zone."* She describes how pleased she was with the new, aesthetic and clean facilities as well as with the staff's care for her child, worshipping their ability to manage his difficult behaviour.

By the time the child turned three he was eligible for SEN provision within their local municipality. Following a placement committee, they were directed to the only ASD-oriented kindergarten within their local municipality. She describes her experience within the placement committee: *"At the committee there were about five people. I was there with Lee and my husband. I sat during the entire meeting and Lee sat under the table. I don't know what questions arose . . . probably questions about the boy. And there was another mother of another child with us. It was short, about ten minutes. I knew what I wanted; I wanted a communication-focused nursery*

because he has communication problems and I was given one. If I would have asked for another setting I would've probably got what I wanted. Whether it's a communicational kindergarten or a regular one with an assistant, I have the right."

Following the placement decision Yelena visits the kindergarten, without having prior information about it: *"I've heard nothing of this kindergarten."* She describes her impressions and concerns following this visit: *"I was there once. I actually didn't like the kindergarten at first. It was old. In the other nursery the building was new and well organized . . . I saw Izabel [the kindergarten teacher] there . . . I saw a child there that used photos to show what he wanted, he didn't talk. I said to myself what will I do if Lee stays that way?"*

By the end of the child's first year in this kindergarten, she says: *"Thank god we have this kindergarten. Everything about this kindergarten is good. The staff, they know him, they give him lots of love. He makes really good progress. The entire staff invests in him."*

However, being aware of his progress, she fears this will require a change of placement and decides to act: *"I asked them not to make us leave the kindergarten. I went to the manager of the educational department and thanked him for this kindergarten. He was so happy that he jumped in the air and typed something into his computer."*

When reflecting on the process, she relates difficulties she encounters as a Russian immigrant: *"It's hard for us Russians; we don't know the rules here in Israel . . . anyone who knows gets what he wants."* She further refers to a sense of social exclusion: *"Lots of people look at my child in ways that I don't like . . . I don't feel comfortable among them. He tries to talk with them, play with them, but they treat him like garbage."*

She relates her decision-making to recommendations made by the kindergarten: *"I trust Izabel, I trust any person within the kindergarten that has gone through internship and therefore knows how to cope with children like that . . . They know much better than I do. I didn't study, I am just a mother."*

Noga: “When we act together our son gains the most.”

Noga’s child Dan attended a regular nursery in a kibbutz, until the age of three. When his special needs were diagnosed his parents considered continuing his attendance within an older-aged regular kindergarten. However, they were rejected by the kindergarten teacher, even though they promised her a privately sponsored personal aide.

Following the refusal, Dan was referred to a local public SEN setting. However, by the end of the year, Noga found out through her personal networks as a local social worker that the children attending this kindergarten next year would be labelled as having cognitive delays. She then decided to advocate for the need to place him in a kindergarten for ASD children, saying: *“He will get the best treatment that supports his wellbeing where he will not be tagged as having cognitive disorders.”*

She describes their actions trying to obtain the desired placement, and mainly her husband’s: *“We kept demanding what we thought was right . . . my husband is the one who pushes things, he is much involved, initiates talks with all people involved. He wants our son to get the best.”*

She describes encountering difficulties when addressing local authorities: *“It was a terrible experience. I tried to explain that he was a high-functioning child with communication issues, who should not be around retarded children. But she ignored me as if I didn’t exist; she had her own agenda.”* She describes the kindergarten teachers’ contribution to the placement decision: *“The kindergarten provided accurate data and spoke of his need to be in an ASD setting.”*

Following this experience, the parents decided to change their home residency in order to get better educational placement within a familiar community—allowing a greater family support. She comments on the uncertain nature of this decision: *“No one knew what the kindergarten was going to be like. We couldn’t ask anyone, we just knew it was the only kindergarten available.”* She was also concerned because they could not predict the child’s future characteristics: *“It’s difficult to make choices. We don’t know what will be with him. What he will be like and which options will be available.”*

The mainstream option was always on her mind: *“We feel that he wants to be around children. It would do him good . . . we don’t want him to be an outsider . . . this is why we fight for the mainstream option.”*

She describes the local educational authority’s negative response to their request—*“They think we want to drain money from them”*—and the kindergarten teacher’s positive approach—*“She went to visit the mainstream kindergarten and tried to convince her supervisor that this was contributing to his development.”*

She reflects on their placement activity, stressing the emotional aspect—*“I was under a lot of stress”*—and the need to get information and support from professionals and officials: *“Once the supervisor told us he could stay at the kindergarten for three more years I calmed down . . . she also told us not to hurry, that there will always be options available since there are more and more children defined as PDD and the system needs to provide them with suitable provision.”* As for getting support from other parents, she says: *“I have a lesser need to get support from other parents.”*

She notes that along with the placement process they have undergone a personal process: *“As parents we speak now from a different stand. We now enjoy being with him, we have learnt to accept him as he is and we cope better in times of crises.”*

Shelli: “We made the right choices, which suited at the time.”

Shelli describes a long placement process, which included three different transitions from one setting to another. The process began with Jacob being educated in a nursery within a kibbutz until the age of three. Once his difficulties appeared, a decision was made to place him in a language-impairments-oriented kindergarten. This decision was made following a placement committee and a consultation with professionals.

The transition to a segregated setting is described as “traumatic” at first: *“We were sure the children there had horns. It was difficult because there were children from backgrounds we didn’t know of; there were children from religious and low-income families.”* However, information provided by a friend eased the stress: *“She told me*

that a language-oriented kindergarten is very similar to the regular settings, the same curriculum but with different instruction. It made me feel more positive.”

During this year doubts were raised by both kindergarten teachers and parents: *“When he first joined this kindergarten he was always several steps behind other children. We then realized how complex his disability was.”* By the end of the year the kindergarten teacher tried to gently suggest that this was not the right place for him, but the mother says she wouldn’t have accepted that opinion: *“No matter what they said was right for him I couldn’t accept that I was in a different place.”*

Following these insinuations she decides to act: *“We visited various kindergartens, looked at the children and their drawings. We were impressed that either he was too low or too high.”* Based on a visit, information given by professionals, and information provided by her mother, who works at the local municipality, both parents decide on a developmental-delay-oriented kindergarten in a different district: *“Though slightly remote, I knew that if I fight I would get the approval for the placement.”*

By the end of this year, the child is diagnosed with ASD. In full, this brings Shelli to search for an ASD kindergarten within her community. Again, she depends on information provided by her mother and is satisfied with the option offered—a combined provision of segregated and mainstream approach.

She reflects on this placement decision: *“Now he is amongst children who are mostly lower than him, but he has become a leader, he feels safe and secure, and so do I. This year my expectations were low, so I was relaxed and it was wonderful. He is what he is, and he did well.”* However, she criticizes local authorities for their inability to accurately place children according to the severity of their disorder, resulting in a marked diversity in the kindergarten.

She reflects on her role in the placement process: *“In difficult situations I go into a phase of doing. When I feel very afraid of not knowing which setting would be good for Jacob, then doing relaxes me. It means speaking to everyone who can help, seeing through my eyes the various options available, searching for information over the internet, to be able to reach a decision from a knowledgeable stand.”*

She summarizes the process: *“For us the placement symbolizes the process of accepting our child as he is. It took us four years of going through a process. We kept on believing that it’s a phase and by the time he reaches first grade he will be in a regular setting. And now we are letting go . . . We made the right choices, which suited at the time.”*

Sara: *“I had a clear direction, I really wanted this kindergarten.”*

Sara’s child Isaac attended an ASD-segregated nursery until the age of three. This setting provided varied interventions based on Stanley Greenspan’s therapeutic approach. Once the child turned three, there was a need to search for a placement. Since there were no options available within her local community, Sara searched for alternatives in nearby cities.

Sara’s search was focused on two kindergartens recommended by parents, professionals, and the child’s previous nursery staff. She visited the two kindergartens. In the first kindergarten she spoke with the kindergarten teacher; however, she was not allowed to tour the inside space. In the second kindergarten, she spoke with the kindergarten teacher, observed her in action and toured the inside space as well as the play yard. Sara describes being impressed by the kindergarten teacher, her actions and the arrangements of the inner as well as the outer space.

Following this visit she makes a decision; however, she raises doubts about how to request this setting from the local educational authorities: *“I want to ask for this kindergarten but I understand the system doesn’t like parents making that kind of request, this might harm my chances to get the placement I want.”* Nevertheless, she notifies the system of her placement request and waits for the official placement decision.

A month before the school year commences, Sara is informed that there is no available place within the setting she requested, and she is then offered other alternatives: *“They suggested several other options which were inappropriate since they were too far away, and the level of functioning of the other children was too low. It’s as if they just wanted to ‘tick off’ our case, as if they were not aware of our needs as a family.”*

She describes her feelings: *“I don’t deserve this. I was so organized; I took care of every little detail and I didn’t neglect anything that needed to be done. I feel hurt and I really want to succeed.”*

While waiting for the final placement decision, she considers calling a parent whose decision might affect her child’s placement; however, she abstains from doing so: *“I know that our children show an unstable development sequence, there are ups and downs and it’s a very dynamic situation. You never know what will happen, so I understand why he is saving a place in the special education setting. As a father, he needs to protect his child. I would do the same.”*

She further asks a kindergarten teacher she knows to enquire about the placement decision. She reports her response: *“She told me . . . the system doesn’t like parents who are pushing in one direction.”*

As a last resort, Sara turns to her local municipality representative; she quotes their response: *“When placing a child in an educational framework outside our local council I will always support the parents’ requests, because it is not right to add to the parents’ burden.”*

She criticizes the other local educational authorities: *“I insist, but they are wearing me down. It’s a mutual war of nerves.”*

Days before the school year commences, the desired placement is approved. Sara reflects on the process: *“The process was good, mainly because I had a clear direction, I knew where I was going and I am happy with what I saw. I really wanted this kindergarten . . . I need to consider all the information involved in our choice. I am willing to compromise but only up to a point.”*

Ruth: “I want the best for him, but what if I don’t know what the best is?”

Ruth’s child Josh attended an ASD-segregated nursery until the age of three. This setting provided varied interventions based on Stanley Greenspan’s therapeutic approach. Once the child turned three other options needed to be considered: *“We understood that there was no option to stay there. Josh was bigger in age and the options were either going to an inclusive setting or to a special education setting*

suited for children with communicational difficulties. There was a dream about a regular setting but then we got the staff recommendation that it wouldn't suit him."

Ruth begins enquiring about other options. Information she received from another mother helps her understand the nature of the placement activity: *"There is not much choice, and [...] according to Josh's age only three kindergartens suit him."*

Following conversations she has with other parents and professionals, she eliminates two kindergartens.

Still in a state of uncertainty, she visits another kindergarten, in a different municipality. She explains her reasons for this visit: *"At that stage I was worried and afraid of the only option I had."* She describes her visit and her impressions: *"The kindergarten teacher gave us information about the daily schedule, focusing on how group activities and individualized treatments sessions are integrated. I saw the whole kindergarten . . . I saw the children sitting and eating together."* However, she explains why they didn't choose this setting: *"It would demand great effort from us since it involves complicated bureaucratic procedures and we are not sure that we will be pleased there, and that this is the right choice."*

On agreeing on the only option available, she submits a formal request to the local authority. However, she raises concerns: *"Even when I applied [for] the request, I felt discomfort asking for a specific placement. I understand that the system does not like it. I tried not to specifically say what I want. What will happen if we don't get the placement we wanted?"*

Once the final placement is approved, Ruth says, *"there is a sense of tranquillity."*

In conclusion, she describes their role within the placement process: *"We want Josh to have a positive experience within the kindergarten, and for us to be able to make the right choice for him."* And when evaluating their choice: *"Overall, we were just looking for a placement in which there will be love and warmth; this was our main priority and we got it . . . However, still, we feel he learns nothing of importance within the kindergarten. His life is not enriched there."*

4.2 Kindergarten teachers' stories

Izabel: "They need support and guidance while making a placement decision."

Izabel describes her role within the placement activity as one that involves responsibility: *"I constantly engage with how to present everybody involved, what the child needs, hoping they would listen and decide wisely."*

She describes the placement process as complex, involving dilemmas for which there is no single obvious resolution: *"I try to tell them what I think are his true capabilities. It's difficult. I don't want to discourage them nor hurt their feelings . . . I don't know what to do, they think differently from us, they are angry with us. However, there is no use arguing with them."*

According to Izabel, the placement process commences at the beginning of the school year: *"We are already debating on his future placement. I predict he will not suit our kindergarten, I think he needs to be placed in an inclusive setting."* It further evolves through constant interactions with parents, professionals and local officials. By the end, she says, *"There are no surprises; everybody is aware of the others' views; this is a result of steady and constant interactions with parents and my supervisors."*

Her perceptions of parents' role within the placement process are ambivalent: on the one hand, she says, *"Parents are important. I cannot work effectively without their cooperation . . . they know their child and can help me better address his uniqueness . . . they need support and guidance while making a placement decision."* And on the other hand, she says, *"He was in a regular kindergarten and I don't understand that, it's because the parents decided. When parents decide they give them what they want."*

Interactions with local officials are regarded as important; however, tensions arise between their policy-driven action and the kindergarten teachers' pedagogical considerations: *"I don't succeed with him because he is used to an individualized work routine—I don't have manpower . . . don't they understand that it's crucial the kindergarten population would be homogeneous. In this way each of the children's*

special needs can be addressed in group sessions . . . they place a child in an inclusive setting without offering support for the child and the staff.”

Miriam: “One should believe in the child’s ability to progress and work without hesitations towards that goal.”

Miriam describes herself as a dominant figure in the placement activity, collaborating in the various formal procedures embedded within: *“I am the one who initiates conversations with parents; I am also the one that manages the discussions.”* However, this is regarded as constraining her educational practice: *“So much time is spent on writing official documents and I came to work with the children.”*

About her previous role within the placement activity, she says: *“In the past before any placement decision was made, parents had to attend an internal ‘getting to know’ committee, where we got to learn of the child and the family and they got to be acquainted with us. At the end of the meeting we used to sit down and discuss the suitability of the child to our provision. Following this discussion parents were informed of our discussion. Today we can hardly influence the decision, made only by authorities. And they have their own agenda.”*

She describes the placement process as involving dilemmas, complicated considerations and collaborative effort: *“The child is going through a crisis that is affecting his behaviour . . . the mainstreamed kindergarten staff lacks inclusive skills . . . we are not sure what is right for him now.”* She describes how she addressed the dilemma: *“I suggested we have a meeting including all staff involved. I expect everyone to show up and express his or her opinions. It’s important that we hear about his current mainstream experience from different points of view. It’s important to consider his future placement in light of his current experience.”*

She regards parents as valuable informants: *“I usually rely upon other parents to provide newer parents of relevant information regarding our kindergarten . . . it’s very important that I get information from the parents about the child. It’s important to hear them as parents, how they experience the child now and their future expectations and goals.”*

Interactions with parents about placement alternatives evolve throughout the year; however, just before the official placement committee is assembled, they are intensified: *“In the middle of the year we carry on an evaluative conversation with the parents and by the end of the year we have a concluding session. In between parents are always invited to initiate conversations and share their concerns and doubts.”*

She describes her role within these interactions: *“I am consistent, determined and clear with parents . . . I try to understand them, where their behaviour comes from, not to be judgmental . . . I try and do my best [so] that they understand me . . . I want them to feel comfortable. I don’t want them to think of me as a pretentious person.”*

She further speaks about parents’ personal experience as affecting their placement decision: *“These parents are tired; for each meeting they have to travel an hour. So I understand why they are looking for a nearer setting.”*

Miriam criticizes the local municipality and the regional educational office for their placement decisions: *“They should have a firmer agenda not to let children that are not defined as autistic join our provision . . . the local authority does so because they are motivated by financial consideration. Having a special needs child within their jurisdiction enables them to get more budget support from the state.”*

Danielle: “Parents should listen to the committee.”

Danielle’s story of her placement experience focuses on two issues: who the key decision-maker is in the activity, and how placement decisions affect her daily actions within the kindergarten.

First, she discusses the framing of the placement activity as a choice activity. She relates to the limited availability of placement options, and to the system’s considerations for the placement of young ASD children within segregated settings: *“I think that the early year’s placement decision process is troublesome because there are not that many possibilities. Here children are classified by age, so there are not that many possibilities to choose from . . . parents from the periphery, who put pressure on the system, have better chances to get what they want.”*

About local education officials' roles and actions within the placement activity and the essence of their decision, she says: *"My supervisor presents our recommendations in the placement committee . . . Parents should listen to the committee, because if its members were entitled to decide for the parents, the groups in the kindergarten would be more homogeneous. This year all the children were placed as a result of the placement committee decision and we can see that the population in the kindergarten is more homogeneous and easy to work with."*

Interactions with parents are described as a means to obtain valuable information about their placement expectations, and in most cases Danielle relates parents' placement decisions to their experience of raising an ASD child: *"The child is here because his parents requested so. They asked for this kindergarten even though they do not live in Haifa. The mother works in the local municipality and considered it convenient to place her child in a setting which is related to her work. She had heard that the kindergarten would include high-functioning children. She said that hopefully he would benefit from the high-functioning children and his situation will improve."*

However, she raises a dilemma: *"These are not simple cases. The parents are in this forever . . . the dilemma is whether to let them decide . . . their decisions interfere with the kindergarten functioning . . . children are placed in inappropriate settings."*

Yael: "We are all in this together."

Yael describes the placement process as collaborative, involving all staff members. She describes her role within the activity as dominating, demanding great responsibility, determinism, clarity and a direct approach in terms of constructing and presenting the kindergarten's agenda regarding the placement of an ASD child.

She describes the placement process as complex and intensified. The process includes the following stages: holding initial conversations with parents about possible future placement; running discussions with staff and institutional representatives about placement options and availability; collecting and organizing the relevant data regarding the final placement decision; presenting the data verbally and in writing to both parents and institutional representatives prior to the placement

committee meeting; and, finally, appearing formally before the placement committee, representing the staff's recommendations.

Doubts regarding the appropriateness of a setting for the child are constantly raised: *"As of now, their current placement is problematic; on the one hand they do not have the chance to interact with children who are both socially and communicatively able. But on the other hand, it empowers them. They get the chance to become leaders of a group."*

The issue of parents as key decision-makers raises concerns about how to cope with controversies created by inappropriate parental decisions: *"The parents are the ones who decide about the placement and the system allows them so. How can I determine that this child does not suit my kindergarten . . . If he goes on to attend our kindergarten, how will the parents perceive me? As the kindergarten teacher who did not want their child? How can I build trusting relationships with the parents later on?"* In these difficult and stressful situations, she turns to her staff for practical and emotional guidance, as well as for the sharing of responsibilities.

Yael recognizes different coping strategies implemented by parents: *"These parents are not angry or frustrated about their son's placement. They see what is good for their child and it is also convenient for them . . . they told us that they needed to try, saying if we fail then we would know that we have at least tried. We want to know that we have done the maximum."*

She repeatedly expresses criticism of the local authority's role in the placement activity, saying: *"I am tired of fighting with them."* She claims the system bases its decision-making on financial and organizational considerations and doesn't focus on meeting the child's specific needs: *"Adding another child so small in age is unreasonable and irresponsible."* She further comments that the system avoids confronting parents about their placement decisions: *"At the beginning of the committee sessions we were told that since the system is already acquainted with the family, we are not going to negotiate with them and they can go wherever they want to."* And, finally, she claims that in some cases the system disregards kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the placement process: *"We actually did not have a say on the matter. We came knowing that the decision had already been taken, that*

wherever they wanted to place him, their demand would be accepted. There was no argument . . . We are working so hard, not enough manpower and the children need individualized care.”

4.2 Cross-analysis

In the previous section the descriptions focused on each individual experience of the phenomenon in question. The aim was to describe the different components of the placement process, as both parents and kindergarten teachers perceive them, and to highlight major themes related uniquely to each of the participants. The following sections are structured to provide a comparison and synthesis of all the data produced by all participants in order to reveal key themes and issues. It starts with the perspective that is fundamental to the theory of Schultz: understanding the process within the personal experience. It then moves on to the conceptualization of the activity by both parents and kindergarten teachers, and it concludes with practical implications. Hence, four main themes are identified highlighting the sense of development in the process: evolving from personal experience to personal understandings to the action itself, as illustrated in Figure 4.1.

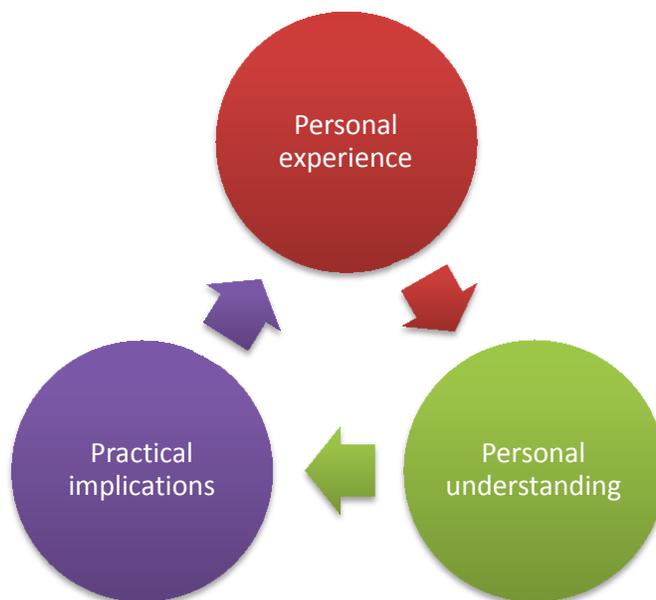


Figure 4.1: The structure of the placement activity.

The description of the different themes in these sections is illustrated by quotations from mothers (Ruth, Sara, Shelli, Noga and Yelena) and kindergarten teachers (Izabel, Miriam, Danielle and Yael).

4.2.1 Personal experience

4.2.1.1 Experiencing responsibility

The sense of responsibility towards the child as related to his educational placement is prominent in each of the stories told by parents and kindergarten teachers. As Ruth says: *“Raising him carries a great responsibility; it’s a heavy burden, wanting him to be healthy, happy and to progress. It’s so difficult to find a setting that will be able to cope with these challenges.”* And as Izabel says: *“I am constantly concerned with how to explain to everybody involved in the decision what the child needs, hoping they would listen and decide wisely.”*

4.2.1.2 Experience of stress and ease

Both parents and kindergarten teachers describe their experience within the placement process as including two extreme emotional notions: stress and ease. All parents describe their daily experience with raising a child with autism as well as their involvement in the placement process as exhausting and time-consuming, stressing the urgency of maximizing early-age interventions and school placement in order to better support the child’s future development, as Ruth comments: *“I feel that we are running out of time. So many things to work on.”* Some mothers also relate their stress level to the severity of their child’s disorder. Ruth, for example, constantly shares her worries of her child’s epilepsy when describing the ideal placement for him: *“Somehow, everything is related to his epilepsy and how to avoid attacks.”* And Sara focuses on the need to obtain a setting that responds accurately to her son’s unregulated behaviour: *“Sometimes his behaviour is extreme, he can’t be controlled. He needs a kindergarten teacher that would be firm with him, set the limits . . . when he is outside he can endanger himself. He needs a play yard that is safe.”*

A sense of ease is described by all parents when first getting the placement they wished for, as Ruth says: *“Now that we got the formal placement there is a sense of tranquillity.”*

Kindergarten teachers as well describe their daily experience as stressful, involving interactions with children, parents, staff, professionals and administrative tasks. As Danielle says: *“I am afraid that more children will be enrolled and their number will increase. The staff is too tired; we have no more energy for one more new kid.”*

A sense of ease is reported by all kindergarten teachers when they are able to persuade parents to agree with their recommendations, when witnessing the child’s progress and when being appreciated by the parents for their role in the child’s progress. As Miriam says: *“At the end of the year one of the fathers said he was so happy he could do stuff with his son he couldn’t do before, like going with him to the swimming pool . . . he said it was all our doing and it felt wonderful.”* Additionally, the kindergarten teachers express relief when being offered support by local officials.

4.2.1.3 Experience of dilemmas and conflicts

Both parents and kindergarten teachers describe the placement process as embedding dilemmas and conflicting issues. These are described as internal, in terms of having personal doubts regarding alternative placements, and external, in terms of differences between different perspectives offered by agencies involved in the process.

Three of the five mothers described their constant doubts regarding the appropriateness of a setting, whether segregated or inclusive: *“What if what I am thinking is good for him isn’t good at all?”* (Ruth).

Parents reported having conflicts mainly with local educational authorities about their perspectives on the child’s appropriate placement: *“It was a terrible experience . . . she ignored me as if I didn’t exist”* (Noga).

Dilemmas about placement options were raised by all kindergarten teachers, mainly when considering inclusive education for high-functioning ASD children: *“As for Levy, mainstream is quite urgent for him but still I am worried because he can’t regulate himself when he is around regular children”* (Yael).

Kindergarten teachers reported that the placement process involved external conflicts mainly when interacting with parents who object to the staff's recommendation. As Izabel says: *"They [the parents] were angry that I told them the inclusive setting did not suit his needs and that it was too soon."*

Other external conflicts were identified between kindergarten teachers and local educational authorities. These emerged when kindergarten teachers learnt of a placement decision made by the system that did not coincide with their own perspectives. Such decisions by the authorities caused frustration and anger, mainly when the choice made by the authority was not negotiated with them, stressing their sense of "loneliness." As one of the kindergarten teachers says: *"I don't understand them, they could have consulted with me, I would have said it was not appropriate and would offer other solutions and maybe we could have discussed it"* (Miriam).

4.2.1.4 Experiencing a sense of exclusion and a sense of belonging

Parents described the tension between feeling excluded and having a sense of belonging. As Yelena says: *"Lots of people look at my child in ways that I don't like. These people are mainly Russians, here in the playground. I don't go there anymore, since I don't feel comfortable among them."* And she highlights a different experience within the kindergarten: *"What's fun in the kindergarten is that I can come whenever I please without ringing and no one says anything. I come to get help or talk with the staff."* Contrary to Yelena's story, Noga describes experiencing a sense of belonging within her community, which influences her perceptions of inclusive placement: *"Here everybody knows him. Here I can meet with his friends during the afternoon; it's much closer and easier."*

Kindergarten teachers seem to recognize these experiences mainly through the eyes of the child. As Yael says: *"The day he participates in the regular setting is a happy day for him."* And Izabel comments: *"When he can't attend the regular kindergarten he is so disappointed, he really longs for social interactions."*

4.2.1.5 Experiencing hope and having turning points in life

All mothers described themselves as optimistic about their child's future. They all reveal a hopeful perspective that is attached to a sense of self-efficacy, and a belief

that in their determined approach and action they can positively influence their child's wellbeing: *"I can see that he has developed greatly, he is independent and is more secure in the interactions he is involved with, and he has got a good friend within the kindergarten . . . I am very excited, can't wait for the year to start"* (Shelli).

Two of the parents, Noga and Shelli, described making a life-changing decision, moving house in order to facilitate their child's placement. These decisions were described as being a turning point in their lives: *"Once we moved things became a bit easier, my family supported us and we were offered a much better setting"* (Noga).

Kindergarten teachers express hope when relating to possible progress of the child following intensive and structured early-age intervention: *"Although we think that now he should be in a segregated setting it does not mean that he will not progress. There is always the possibility of mainstreaming next year. This is what I told his parents"* (Izabel).

4.2.1.6 Experiencing uncertainty

All five parents described the placement activity as uncertain and at times risky: *"When we asked for the current setting there were things we did not know. Maybe it was a mistake to ask for a specific placement under uncertain conditions"* (Ruth). Or, as Shelli says: *"What do you do when you find out few days before school starts that you don't have a placement for your son?"* And Sara comments: *"Parents like us deal with a lot of difficulties, every little change causes emotional distress, on top of the dynamic and unstable nature of the disorder: so we must be flexible in our choice of school. You can never know or anticipate future developments."*

Kindergarten teachers highlight as well the sense of uncertainty, mainly when needing to recommend a placement for a child who exhibits inconsistent developmental features: *"How can I determine that this child does not suit my kindergarten?"* (Yael). Danielle extends this perspective and relates to interactions with parents as uncertain: *"I don't know for certain whether it is the right thing to do when addressing them. I am often afraid of entering all sorts of places and not being able to cope with situations on my own."*

4.2.2 Personal “understandings”

Following parents and kindergarten teachers’ descriptions of their first-hand experience within the placement process, both agencies are seen to conceptualize these experiences into personal understandings of the placement activity. In the following section I elaborate on each of these understandings.

4.2.2.1 “Understandings” of the placement activity as a choice situation

Parents perceive the placement process as displaying episodes by which they are presented with choices regarding their child’s placement, and strategies needing to be implemented in order to achieve their desired goal: *“Once we understood that Josh has to attend a special education setting, we started to enquire about the options available to us”* (Ruth).

While going through the various placement procedures, parents subscribe to the belief that parents in principle have the right to influence and select a placement for their ASD child, as Yelena indicates: *“If they had offered other options I think I would have probably got what I wanted, I have the right.”* Nevertheless, all mothers suggest this right is limited by the availability of educational alternatives, the considerations of the system, and the age of the child and the severity of the disorder: *“We understood there was not much choice, and that for Josh’s age only three SEN kindergartens are suitable”* (Ruth).

All mothers elaborate on their ability to choose and use various strategies in order to obtain valuable information and the desired outcome. As Shelli says: *“I knew that opening a mainstream setting depended on the number of children registered, so I started to call parents, tell them about the initiative and inquiring whether they were interested in joining the project.”*

Kindergarten teachers describe the placement process as one that is dominated by parents and decision-making by the institutions: *“He was in a regular kindergarten and I don’t understand that, it’s because of the parent’s decision. When parents decide, they give them what they want”* (Izabel). And, as another comments: *“Today we can hardly influence the decision, the authorities don’t consult with us . . . they have their own agenda”* (Miriam).

Responses by all kindergarten teachers highlight their perceptions of the placement activity as one that embeds choices on their part at the commencement of the placement process, where the expectations of both sides are revealed, recommendations are made and strategies are chosen for securing parents' agreement to the type of placement offered.

4.2.2.2 “Understandings” of the child

Parents referred to considering the features of their child's disorder when evaluating placement alternatives. As Yelena says: *“He needs to be in a communicative kindergarten, he needs to learn how to speak and behave around people.”* And as Noga argues: *“I don't care if he reads or not, I want him to be able to play and communicate with other children around, this is why we fight for the mainstream option.”*

The focus on the child's social and communicative competence highlights the parent's desire for a placement that supports the development of such skills. As Shelli says: *“I wanted him to be around children that were high-functioning, so that he could learn from them.”*

All five mothers relate to the unstable features of the disorder: *“It's difficult to make choices. We don't know what will be with him. What he will be like and which options will then be available”* (Noga).

Three of the mothers suggest that they would evaluate the setting based on the child's expressions upon returning home at the end of the school day. As Sara says: *“If he comes home smiling then I would know that I have made the right choice.”*

Kindergarten teachers as well focus on identifying and describing the child's characteristics and specific needs when recommending a placement. As Izabel says: *“I told her that in my opinion he was going through a very long and intensive process within our setting with outstanding outcomes, and there's still a long way to go. He has stable learning routines and a stable environment that he is familiar with.”*

4.2.2.3 “Understandings” of coping and support

All mothers, according to the data, relate their daily coping strategies to their actions within the placement activity. As Shelli says: *“In a difficult situation I go into a process of action. I find it difficult to calm myself down. In cases where I fear the most, such as when you don’t know which setting would be good for your child, then action relaxes me. It means speaking to everyone who can help, seeing through my own eyes the various options available, searching for information over the internet and being able to reach a decision from a position of knowledge.”*

Parents’ acceptance of their child’s diagnosis is directly related to the placement activity by three of the mothers. As Yelena says: *“I have accepted everything. I openly say I have a child with autism, I keep saying: what good will tears and crying do?”* And, as Sara comments on choosing a segregated setting for her child: *“It’s crucial since this will be a placement for more than a year.”*

Shelli adds that her acceptance of her child’s diagnosis evolved through her on-going experience within various placements’ activities: *“No matter what they said was right for him I couldn’t accept that I was in a different place.”*

All five mothers describe having a positive world view and an active approach to their child’s developing competence and the placement activity. As Ruth says: *“You just need to believe, simply believe that things will improve.”*

Most mothers mention lowering their expectations for their child’s educational progress. This act was identified as a means to moderate stress conditions, as Shelli comments: *“This year my expectations were low so I was relaxed and it was wonderful. He is what he is, and he has managed to fulfil them all.”*

The need for social support was a prominent theme in the responses provided by all parents. Parents perceive social support as an essential component of the placement process, specifying three main resources: professionals (not directly involved in the activity), friends, and other parents of children diagnosed with autism. Interactions through informal social networks are perceived as a means to obtain valuable information about placement procedures and educational alternatives, as well as to obtain support while experiencing dilemmas and conflicts within the activity. As Ruth says: *“When the situation gets complicated there is a need for a listening ear*

and understanding . . . when I am fearful of future events I tend to ask people around me for advice.”

Kindergarten teachers directly relate parents’ acceptance of their child’s disorder to the placement activity. As Izabel says: *“When a parent needs to address a placement issue, he suddenly sees what his child is worth; it arouses issues such as parents’ acceptance of the child and lots of emotions.”*

The gaps between parents’ and kindergarten teachers’ perspectives of the child’s wellbeing are reported by all kindergarten teachers as a source of conflict when trying to reach a placement agreement. Yael describes a placement incident: *“They said that the current kindergarten did not suit his needs any more. They do not have a realistic perception of the child’s functioning. They assumed that if he became more verbal, talkative and communicative at home then he did not need to be around children with ASD.”*

All kindergarten teachers identify parents’ motivation within the placement process. Yael comments: *“They told us that they needed to try, saying if we fail then we would know that we have at least tried. We want to know that we have done the maximum.”*

They further identify social networks activated by parents throughout the placement process. These are the child’s core family and extended family as well as professionals involved in the child’s various interventions, personal friends and other parents sharing the same experience. The next quotations demonstrate the interpretations kindergarten teachers make of the influence of these interactions on parents’ decision-making: *“Roy’s mother knew the kindergarten would be at a lower level of functioning even before we did. They had heard from families participating with them in the Milman program whose children would attend our setting; they knew exactly who would come. Therefore, they decided to focus on obtaining a language-oriented kindergarten . . . they brought with them to the placement committee the therapist working with the child in the afternoons. She gave a speech about what she thought was right for him”* (Yael).

As for their own informal social interactions, kindergarten teachers identify internal resources: *“I couldn’t convince these parents and I couldn’t handle them anymore so*

I asked the kindergarten psychologist to help me” (Yael). External resources such as work colleagues are acknowledged as essential since they contribute specific information not being offered by officials: “I called the child’s previous kindergarten teacher and asked her to tell me about him” (Danielle).

4.2.2.4 “Understandings” about parents’ role

Four of the five parents define their role within the placement process as that of key decision-makers about their child’s educational placement. Such a definition is related by them to their level of involvement in the placement activity: *“We kept demanding what we thought was right. Eventually they agreed” (Noga).*

Yelena, however, is an exception, since she defines her role as one that supports the decisions and actions of the officials and professionals: *“They know much better than I do what is good for him. I didn’t study, I am just a mother.”*

From the kindergarten teachers’ perspectives, parents are providers of practical information, as Miriam says: *“It’s very important that I get information from the parents about the child. It’s important to hear them as parents, how they experience the child now and their future expectations and goals.”*

Parents’ determination and knowledge of their child and of a preferable placement option is recognized by all kindergarten teachers: *“I admire his mother, she knows what she wants. She is a fighter . . . She is constant and persistent” (Izabel). And, as Danielle says: “Sara insisted that he should be placed in this kindergarten. She knew what she wanted and was clear and direct about it when approaching the system.”*

However, when this approach contradicts educational recommendations, parents are perceived as lacking comprehensive insight into the child’s wellbeing, and doubts are raised about their abilities to recognize an appropriate setting for the child: *“They mainly looked at the child’s strong points; they did not look at the difficulties. They had a strong desire to make him progress as fast as possible: to do whatever they could to give him as much normality as possible. But we know and it is clear to our staff that he will not manage there” (Yael).*

4.2.2.5 “Understandings” of the appropriate placement

The “right” placement for the ASD child is perceived by parents as one that maximizes his or her wellbeing, focusing on issues such as the child’s happiness and safety, as well as social and communicative skills, as Ruth says: *“I just want the best for him. I want him to be in a kindergarten where he would get love and warmth. Where they work with him on his communicative skills and enrich his knowledge. I want him to have a nice experience. I want him to be safe and happy there.”*

However, parents differ in their placement preferences for a segregated or an inclusive setting. Sara, Yelena and Ruth favour segregated settings, whereas Shelli and Noga support mainstream options. As Noga argues: *“I don’t care if he reads or not. I want him to be able to play and communicate with other children around; this is why we are fighting for the mainstream option.”*

Kindergarten teachers as well debate the issue of what is an appropriate setting for the ASD child, suggesting there is no one obvious solution: *“The other children are quite complex in their overall development and behaviour, except for Levy and Eden, who are verbally able, and present a higher level of functioning. As of now, their current placement is problematic on the one hand since they do not have the chance to interact with children who are both socially and communicatively able. But on the other hand, it empowers them. They get the chance to become leaders of a group”* (Yael).

When speaking about inclusive settings, kindergarten teachers focus on the availability of resources within the setting, in terms of qualified manpower able to mediate social interactions and effectively regulate emotional and behavioural difficulties, teacher-to-child ratios, and specific treatments offered within the kindergarten: *“They would need added help, someone who would constantly be with him to support and mediate. He would not be able to be independent there like the other children. He would need constant support. I think his behaviour may also negatively affect the other children. His presence will only disturb, and the system will probably not provide him with a personal helper”* (Yael).

4.2.2.6 “Understandings” about the kindergarten teachers’ role

Parents’ descriptions of their placement experience provide insight into how they perceive the kindergarten teacher’s role within the placement activity. Throughout the various placement procedures and episodes, parents perceive kindergarten teachers as providers of valuable information. As Ruth says following a visit to an ASD kindergarten: *“The kindergarten teacher gave us information about the daily schedule, focusing on how group activities and individualized treatments sessions are integrated.”*

Yelena adds a different perspective on the kindergarten teachers’ role: *“Everything depends on what Izabel says she learnt, and she spends more hours with my child than I do, so she knows him better. She knows also what is good for him.”*

Shelli and Noga contribute other perspectives of the kindergarten teacher’s role as being knowledgeable in the field of special education, attentive, direct and active in her approach: *“I needed a kindergarten teacher who would help me make sense of things. A kindergarten teacher who was highly professional, who would be able to put her finger on his difficulties. No one told us it was a mistake for him to be there, but she tried to tell me I should think of other options”* (Shelli). Noga describes the characteristics and essence of the dialogue between the parents and the kindergarten teacher while going through the placement process: *“She is always available for talks, she gives us accurate information, she responds clearly to our questions, I can bring my doubts and fears and get feedback. She is organized, flexible and familiar with various treatment approaches, and overall there is a sense of togetherness in the kindergarten.”* She further relates to the kindergarten teacher’s actions following this dialogue: *“She is always supportive of us, and our decisions. She even went to visit the mainstream kindergarten and tried to convince her supervisor that this was contributing to his development.”*

Kindergarten teachers perceive their role within the placement process as one that combines two main features: administrative and instructional.

The administrative aspect includes data management skills, focusing on the responsibility for a systematic and dynamic gathering, analysis and presentation of relevant and accurate information of the child, as a foundation for a future placement

decision made within the official placement committee. *“At the end of the year, we meet with parents to review the process the child has gone through over the year. The entire staff is present including our psychologists. Usually we let the parents begin by describing their impressions of the child and of his or her progress during the year. Then we give them a short summary of the child’s current functioning. We come prepared with a standard educational report, which describes the child as he or she is and includes our recommendations for the coming year . . . at the beginning of the placement session, I described the child. I told the people sitting on the committee, that the staff recommendation is to let the child spend another year in our kindergarten”* (Yael).

Additionally, all kindergarten teachers describe their role as including an obligation to create an effective coordination between all agencies involved in the process: *“By the end of the year there are no surprises; everybody is aware of the others’ views; this is a result of steady and constant interactions with parents and my supervisors”* (Izabel). The collaborative work is aimed at securing the appropriate placement for the child, while making sure the SEN placement policy is being implemented according to state regulations.

Overall, when accompanied by paperwork and journeys between the different placement committees, these administrative features are perceived by all kindergarten teachers as causing fatigue and having a negative emotional affect: *“So much time is spent on writing official documents, and I came to work with the children! I also have other obligations such as my own children and a house to run”* (Miriam).

The instructional aspect of the kindergarten teachers’ role includes communication skills by which relevant and specific information is mediated to parents along with providing emotional support: *“We constantly need to explain to the parents why the child acts in a certain way, what his motives are. We give them strategies that would help them cope with the child. We actually accompany them on their personal journey with the child . . . Once I often felt anger and criticism. Today I am more accepting; I simply understand where the parents’ responses come from. I understand where they are mentally”* (Yael).

4.2.2.7 “Understandings” of formal interactions with local education authorities

All five mothers recognize the essential need to interact with local educational authorities while going through the placement process. They define the ideal role of the local educational authority as one that has various functions. First, it provides parents with practical information such as the availability and the nature of the placement offered: *“I am a bit confused with what inclusion is and means. I think the system should explain to parents what it is and who it might be appropriate for”* (Ruth). Second, it provides guidance through the practicality of the placement procedures: *“I was so angry at them; couldn’t they have told me I can present my case in face-to-face interaction, which I regard as more valuable?”* (Ruth). Third, it should develop awareness and empathy towards parents’ experience: *“They suggested several other options which were inappropriate since they were too far away, and the level of functioning of the other children was too low. It’s as if they just wanted to ‘tick off’ our case, as if they were not aware of our needs as a family”* (Sara). Fourth, it provides constant help and support: *“I thought she was supposed to only be helping us, but she has so many other responsibilities, how can she still have time for us?”* (Ruth). Fifth, it provides protection: *“They should protect us, take care of us, not write things in the placement document that cause stress”* (Shellie). Sixth, it makes a final decision, which accords with the parents’ request: *“In the end it is our decision; I don’t understand why they make things so difficult”* (Noga). Finally, it is attentive and flexible according to the needs of each family: *“I think they should ‘sew a special suit’ for each family according to its needs”* (Sara).

However, following their experience within the placement activity, parents perceive the system as one that neglects to identify and understand parents’ perspectives and world views, resulting in a sense of alienation and conflict: *“I felt that instead of hearing us and trying to help us, they seem to oppose us”* (Ruth); *“I insist, but they are wearing me down. It’s a mutual war of nerves”* (Sara).

Additionally, parents claim the placement procedure is bureaucratic and time-consuming: *“Instead of playing with my son I had to make phone calls enquiring about other options”* (Sara), and mostly led by administrative considerations, which are at times unclear, lack transparency and differ from parents’ perspectives: *“I know they have many constraints when they make decisions; however, they are not*

transparent for us” (Ruth); “They offered other alternatives which we didn’t like. I don’t have time to experiment with my child” (Noga).

Furthermore, parents’ descriptions suggest they mostly perceive local educational authorities’ behaviour within the placement activity as characterized by inaccessibility and a failure to maintain frequent face-to-face interactions: *“Sometimes it is so hard to get in touch with her” (Ruth).* They further describe local authorities as avoiding on-going dialogue, as lacking a sense of intimacy and empathy in their interactions with parents, and as socially and emotionally insensitive: *“She said there are plenty of assistants in each kindergarten and that Josh is not the first and the only child with epileptic seizures . . . But I said to myself: for me he is the first and only child with autism and epilepsy” (Ruth).*

Additionally, parents claim that they in turn are perceived as insensitive to the system’s needs, unaware of the whole picture and preoccupied with only their own needs. As one of the mothers said when initiating interaction regarding a mainstream option: *“I feel as if they think we are draining them of their money, but it is mostly our money, and anyway it is not an issue of budgeting, this is our life and our child’s life and eventually this is our decision” (Noga).*

Two mothers have different perceptions of the essence of their interactions with local officials. Yelena recognizes the boundaries between herself and the system and accepts all that is offered to her: *“We should say thank you, for what we have, in Ukraine they would have stigmatized him. Over there no one cares about these children and their families. We are so lucky here, they help us a lot.”*

Shelli, on the other hand, appears to consider herself an insider, since she has close ties within her local municipality, enabling her to obtain reliable knowledge about available options and also to be more of an influential figure when a new initiative to open a self-contained first grade within a regular school is offered. She therefore describes the placement process as “collaborative in nature,” one that involves a system eager to invest both in human and financial resources, and parents as data collectors through their social networks, screening for eligible children for the project. However, along with such appreciation, she expresses criticism of the local educational authorities related to unsatisfactory final placement decisions that result

in settings populated with highly diverse children. This phenomenon is seen to relate to the systems' hasty process of decision-making, aimed at placing as many children as are allowed in a setting in order to secure the official establishment of such a setting. She suggests this haste leads to reliance upon the diagnosis of the child and not on his or her wellbeing: *"They need to get to know the child through the parents, what he is like and not rely only on the reports and diagnosis"* (Shelli).

In conclusion, the following quotation highlights parents' expectations of the system: *"Each parent is different, each parent perceives his child differently and consequently his placement decision is differentiated from the others' decisions. Each parent makes a decision that influences his world in a unique way. This affects the placement process. For the institutions it means being aware of the person before you"* (Ruth).

As for the kindergarten teachers, three of them describe complex feelings of alienation, anger, lack of clarity and mistrust when interacting with local educational authorities in all issues relating to early-age school placement. Their experience highlights a sense of battling: *"I am tired of fighting them . . . sometimes they are so judgmental in their approach"* (Yael).

All kindergarten teachers claim that local educational authorities in some cases impose upon them placement decisions that are neither relevant nor appropriate to the characteristics of the setting and the child. These decisions are regarded as somewhat arbitrary, relying on financial and administrative considerations, lacking the child's and the kindergarten teachers' perspectives. *"They said the child should be placed in our setting. How can he benefit by this decision? He is so small compared to the other children. I think that by suggesting that, they just wanted to calm things down at his previous setting. There was a commotion there; the staff said they couldn't handle him"* (Yael).

The next quotations, taken from Izabel's interview transcript, highlight her perception of the system's conduct, lacking knowledge of and empathy towards parents' experiences: *"They [parents] were not allowed to observe the inner space . . . they overburden parents with bureaucratic procedures, and don't identify or recognize parents' perspectives at an earlier stage of the placement"*

procedures . . . They don't work with parents throughout the whole experience. Parents go through a process of comprehension and they [the system] need to understand that. Parents' decisions do not come from nowhere and the system needs to understand and work with them; it's a process."

Returning to kindergarten teachers' perceptions of official placement decisions as featuring somewhat arbitrary and inconsistent decision-making, they strongly relate these to the difficulties kindergarten teachers experience when managing a highly diverse populated kindergarten: *"In the end, the kindergarten was not homogeneous, it was extremely heterogeneous and everything fell apart, including the staff. The problem is that everybody (every parent) decides to place his/her child wherever he/she likes. His inappropriate placement destroyed the kindergarten"* (Danielle).

Furthermore, all kindergarten teachers claim that inappropriate placement decisions create conflicts and cause distractions within the kindergarten's daily work routines: *"It cannot be that they throw large and complex groups onto the kindergarten teacher. We have no more energy, teachers are burned out and there is a tendency to leave the profession. Eight such kids in the kindergarten is too hard. The work is similar to being a babysitter. Working with a limited staff with little support and means is almost impossible. It is too hard"* (Danielle). As Izabel relates about pedagogical issues: *"Don't they understand that it's crucial the kindergarten population would be homogenous. In this way each of the children's special needs can be addressed in group sessions."*

Overall, all kindergarten teachers feel a lack of support from the official representatives while going through the placement process: *"It doesn't help me when I address her, she only gives me a general establishment response. And she changes the response according to what is convenient for her, saying at first that our kindergarten is only for children aged five and up, and when realizing it limits future placement of younger children saying it is for children aged 3 and up"* (Yael).

4.2.2.8 "Understandings" of the role of knowledge

Parents perceive knowledge as a goal, and as a means to obtaining satisfactory placement decisions. In some cases, it is a means of salvation and of regaining a sense of control over the placement activity. As Sara says: *"Luckily I know almost*

everything including options that are available and my rights. If I hadn't known they would have tricked me into choosing a setting more convenient for them."

All parents stated that they regard their knowledge as derived from their own practical experience as parents of an autistic child as well as from various other sources of information such as books, movies, articles published online, parents' support associations, and so forth. They describe their knowledge as developing within their experience: *"At first I didn't know. I needed help"* (Yelena).

They further enlist its components: knowledge of the Israeli SEN policy and of the local educational authority, knowledge regarding social skills needed, and knowledge of the child's disorder: *"I am a mother who knows a lot about the disorder and treatments available and options available and that helps me"* (Sara). The school-choice activity is described by parents as developing through the gathering of relevant information. This enables them to better act within realms that are not commonly available, situations that involve people and actions within the placement process which they have never encountered before: *"I don't know who to turn to and how to ask so that it will not be intrusive"* (Ruth).

Parents express the need to have information on officials' positions and role descriptions as well as personal characteristics and worldviews. These are practicalities they claim will raise their chances of getting the placement they wished for: *"It's vital to show these people who are in charge of the placement that you are flexible in your demands. If you insist on one option then their view about the setting becomes more rigid, and they might not allow it"* (Sara). Parents say that once they have obtained that information they feel more secure when addressing these people and more confident about the procedures: *"Now I can speak, I can say what I want"* (Yelena).

However, besides the "knowhow," parents describe their need to gather information on the availability and appropriateness of alternative placements. Thus, relating to the ideal kindergarten teacher's professional identity, staff professionalism, the kindergarten proximity, the kindergarten general layout and design and the characteristics of the other children attending the kindergarten, Ruth says: *"I started*

asking other parents about their experience with this kindergarten teacher. I wanted to know what her credentials were and how she was with the children and parents.”

Although describing their knowledge as essential in the placement process, they claim it is not regarded as such by other participants in the process: *“We speak and speak and she agrees, but will she do something with the information we have provided her? I don’t think so”* (Sara).

Kindergarten teachers define their knowledge as based on their professional expertise integrating practice and theory: *“I think that a child with ASD at his level cannot be in a language-impairment-oriented setting. He would need so many adjustments”* (Yael). In contrast, parents’ knowledge is mainly related to the daily issues of raising a child with autism. Nevertheless, kindergarten teachers appreciate parents’ quest for sufficient knowledge of the disorder and optional treatment strategies. They describe knowledgeable parents as ones that “highly invest” in their child’s future but mention incidents in which knowledge provided by parents creates conflicts within the placement process.

4.2.3 Practical implications

In attending to the lived experiences of both parents and kindergarten teachers within the placement activity, personal theories regarding the components and structure of the placement activity are conceptualized by both parents and kindergarten teachers. These understandings about the child, the placement as a choice activity, coping and support, the appropriate placement, the kindergarten teacher’s role, knowledge within the activity, and interactions with local education authorities provide parents and kindergarten teachers a framework by which they define, design and activate their plan scheme in order to either recognize a problem or set the goal of the placement activity. Thus, personal theories based on their lived experience influence the way they act within the activity. In the following section I provide evidence from the findings to support this claim.

4.2.3.1 Defining the framework of the placement activity

On being aware the child needs to be placed in a different and publicly sponsored SEN kindergarten, parents recognize and define the aims of the placement activity:

to gather as much information as possible about placement options, and the means to obtain these. As Ruth says: *“Once we understood that Josh has to attend a special education setting, we started to enquire about the options available to us.”*

Based on their previous experience and conceptualization of the appropriate placement, parents identify and prioritize what Schutz defines as their system of relevance, that is, that which frames the action to be taken. For example, Yelena defines three main interests in hand that determine her system of relevance when choosing a provision: *“I knew what I wanted and that was and still is a communicative kindergarten, and I also want the same now. This is because he has communication problems . . . He needs to be around people who will love and respect him . . . It’s good that the kindergarten is close to our house.”* Ruth, on the other hand, specifies other interests such as the flexibility in the kindergarten’s daily schedule, the design of the inner and outer spaces, the kindergarten teacher’s approach to parental involvement, and the kindergarten teacher’s and staff’s educational approach and ability to respond to her child’s epilepsy. However, while going through the initial stages of the placement activity, she is required to decide which of these interests are actually within reach in order to better define the placement activity in terms of her role and desired consequences.

Being able to outline their priorities is regarded by Sara, for example, as an essential factor influencing the achievement of the placement goals: *“I recommend that other parents should look inside themselves deeply, to examine what suits their needs and their child’s needs, and what is right for them as a family. I think both parents should examine their own expectations and listen to their own intuitions . . . one needs to be practical, to think of a placement which will be appropriate for all of us. They (institutional representatives) wish to define their action as simply giving us alternative options, but we need to consider all the information involved in our choice. I am willing to compromise but only up to a point.”*

Having identified their aims and prioritized their considerations, parents describe a phase in which they try to recognize the forces acting within the activity and strategies aimed at addressing and influencing their decision-making: *“I try to be creative, try to think to whom to turn, who can help me”* (Sara). And, as Ruth says:

“We are afraid that if we don’t act wisely then we would be left with no placement at all. We do not want to say the wrong thing or demand things rudely.”

Kindergarten teachers also relate to the framing of the placement activity in terms of defining their goals and the framework of the sequence of events of the placement along with strategies needed to achieve the desired placement. However, unlike parents, they are familiar with the placement-activity procedures, and their framing of the activity is done routinely throughout their years of experience.

All kindergarten teachers recognize the main objective of the placement activity to be securing the appropriate educational setting for the child. However, to obtain this goal they recognize strategies that must to be applied in order to convince both parents and the system to agree to their recommendations.

Consequently, they highlight other important skills such as the ability to write and verbally present a comprehensive profile of the child’s current overall development state, as well as to direct and negotiate mutual discussions with all agencies involved: *“I suggested we have a meeting including all staff involved. I expect everyone to show up and express his or her opinions. It’s important that we hear about his current mainstream experience from different point of views. It’s important to consider his future placement in light of his current experience”* (Miriam).

4.2.3.2 Taking action

Being the child’s advocate

The most important role parents take upon themselves while going through the placement process is that of advocacy. This is claimed as essential due to the characteristics of the disorder, parent’s worries about their child’s wellbeing and the urgency of time: *“It seems to me that we do not see ourselves in the center. Josh is the center of our universes. We constantly think how to describe and present him”* (Ruth). Or, as Noga says: *“He will get the best treatment that supports his wellbeing there; he will not be tagged as having cognitive disorders . . . I want him to be part of our community. I don’t want him to be an outsider, everyone already knows him, what he’s like.”*

Parents' advocacy is performed verbally while interacting face-to-face, and in writing. In both of these strategies all parents express concern about whether they managed to clearly justify their request or about officials' conscientious reading of documents regarding their children's overall abilities. As Ruth says: *"I am worried and not sure whether we have managed to clearly present our child and what we think is good for him . . . how can I be sure they read the document?"*

Kindergarten teachers also act as advocates for the child while going through the placement process; therefore, they highlight the necessity of making a match between the child's needs and the type of educational setting. In some cases this results in tension and conflicts between the kindergarten teacher and the parents: *"In one case, what the parents wanted for their child did not suit him, I couldn't go along with them, it wasn't right. I had to say that as of now he needs to be in our kindergarten, but maybe next year I would recommend differently"* (Izabel).

In order to better address a child's needs within the placement activity, kindergarten teachers seek to obtain information about parents' motives and intentions as well as their interpretation of these in terms of plans for what they regard as a provision that suits their child's needs: *"At first we just wanted to understand what their motives were, why they wanted to place him in a language-disability-oriented kindergarten"* (Yael). They further seek to gain knowledge that clarifies parents' perspectives of their child's overall function, their future expectations of him and their domains of relevance, how they define the most appropriate setting for the child. Following this first stage of enquiry, all kindergarten teachers reported that they informed the parents of the child's current development and their future expectations of him, providing parents with their suggestions on the most appropriate placement. In most kindergartens this was a long process of on-going exchange of information on both sides.

In all of the cases parents were given a detailed document summarizing their child's overall development in light of future placement considerations. In three kindergartens parents were given the opportunity to observe their child within the kindergarten during various activities. Parents' interpretations of the child's activities were later shared with other multi-disciplinary staff members. Kindergarten teachers stated that it took more than one meeting to reach a mutual understanding, if at all.

However, as Miriam states: *“The constant distribution of knowledge between us later makes our recommendations as to the most appropriate placement not a surprising one, so that even if we don’t agree, there is no sense of conflict.”*

Shopping around for alternatives

All five parents described touring different kindergartens in order to learn more about the availability and quality of educational options. As Shelli describes: *“We visited various kindergartens, looked at the children and the drawings. We were impressed that either he was too low or too high.”* Sara contributes her own impressions of the kindergarten while highlighting dilemmas concerning her visit: *“The kindergarten is quite large. It’s clean, nice to look at, and is not over-packed with games and other play equipment. I am pleased with the playground and enjoyed observing it, it has no sand and no stones, it’s not dangerous for the children, and they can’t ‘lose themselves’ there . . . I learnt a lot from these visits although I wasn’t allowed in one of them to visit the inner space; I understand that there is a need to preserve the children’s privacy.”*

Kindergarten teachers also examine alternative placement options for the child.

Three of the kindergarten teachers say these options are mainly inspected through the eyes and experience of other professionals. Izabel notes that when possible, she escorts parents in their tour across available settings. However, she states that these visits are limited by her other obligations. Additionally, she remarks, at times these visits are useless since parents are not allowed to observe the setting in real action and are only given the opportunity to be impressed by the landscape.

Interactions with formal agencies

Interactions with local educational authorities as well as knowledge of the various procedures and options as embedded in the placement policy are described as an essential component of the placement activity and parental agency within. Being active, persistent and determined while interacting with officials is described as vital to getting the desired placement. As Noga says: *“We kept demanding what we thought was right . . . eventually they agreed.”*

Ruth, hesitant in her approach with a local official, gets advice which highlights the essence of being determined and persistent: *“We understood that we couldn’t control things regarding Josh’s placement. That the system would tell us where Josh will be placed and that there was not much choice. That stressed me, but then she said that we could manoeuvre things. If we didn’t like what was given and we thought it wasn’t the appropriate choice and that if we asked for the option we wanted again and again, they would give us whatever we asked. That means exhausting them till they approved the setting.”*

Kindergarten teachers’ action within the placement process is influenced by its dependence upon decisions made solely by the formal authorities. Therefore, teachers’ actions in most cases are multifaceted. They focus on getting support and guidance from their educational instructor following a conflicting placement decision: *“Tomorrow we will have a meeting with her and I intend to say everything and show her how difficult our work is this year, and how inappropriate their decision is”* (Yael). They also gather valuable information through informal channels: *“Since Sara is acquainted with the child’s mother I called her and asked her to tell me about him”* (Danielle). And, last, they try to influence placement decisions by activating parents and professionals working within the kindergarten: *“The parents will come for a visit on a day on which I have hardly any staff. I hope they will be shocked by what they see, and will understand that this is not the place for their child . . . I trust the kindergarten’s psychologist to lead the discussion appropriately, relating to both the child’s and the kindergarten’s needs”* (Yael).

Nevertheless, all kindergarten teachers still keep the boundaries between the agencies and follow the rules and procedures. They carefully ensure that policy is being implemented within the kindergarten, while being aware of context limitations: *“Once a decision is made there is no use arguing. One needs to work out for oneself how to cope with the consequences . . . this is their choice I cannot fight this. I need to adjust to think of ways to better cope and make his stay within our kindergarten meaningful”* (Izabel).

Interactions with informal agencies

While going through the placement process, both parents and kindergarten teachers are socially engaged in an on-going process of making sense of the placement phenomenon. The current theme focuses on interactions that both parents and kindergarten teachers have with informal agencies such as friends, work colleagues and professionals who are not directly involved in the process.

Parents describe when they had doubts and were insecure about the choices involving various strategies taken, while considering placement options, they sought guidance, advice and support from others: *“With my friends from work, I share my doubts. These friendships are not based on sharing knowledge but on sharing thoughts, trying to think of creative ways to address my difficulties”* (Ruth).

In times of doubts and uncertainty, parents report contacting people who could offer them various kinds of support: valuable information about different perspectives on their child’s overall competence and placement suitability; help in defining and clarifying practical codes of behaviour when interrelating with officials; knowledge of placement availability and characteristics, taking into account structural and process considerations aimed at evaluating the quality of that provision; and support in their final decision-making.

The people they sought out were of various kinds: ones they believed were able to give them reports of various educational settings they have observed; those who were insiders acting within the system and able to give more direct information; and those who could be regarded as analysts who shared the same system of relevance and therefore could provide them with valuable information, such as other parents: *“We were at the beach last Saturday. We met two parents we had previously got to know. I asked them about their experience following their own meeting with the kindergarten teacher. They expressed similar concerns to ours”* (Ruth). In addition, they sought out people who were described as commentators whom they trust as collecting information in a way that is objective precise and clear: *“We constantly looked for alternatives, we kept on asking people what they knew and what their opinion was . . . these contributed to our understanding and knowledge of the options available to us”* (Noga).

As for their spouses, all mothers shared their placement experience with their husbands. Three mothers described that the final decision was taken solely by them. Additionally, four mothers (Yelena, Ruth, Shelli and Sara) indicated that the search for information about the right placement was mostly undertaken by them. Noga and her husband are an exception, since they acted jointly within the placement activity, sharing responsibility equally: *“When we act together our son gains the most.”*

Kindergarten teachers describe the dilemmas raised within the placement process as those that cause at times a sense of loneliness; therefore, informal interactions provide support and reassurance of actions taken. Thus, in times of uncertainty and frustrations, kindergarten teachers mainly turn to colleagues they trust within and outside the kindergarten. As Yael says: *“I don’t know what I would have done without Sharon [the kindergarten psychologist]; she is always there for me. She supports, gives advice and accompanies me when interacting with parents even when she doesn’t have to.”* Or, as Danielle says: *“Every time he writes to me [the parent], I ask someone else to help me write back. I am afraid I do not know how and what to write to him.”*

Chapter 5:

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study explores the phenomenon of early-age school-placement activity of children with ASD within the Israeli context. This phenomenon is studied from a phenomenological perspective, focusing on the question of what can be learnt about this process as it is experienced by both parents and kindergarten teachers. Through the research questions, the study explores parents' and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their social role as decision-makers within the placement process.

The research approach of this study is based on the worldview of existential hermeneutics phenomenology, which seeks to interpret the experiences of individuals as part of the environment in which they live and with which they interact. It seeks to describe experience as it emerges in some contexts as it is lived, and the wholeness of the life-world of individuals. The individuals as experts live their knowledge in a way that is not fully representable by a set of decontextualized rules and principles (Thompson et al. 1989). The research paradigm thus describes an experience from a first-person viewpoint seeking to apprehend a pattern as it emerges (Husserl 1960/1925).

The world of lived experience is the world of the subjective, and in this thesis I attempt to transform such a description into an objective interpretation. There is some difficulty in relating the current findings to existing theory, since I found very few references, either in Israel or internationally, that relate to the placement activity as a process, uniquely experienced by each agency, rather than simply an outcome. Thus, two parallel domains have been created: that which represents the process of the construction of knowledge by the parents and the kindergarten teachers, and that which represents the construction of knowledge on the part of the researcher as she conceptualizes an appropriate theory.

Research done within the UK context (Parsons et al. 2009) explored, using mixed procedures, parents' experiences and perspectives regarding educational placement of their ASD children between the ages of 5 and 16. One of the aims of this study was to identify the key concerns and priorities for SEN children and their parents

within the UK. Another study within the UK (Tissot & Evans 2006) explored parents' perspectives on their personal experience when securing educational provision for their ASD child. Another study (Tissot 2011) focused on parents' and local authorities' views on the process of obtaining an educational provision for children defined as having ASD. The present study, however, conducted within the Israeli context, expands on these studies, focusing on the social nature of the placement activity—providing an in-depth phenomenological description and interpretation of parents' and kindergarten teachers' roles and interactions within the activity, regardless of the outcome. The qualitative in-depth data gathered demonstrate the subjective experience of both parents and kindergarten teachers. Through the use of Schutz's theory of social phenomenology, I related parents' and kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the placement activity to their subjective and intersubjective everyday experiences. This enabled me to derive objective theoretical conceptualization from data, which is essentially subjective.

The data collected included semi-structured interviews with five mothers and four kindergarten teachers, visual tools, written documents, email exchanges, telephone conversations and home–school communication notebooks. All the data were carefully gathered into files and later content-analysed circularly using both the holistic and analytic approaches: constructing the story of each case by identifying the uniqueness of each and only then undertaking a cross-analysis of all nine cases.

My findings overall indicate that within the Israeli context, the activity of early-age school placement of ASD children is multifaceted across all cases although uniquely experienced by each parent and kindergarten teacher. This phenomenon raises a general and common theme about the issue of responsibility and partnership within the placement activity as contributing to its highly charged nature. Accordingly, relational themes regarding the parental role and that of other agencies have been recognized across all cases. These are discussed in the following sections.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986), the placement activity highlights interrelationships between the various agencies involved in the activity, exploring intrapersonal components as well as interpersonal components within social, cultural and historical contexts. Additionally, the placement activity is described as evolving through social interactions within varied contexts by which

knowledge is distributed. Knowledge, then, serves as a means to obtain a certain provision as well as a method to secure position and power within the placement activity.

Findings and analysis presented in chapter 4 introduced a circular model illustrating the sense of a process within the placement activity. This chapter, however, refers to a more abstract model, illustrated in Figure 5.1. Accordingly, the placement activity is characterized as a process evolving from the subjective experience and interpretation, to an activity within an intersubjective field, followed by a return to the subjective experience.

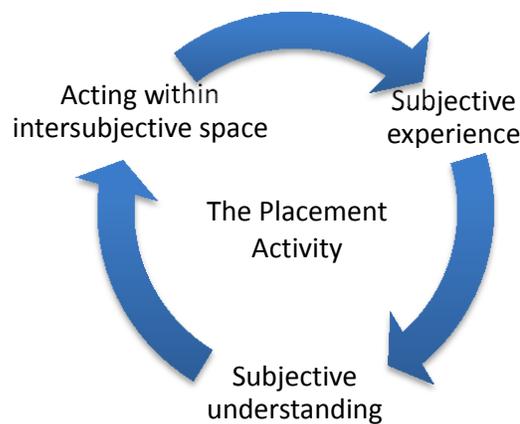


Figure 5.1: The evolution of the placement activity.

5.2 Early-age school-placement activity as a subjective experience

Stories told by parents and kindergarten teachers underline their subjective experiences within the placement process, recognizing themes such as responsibility, stress and ease, dilemmas and conflicts, exclusion and belonging, hope and turning points in life and uncertainty. These themes were directly related to their life-world experience evolving towards the conceptualization of personal understandings guiding them through their plan and action scheme within the activity. Hence, their narratives about raising, treating and educating an ASD child are framed within the placement activity.

All mothers refer to the stress caused by the responsibility of caring for the child with ASD. These reports coincide with other studies—Gray (1994, 1997); Ludlow et

al. (2012)—highlighting mothers’ concerns about their child’s physical health as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

The highly complex experience of raising an ASD child is related in the present study to the cardinal importance parents ascribe to their role within the placement activity, as one of the mothers says: *“Even though I chose to be calm, staying calm during the new beginning is not simple. When I think about the size of the responsibility for Josh, mainly because of his seizures, I feel the extreme burden on my shoulders and I find it extremely difficult to let go of him in a new kindergarten . . . it so difficult to make the right decision”* (Ruth).

Although parents describe their experience of raising a child with autism as stressful, their stories about their placement experiences highlight the development of a strong sense of agency relating to their developing sense of control enacted through self-reflection, advocacy and responsibility over their children’s lives as well as their own (Lutz et al.2009; Woodgate et al. 2008; Hoogsteen & Woodgate 2013; Hastings et al. 2005; Cashin 2004). However, parents also express negative feelings towards society and institutions (Woodgate et al. 2008); consequently, they comment on the need to fight all the way to make the system work for them and for their child. In order to do so, parents recognize their need to become more direct and regulated while interacting with the system; to learn as much as they could about every aspect of the disorder and strategies used to obtain better outcomes; and finally, to educate others, focusing on valuing their child and their equal and important role as parents and worthy contributing citizens.

Responses provided by mothers reveal the role of their self-belief systems in the placement activity, mostly related to their everyday priorities and concerns (King et al. 2009). These belief systems have been found to guide mothers’ actions and choices within the placement process, for example, as Noga says: *“We feel that he wants to be around children. It would do him good . . . we don’t want him to be an outsider to our community . . . this is why we fight for the mainstream option.”* Or, as Ruth comments: *“I need to make the right choices for him . . . I am his parent . . . I need to do everything in order for him to progress.”*

All mothers involved in the present study had well-defined priorities, which helped them come to terms with various inconsistencies within the placement process. For example, Yelena focused on her child's disability and on her own passive position as a mother: "*I trust them . . . I am only a mother . . . I haven't learnt . . . they are the experts.*" Furthermore, coming from a different culture, Yelena accepts events within the placement activity as ones that cannot be modified by her actions; therefore, she transforms imposed considerations into intrinsic ones (Schutz 1970). This provides her with a sense of resilience within the activity. Nevertheless, while going through the placement activity, she regains a certain sense of behavioural control, which allows her to initiate action when seeking a wished-for outcome.

Keeney (1994, 1996) suggests that any decision-making should begin and proceed as a value-focused thinking activity, in order to better create alternatives and effectively regulate the decision-making process, mainly in situations in which individuals are left to decide as a result of others' actions. By focusing on values, alternatives become a means in terms of valued information applied in order to achieve one's purposes rather than as merely a goal. Recognizing values as the basis of a good qualitative choice implies that better alternatives are identified and problems are recognized and addressed through organized and systematic conduct.

When focusing on the process of determining the most appropriate placement for the young ASD child, Delmolino and Harris (2012) suggest that the extent to which professionals and parents share general viewpoints based on their ideology of what is the best for the child has an impact on the identification and establishment of the appropriate placement decision. Therefore, it is suggested that discussing each agency's assumptions about the child's potential, as well as expectations and priorities regarding the focus of education, would decrease levels of stress and increase the probability of reaching an agreement on the placement.

Another theme strongly apparent here is parents' coping strategies. All mothers involved in the study adopted three main types of attitudes: optimism; acceptance and appreciation; and "striving" to bring about change (King et al. 2009). These stances are intertwined in their stories and shift over time, a consequence of their growing experience of raising a child with autism and their practical experience within the placement activity. Thus, parents express hope for their child's progress,

highlighting their role as providers of educational opportunities—ensuring the child reaches his or her full potential. As they move on with their educational experience, they modify their expectations for their child into more realistic ones so that he can succeed in areas he is strong in. They further define their experience of raising a child with autism as knowledge-based, evolving through a process of obtaining valuable information and constructing stocks of knowledge, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding a placement that maximizes the child’s wellbeing.

From a more personal perspective, all mothers indicate that they love, accept and are proud of their child for who he or she is. The child’s uniqueness is accepted, although all stress the gap between wanting to provide specific support for special needs yet subscribing to a belief that the child should be treated like any other. Last, all mothers indicate that they act in order to achieve an educational environment that is supportive and (at times) tailored to the child’s specific needs. Consequently, they adopt an active task-oriented stance by which they obtain information, resources and services for the child. They further indicate they learn about the child and what best suits him or her through a ‘trial and error’ approach (Hoogsteen & Woodgate 2013). Overall, parents become advocates for their child and prioritize his or her needs of high relevance. This enables them to negotiate intrinsic and imposed preferences and to make compromises which they feel are beneficial for the child and manageable for them.

The child’s voice in the placement activity is not heard directly; therefore, parents and in particular mothers frequently became mediators between the child and the world (Ryan & Runswick-Cole 2009). They develop a vision by which the child’s needs and intentions are perceived and described through their eyes. Thus, they often present the child’s life-world experiences from their own perspective—aiming to protect the child from the world and to provide him or her with a sense of worth. Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2009) claim that the role of advocacy among mothers of autistic children is more extended and complex than that of mothers of children with other disabilities, and at times evolves on a continuum from advocating on behalf of the individual child to activism on behalf of other ASD children—moving from internal to external activism. In the present study, all mothers described battling authorities individually, motivated by their need to give their child the best educational opportunities. Nevertheless, two mothers recruit other mothers in order

to obtain a better placement for their child: Ruth suggests to two other mothers that they should negotiate their children's placement as a group, whereas Shelli tries to recruit parents to join an experimental mainstream setting.

In order to succeed as advocates, all mothers indicate they needed to actively engage the body in various spatial situations, thus going from one kindergarten to another, exploring and researching possibilities, attending meetings with other parents, other professionals and institutional representatives. As one of the mothers says: "*In a difficult situation I go into a phase of doing. It means speaking to everyone who can help, seeing through my eyes the various options available, searching for information over the internet . . . being able to reach a decision from a knowledgeable stand*" (Shelli).

Overall, mothers in this study based their motivation to participate in the placement activity on these notions: their self-efficacy in supporting the child's wellbeing, their perceptions of the extent to which they can be involved in and influence the activity, their cultural and social capital along with their ability to invest time and energy in the activity (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005; Foot et al. 2000).

In this study I argue that kindergarten teachers' experience as educators of ASD children is related to their role and action within the placement activity. Three main themes are recognized in their stories: their commitment to the child, their educational philosophy and teaching approach, and their growing sense of stress as a result of teaching an exceptionally difficult and diverse population. Coman et al. (2013) relate the experience of teaching children with developmental disabilities to a growing sense of stress and wearing down. When these are not properly managed a sense of burnout occurs. Factors contributing to teachers' sense of wearing down include an unmanageable workload, role ambiguity, excessive paperwork and a lack of resources. Among teachers of ASD children, these daily demands and expectations are even greater, since they are added to the teacher's sense of self-efficacy when managing the complex features of the disorder and the increased parent-teacher relationship (Dymond et al. 2007). On the whole, the complexity of teaching ASD children might result in teachers experiencing burnout in terms of

exhibiting emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Coman et al. 2013).

Within the placement activity, all kindergarten teachers express their commitment to the child's education. However, all mention stress when describing their coping within a highly diverse kindergarten population and interacting with parents. Therefore, they insist on the need to obtain a provision characterized by a homogeneous children's population. Such an environment allows optimal functioning of the staff with limited manpower. Thus, any placement that contradicts this need is perceived as threatening and as endangering the quality of teaching and care provided. Nevertheless, kindergarten teachers who were most committed to their educational agenda and practice were able to better adapt to inappropriate placement decisions. As Izabel says: "*Once a decision is made there is no use of arguing. One needs to work out for herself how to cope with the consequences.*" These kindergarten teachers, when interacting with parents, requested professional and emotional support.

5.3 The early-age placement activity as a choice activity

My findings highlight a major debate within the Israeli context about who is responsible for the most appropriate school placement, and the extent to which parents can influence this placement. In this study I argue that the placement activity for young Israeli ASD children does not offer enough clear choices for parents when they consider a segregated ASD setting within their local municipality. In these cases, placement alternatives are limited by strict reliance on the diagnosis and age criteria rather than on the child's functioning level. For parents wishing to place their child in a setting outside their local municipality, the placement depends on the system's financial considerations and parents' ability to insist on the wished-for setting, as Shelli says: "*Though slightly remote, I knew that if I fight I would get the approval for the placement.*" As for parents' desire to place their child in an inclusive setting, their decision depends on the system's approval, the kindergarten teacher's willingness to mainstream the child within the setting and the parent's financial ability to support more tutoring hours for the child.

Dolton (2003) discusses principles defining an educational system that is accountable for enhancing school choice. Two of these principles seem to define the Israeli system in a way that doesn't support school choice within its SEN educational system. For example, parents in the present study claim that information provided by the system was partial, insufficient and unclear, making it almost impossible for them to consider the appropriateness of a certain setting even if it was the only one available. This echoes a finding from Parsons et al. (2009), who reported within the UK context that parents of ASD children expressed less satisfaction with the availability and extent of information presented when choosing a school. Their finding suggests that parents of ASD children may require extensive information that reassures them of the adequacy of the placement available. Having this information would reduce anxiety and frustration. Additionally, within the present study, parents claim that their ability to balance priorities within the placement activity was partial, due to the limited options available, along with use of the criteria of age and the child's functioning to determine the child's placement.

Within the Israeli SEN law there is no clear statement suggesting that parents have the right to choose a preferable SEN or inclusive placement. This is regarded as the main source of conflict between parents and the system. This incoherent policy is responsible for the sense of frustration described by both parents and kindergarten teachers. Both agencies describe official responsiveness towards the placement wishes that parents express as inconsistent and ambiguous: sometimes officials object to parents' requests, and sometimes they express readiness. Parents construe this as contributing to a sense of uncertainty and confusion about their role and ability to influence the process. Kindergarten teachers interpret it as the system's inability to clearly define for parents who is responsible for the child's placement. Consequently, kindergarten teachers feel that their role within the process is devalued and that the child's wellbeing is compromised.

Additionally, the Israeli SEN law, by allowing parents to appeal any placement decision, contributes to a sense of confusion regarding their ability to influence the placement decision. On the one hand, this regulation motivates parents to act within the placement activity; on the other hand, it results in the previously mentioned inconsistent approach taken by local education officials to parents' requests.

As for decisions taken within the placement activity, parents report having made choices about the type of placement previous to the actual activity. Three of the five mothers support mainstream placement, defining it as best contributing to their children's wellbeing—providing them with a combined opportunity to be educated among peers, enhancing their communicative and social skills along with giving specific instruction within the self-contained setting. Their recognitions of the positive effects of inclusive education on young ASD children coincide with studies reporting positive outcomes in terms of communicative and social aspects (Odom et al, 2004).

Among the mothers, only Noga actively pursued inclusive education, focusing on enhancing her child's sense of belonging within their community. Noga describes having to fight for her son's right to be mainstreamed within their community. These notions of war and battle were recognized by the Dorner Committee (2009), which ascribed them to gaps between inclusive ideology and practice and claimed that the principle of inclusion is mainly declarative rather than practical, leaving parents with feelings of loss of trust in the system.

As for the other parents, Shelli first prioritized a SEN setting within her community with limited mainstream encounters, whereas Ruth decided to relinquish her inclusive dream. Ruth doubts whether inclusion suits her child's current needs and whether she has the ability to support him within such a setting: *"I decided to let go the idea of inclusion . . . couldn't think I can cope with such a complex situation . . . was afraid of the other children."* The other two mothers, Sara and Yelena, clearly prioritized segregated settings as their prime goal, focusing on their children's moderate function and fear of exclusion within their own community.

The inability to control the final placement decision requires all parents to compromise their own personal preferences—involving internal negotiation of preferences and external negotiating between their system of relevance and that of the system. Once there has been a compromise with regard to the final placement, whereby parents must forgo their vision of the ideal provision, emotions are involved and tension builds between the hoped-for and the achievable solution.

As for the kindergarten teachers, they all express limited ability to influence the final placement decision. Accordingly, they perceive parents' and local education authorities as dominating the placement activity in terms of that decision, suggesting that both local officials and parents lack the objective perspective of the expert (Dorner Committee 2009). However, they do express a sense of choice in the placement activity, when regulating and managing the various procedures within it. These include the strategies by which data regarding the child is obtained, the design of the framework by which discourse with parents and other agencies is managed, and the final representation of their recommendations both in writing, and verbally in the placement committee.

Kindergarten teachers report that the main dilemma within the placement activity is whether to recommend an inclusive or a SEN placement for the ASD child. This is reported as a source of concern and doubt. Consequently, kindergarten teachers express ambivalent attitudes towards inclusive education. Their placement recommendations mostly rely on 'within child' characteristics—suggesting that high-functioning ASD children be mainstreamed, whereas moderate-functioning ASD children be placed in segregated settings. In these cases, they express concerns about the child's unstable and at times uncertain and complex development path—questioning the ability of such a mainstream setting to provide extensive and appropriate support to the ASD child and his parents. They further mention other considerations affecting their placement recommendations: the professional competence of the regular kindergarten; the availability of qualified manpower and the adult-to-child ratio; and the availability of a mainstream setting within the child's community.

Kindergarten teachers' approach to the inclusive dilemma reveals teachers' perceptions of inclusive ideology, suggesting that it is not possible to mainstream all children (Runswick-Cole 2008). Additionally, it stresses their reliance on the psycho-medical model approach, focusing on within-child deficits rather than defining disability as the product of social and institutional exclusion (Skidmore 2004). Kindergarten teachers further claim that when deciding on an inclusive or a language-oriented setting, parents are misled by privately sponsored professionals or by their own misconceptions of the child's wellbeing and the SEN inclusive regulations.

Kindergarten teachers raise other concerns about choices regarding parent–professional interactions within the placement process. At times, conflicting perspectives regarding what best suits the child’s needs create tensions between parents and kindergarten teacher, resulting in their feeling unable to effectively regulate their actions within the activity. Consequently, kindergarten teachers report a tendency to avoid contact with challenging parents (Sewell 2012).

In summary, then, the placement process is one in which kindergarten teachers and, in particular, parents feel, and express, a lack of free will and at times a lack of control over the activity. They regard the placement activity as lacking sufficient information on the availability of placement options, the suitability of the placement to a child’s specific needs, the undefined framework of the parent–professional partnership, and the unclear presentation of the issue of responsibility within the placement activity.

Although the placement activity offers parents limited degrees of freedom, it is argued, however, that parents do experience choice by choosing the strategies they *conceive* and *activate* in order to attain their objectives for the placement activity (Schutz 1970), for example, by choosing to shop around for alternatives or to initiate conversation with parents or other professionals who might be able to offer information and advice.

5.4 The early-age placement activity as a social activity

As discussed previously, the issue of who is responsible for the ASD child’s placement raises conflicts within the activity. This section, however, expands on this discussion, adding the theme of partnership and collaboration within the placement activity. Since the present research focuses on exploring the placement activity within a social context, it examines interaction between parents, kindergarten teachers, informal and other formal agencies.

Parents describe three main themes related to social aspects of the placement activity: a sense of loneliness in the activity, the strong need to belong to their community, and the need to obtain social support. Sara, Ruth and Yelena describe situations in which they were ultimately left with taking a compromise decision by themselves: one which might be considered sometimes a personal risk and which, in

most cases, resulted in negative feelings such as disappointment and regrets. They further relate to social themes motivating their actions towards a certain placement decision—a sense of exclusion and a sense of belonging. Additionally, when parents experience controversies and uncertainties, they speak of seeking social support from varied social networks such as family, professionals, friends and other parents sharing the same experiences. These social resources are identified as providing valued information and emotional support, not being offered by local officials.

The role of social support as a strategy used by parents to better cope in stressful situations is a recurring theme in several studies (Gray 1994, 2002, 2003, 2006; Boyd 2002; Bromley et al. 2004; Higgins et al. 2005; Lutz et al. 2012). However, in the present study the focus is on parents' reliance on informal support as deriving from the uncertain nature of the placement activity as well as the ineffective communication between parents and professionals within the process. Thus, informal agencies are perceived as providing emotional support and information in times of doubt and inconsistency within the activity, as Ruth says: "*When I am fearful of future events I tend to ask people . . . for advice,*" or as Sara says: "*Without my contacts I couldn't have gotten the placement I wanted.*"

Parents' attitudes towards using social networks to achieve the objectives of the placement activity differ among parents. Ruth and Shelli actively turn to other parents for information and support, whereas Sara seeks only to obtain information and Noga avoids turning to other parents, relying only on information given by reliable professionals. Yelena's story is an exception, since she constantly describes a sense of social exclusion in her daily life. This appears to motivate her to maintain close interactions with the kindergarten's staff, reflecting on her need to belong and to feel confident within a certain social group. Furthermore, being comfortable and feeling secure within the provision is perceived by her as a criterion for evaluating the placement decision. Yelena offers a glimpse into the life of an immigrant, lacking social capital in terms of connections and social skills that allow her access to relevant information. Additionally, Yelena alone describes professionals and institutions as experts in the placement process providing her with information and emotional support.

That parents seek support from other parents of ASD children echoes findings from Ludlow et al. (2012); accordingly, parents sharing the same experience provide a valued, judgment-free source of support. Additionally, they provide understanding, emotional support, advice, valued first-hand information, and ideas and strategies for dealing with challenges experienced within the placement activity.

Another social aspect revealed in the present study is the notion of closeness between parents and kindergarten teachers. All mothers reported sharing information with kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers were described as accessible when parents needed support and guidance. Although the parties have conflicting views on what best suits the child, there is still a sense of “togetherness,” since both agencies share a common goal—the child’s wellbeing. Accordingly, kindergarten teachers are described as being able to reach out to parents. In contrast, local educational authorities are perceived as distant and unsupportive. This theme is further elaborated in the next section.

Parents’ interactions with local officials are a prominent theme in the present study. Local officials are presented and perceived as powerful, distant, alienated and judgmental agencies that fail to interrelate with parents, understand their experience or show any empathy, as Noga says: *“It was a terrible experience. She ignored me as if I don’t exist; she had her own agenda.”*

These officials are further perceived as failing to recognize parents’ perspectives on what it is like to raise a child with autism, thus limiting any interaction based on reciprocity of perspectives and interchangeability of standpoints. They are seen by parents as unsupportive and insensitive social agencies, which aim to impose their systems of relevance on parents rather than to be aware and negotiate with parents’ intrinsic system of relevance (Schutz, 1970). This finding confirms those of other studies done within the UK context (Tissot 2011; Tissot & Evans 2006; Duncan 2010; Parsons et al. 2009). However, the metaphor of battling and the placement activity as a warzone between parents and officials is intensified in the current study through the detailed in-depth description of parents’ experiences within the various placement activities.

Parents stress that they view local authorities' behaviour as neglecting to place a great value on the life of both the parent and the ASD child. Therefore, when parents strategically choose to present their preferences for the most suitable placement for their child, they are regarded as poorly adjusted with respect to their child's disability and as difficult to manage (Hodge & Runswick-Cole 2008). Thus, they are perceived as irrational decision-makers who only aim to create chaos and instability within the system. Consequently, parents express concerns about the existence of the value of free choice and their ability and right to express their viewpoint regarding the placement of their child. Hence, at times they define the placement activity as one that devalues their sense of autonomous acting—lessening the extent to which they can practice the value of choice.

In this study I claim that the deterministic institutional approach neglects to perceive parents as having not only the ability to exercise free choice when selecting the most suitable educational setting for their child, but also the ability to exercise the right to believe in free choice. The notion of free choice allows us to work for and anticipate a better life and greater happiness. Free choice is needed to experience accomplishment, autonomy and dignity (Wertenbroch et al. 2008). Having the free will to choose a setting for their ASD child is perceived by parents as most relevant to their autonomy, thus empowering their ability to practice their agency. The belief in their right to freedom of will or choice motivates parents to explore alternatives and to evaluate their preferences. Their belief provides them with feelings of stability and control, and enables them to define and act with moral responsibility, enhancing a sense of behavioural control of the placement process as part of the complex situation of being a parent to an autistic child.

When parents learn they have no freedom of choice, they also realize that the conceptions of the ideal setting they designed when beginning their search are not reflected in reality. Furthermore, they face a reality by which their right to make decisions is controlled by the rigid institutions' imposed system of relevance. They are disappointed by the limited availability of placement options within their community, the physical environment of the setting, the curriculum, the criteria on which children are placed in a certain setting creating homogenized or heterogeneous settings, the characteristics of the kindergarten teacher and staff members, professionals who lack training and knowledge and, last, the formal system's

inaccessibility and inability to offer adequate and appropriate supporting resources, enhancing children's development within the kindergarten. Thus, they not only lose their right and belief to make choices, but they are also introduced to situations which mostly contradict their world view.

The activity of school placement offers insight into how knowledge is negotiated and constructed among the different social roles taking part in it and, therefore, could be defined as a figured world where one learns directly from a more knowledgeable participant about the framework which organizes the activity (Lachicotte 2009). Parents perceive local authorities as holding stocks of knowledge about practical, organizational and procedural aspects of the placement process, knowledge they wish to acquire. However, when this knowledge is not adequately presented to parents, they seek support through informal agencies. Furthermore, at times information provided by informal agencies does not coincide with the local authorities' stock of knowledge. Consequently, conflicting situations arise where parents are judged as not seeking the best for their child's wellbeing and as not being aware of systemic considerations.

Furthermore, the system is quick to define the child's ability as static, focusing on the labelling of the child according to his diagnosis rather than his daily function. This is done in order to justify a certain setting, whereas parents' presentation of their child supports a developmental, sociological and organizational approach (Skidmore 2004), perceiving the disability within the context rather than within the child. These differences in perceiving the child's disability are described by Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2008) as contributing to parents' feelings of stress while regulating their encounters with professionals.

Parents' and kindergarten teachers' descriptions and interpretations of local authorities' role within the placement activity suggest that local authorities perceive that they are responsible for the final placement decision only and not for the decision-making process itself (Tissot & Evans 2006). This could shed some light on why and how local authority officials respond to parents who are perceived as challenging the official final placement decision—at times accepting their placement request in order to avoid confrontation, negatively stressing parents' inability to make the "right" decisions for their child.

There is a sense that the system avoids having a continuous dialogue with parents while going through the placement activity. Consequently, tension escalates towards the final stage of the placement decision. In most cases, by the end of the placement activity there is no construction of shared and acceptable language aimed at enhancing dialogic features between parents and local authorities (Lachicotte 2009). These could be the consequence of incoherent educational policy regarding the descriptions and definition of qualitative educational care for children with autism, lack or misunderstanding of parents' experience raising a child with ASD, an undefined and unclear framework for parent-professional partnership, and, finally, lack of communication skills when interrelating with parents.

Expanding on this argument within the Israeli context, although legislation supports placing a greater value on parental perspectives, the practical implications of such an approach are differently experienced. This argument is further elaborated in the next section.

Overall, the present study has highlighted the importance of parents' intra-social capital within the placement activity. This derives from parents knowing how the system works; becoming advocates for their child, expressing concerns and wishes according to well-defined priorities; applying pressure; and activating systems of support in times of need without relying on social and professional status (Gewirtz et al. 2005).

5.5 Early-age school-placement activity as a distribution of knowledge

The present study has highlighted the role of knowledge and its evolving nature within the placement activity. Accordingly, the discussion of this theme relates to two aspects: the first is the perception of knowledge as creating boundaries between parents and professionals within the placement activity, and the second is knowledge as an objective and a commodity within the placement activity.

Parents in the present study claim that the stocks of knowledge created through their life-world experience raising a child with autism are devalued within the placement activity, mainly when interacting with professionals. According to parents' descriptions, knowledge distribution within the placement activity empowers a sense of unbalanced and unequal power relationships between professionals, local

authorities and parents. This finding is supported by Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2008), who highlight the activity of parent–professional partnerships as constructed according to hierarchies of knowledge where policy-makers and professionals are perceived as having privileged knowledge and parents’ intimate knowledge of their ASD child is lessened because they are considered to be mainly informants. The present study adds to these important findings by expanding on the scope of the placement activity and relating also to the views and role of kindergarten teachers as knowledge distributors. Accordingly, kindergarten teachers perceive their role within the placement activity as mainly providing relevant information to parents and local authorities, before the final placement decision.

In order to better understand the nature of these findings, I use Schutz’s interpretation of knowledge as a key element within social engagements. Schutz (1970) specifies three types of people according to the nature of knowledge they hold: the expert, the man in the street, and the well-informed citizen.

While interacting in the various procedural stages of the school-placement activity, kindergarten teachers and local authorities took the position of the skilled, better-informed individual who is more professionally equipped with relevant knowledge about autism and placement procedures. It seems that both kindergarten teachers and the local authorities have taken upon themselves the limited role of the expert, assuming their field of specialty as the most and only relevant system of knowledge, thus creating clear boundaries between their role and the parents’ role and limiting the possibilities for negotiation and discourse.

Mothers, on the other hand, exercised the role of the well-informed citizen who seeks a definite solution to problems she encounters but understands that there are infinite numbers of possible frames of references to address, in order to better manage a complex situation. Thus, parents are characterized as willing to openly negotiate their own knowledge while pursuing expanded valuable information regarding placement options. However, the unstable and ambivalent boundaries between the agencies bring about actions aimed at self-protecting. It seems that both kindergarten teachers and local authorities’ representatives perceive the parent as mainly exercising the daily and practical role of being a parent to an ASD child. However, they fail to perceive the parent’s whole entity as contextually related, including the

parent's private individual identity and recognition of his or her multiple selves, thus enhancing the stress load parents already feel and highlighting the phenomenon of loss of self (Cashin 2004).

Generally, within the daily routine of interacting with parents, kindergarten teachers assume the framework of the transplant model of parental involvement (Jones 2004), by which parents are mostly regarded as a source of practical information. Accordingly, parents are invited to become active participants in their children's lives, and information regarding skills and expertise is constantly shared; however, professionals constantly retain control over the activity. Specifically, within the placement activity, parents are perceived by kindergarten teachers as informants. Furthermore, kindergarten teachers are ambivalent in identifying parents' ability to make informed decisions regarding their children's education. Thus, in situations where conflicts arise due to gaps between parents' perspectives on the appropriate placement and kindergarten teachers' perspectives, teachers express frustrations over parents' decision-making, perceiving parents' motives and understandings of what is in the child's best interests as incomplete, stating that they lack a comprehensive outlook on the child's abilities. In doing so, they assume the expert model, defining parents' role within the placement activity as passively receiving services (Jones, 2004) and their own role as dominating the placement activity.

Most of the shared knowledge about placement suitability and availability is constructed through interactions whereby one person is dependent upon the other for the attainment of various exchange outcomes. The parents, it seems, are the ones most dependent upon the input of others, and although they have enormous knowledge about their child, it is not highly regarded by the local authorities. However, in going through the placement process, parents become better skilled at identifying and recognizing process objectives and characteristics. Furthermore, they gain insight into the strategies needed to be implemented at various decision points, creating the phenomenon of doubts and uncertainty. By the end they are able to construct stocks of knowledge that enable them to become the primary players in subsequent, similar decision-making processes (Lachicotte 2009).

Therefore, another major understanding formed by the present research is that knowledge in the placement process has become a commodity gradually

accumulated throughout the various procedures and interactions undertaken. Thus, in order to reduce the uncertainty level of the placement process, parents aim to locate and gather valuable information through varied resources. This information is considered to complement the insufficient information provided by officials.

Characterizing the placement process as one of interactions between parental agency and professional knowledge, it is presumed that through self-experienced and guided interactions with professionals who have relevant information to the activity, parents become aware of their role in the placement process, leading to a better understanding of their parent-self and their sense of agency within the process. Thus, there is a sharing of a co-constructed vision between parents and professionals with respect to the process of early-age placement of children with SEN. Furthermore, when parents become more knowledgeable of the various components of the early-age school-choice ability, their agency would be empowered in terms of their willingness to share the experience with other parents. Consequently, their agentic encounters might expand, leading to positively perceived interactions contributing to self-enhancement.

Finally, within the Israeli context, the Dorner Committee (2009) suggested that morally parents should be acknowledged as key decision-makers in their SEN child's placement process since their intimate knowledge of their child is of great importance. The committee indicates that in most cases parental school-choice coincides with the child's wellbeing, stating that the fear of parents making decisions based on inappropriate considerations has not yet been empirically supported. Therefore, parents should be given the right to choose a setting provided that their decision doesn't harm the wellbeing of their child or others. In any case, the committee suggests that within the first year of the placement, parents and professionals should hold a continuous dialogue and review of the appropriateness of the placement decision.

5.6 Summary

This chapter related the analysis of the finding to key theoretical conceptualizations empirically explored within the UK and within the Israeli context. The present study recognized common themes across the two contexts and added the perspective of

kindergarten teachers in order to create a holistic view of the phenomenon in question.

The central theme elaborated in this chapter is the discussion and argument about responsibility and partnership within the placement activity. In the analysis chapter, conflicting viewpoints arose when parents wished to practice their role as key decision-makers within the placement process. These conflicts have been found to influence the extent to which interactions between parents, professionals and officials were effective. Along with the uncertain nature of the child's characteristics and the complex features of the placement activity, these conflicts contributed to increased feelings of anxiety and stress among parents and kindergarten teachers. Thus, the first claim made in this chapter is the intensified subjective experience of each parent and kindergarten teacher as influencing their role and action within the activity.

The second claim highlights the placement activity within the Israeli context as lacking clear choice regarding the type of early-age placement for ASD children. This is related to gaps between ideology and practice and expands on findings within the UK context.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the third claim expands on the social aspects of the placement activity. Defining it as such involves interactions between microsystems such as parents, professionals, officials and informal agencies within the mesosystem environment. These are examined within the large cultural context—the macrosystem. These interactions are later related to the argument that within the placement process knowledge is socially distributed, defining knowledge as creating a hierarchy of position and power. Consequently, an unequal power relationship is constructed among the agencies involved, resulting in the creation of boundaries between parents and professionals and a sense of a battle and warzone. Knowledge, then, is defined as a means to obtain position and power. From the parents' viewpoint, it becomes a commodity needed in order to better regulate the placement activity and decrease notions of anxiety and stress.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion

The high rise in the prevalence of autism raises the issue of the need to provide ASD children with appropriate placement solutions that best suit their specific needs. However, within the Israeli context the debate about who is responsible for the placement decision—parents, professionals or local authority officials—is extended. This study strongly highlights the social aspect of the placement activity, focusing on the difficulties parents as well as kindergarten teachers experience when interrelating with each other and with other agencies within the placement activity. It further indicates that there is a need to develop a practice by which agencies involved in the placement activity are openly aware of and able to share others' perspectives. In particular, this study stresses the need for professionals and local officials to listen, trust and support parents in their placement decision.

6.1 Summary of the findings

This study set out to answer the following questions.

6.1.1 How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive early-age school placement as a decision-making process? (Section 5.3)

The data reveal that despite parents' strong belief in their right to influence their ASD child's educational placement, they are often presented with no clear choice as to the types of settings. Hence, they are presented with limited placement availability, and insufficient information, and are consequently unable to balance their priorities across varied educational settings. As a result, they experience heightened feelings of anxiety and frustration within the activity. Kindergarten teachers also discuss the gap between the professional autonomy they experience daily within the kindergarten as well as their commitment to the child's wellbeing, and the lack of ability to influence the final placement decision. Among kindergarten teachers, stress arises when decisions taken by local authorities contradict their worldview. Nevertheless, parents and kindergarten teachers both express a certain level of choice within the activity. Choices are noted as evident when relating to strategies and skills used when interacting with other agencies. These strategies are

aimed at obtaining missing information and support when inconsistencies and controversies occur within the activity.

6.1.2 How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive their role and action in the placement activity? (Sections 5.2 and 5.3)

Parents and kindergarten teachers perceive their role within the placement process as one that is aimed at securing a provision that best supports the child. Therefore, they perceive their role as one of advocating for the child's rights. Parents in particular consider themselves key decision-makers in the placement activity. Therefore, they are actively involved in the activity. Additionally, kindergarten teachers perceive their role as directing administrative placement procedures and interactions as well as offering support and guidance to parents during the placement process.

6.1.3 How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive the role and actions of other agencies in the placement activity? (Section 5.4)

Both parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive local education authorities as powerful, distant, and alienated from their needs. Consequently, interactions with the local authorities are described as contributing to their sense of stress and emotional overflow as they go through various stages of the placement process. Parents add that local authority officials don't offer sufficient information or a comfort, support and understanding. In their frustration, parents turn to other informal agencies such as their extended family, spouses, friends, privately sponsored professionals, and other parents sharing the same experience. These are perceived by parents as offering reliable information that can compensate for the incomplete information provided by local education authorities. They further provide parents with emotional support and guidance when encountering controversies within the placement activity. Kindergarten teachers also perceive informal social networks as providing valuable information and emotional support when experiencing stressful situations. The role of these informal networks as buffers against stress within the placement activity raises questions about why formal agencies are not able to provide sufficient information and support within the activity itself and about to how these social networks could be officially integrated within the activity itself.

6.1.5 How do parents and kindergarten teachers describe and perceive the role of knowledge in the placement activity? (Section 5.5)

Knowledge is recognized here as a major component of the placement activity, since on the one hand it defines the social positioning in terms of the role and power of the agencies involved in the activity, and on the other hand it becomes an objective within the activity. Distribution of knowledge within the activity represents unequal power relationships between parents, kindergarten teachers and local authorities. Parents describe themselves as experts in their own field and therefore wish to contribute equally to the placement activity. However, kindergarten teachers and local education authorities regard their role to be that of the dominating expert and perceive parents as informants and passive recipients of services.

6.2 Reflections on the study—Difficulties and limitations

The present research, although presenting a richly textured account of the parents' and kindergarten teachers' subjective experiences, has a number of limitations, which I have tried to offset. I discuss these below.

Time and practicability imposed difficulties in accessing both institutions and children. Therefore, the phenomenon of school choice was mainly described through the eyes of parents and kindergarten teachers; similarly, the perspectives of the institutions were presented through their eyes, as was the voice of the child.

The scale of the research was small; however, the thick, in-depth data, triangulated through the use of various research tools, provided valid insight into the phenomenon in question. Another aspect strengthening the validity and reliability of the research is that the data were gathered from the participants as they were undergoing the placement process. These authentic descriptions contribute to the understanding of the placement activity as a socially evolved activity.

One of the main challenges was the constant need to refine the process of data analysis in order to better address the data's complexity, and to reach a deeper description and interpretation of how other people think. The thick data collected and added during the analysis stage required constant familiarity; therefore, analysis procedures were repeatedly reinvented and relied on principles of the hermeneutic circle. Based on thematic-analysis principles (Giorgi 1997; Van Manen 1991), a

balance was created between the whole and the analytic approach. However, herein also lies their strength, since they enabled me to be flexible and to readjust, allowing me to engage with emerging new data while conducting the analysis. Thus, mere technical procedures were avoided, enabling a focused effort to uncover the uniqueness of each case, the unpredicted, unexpected and uncertain.

Another challenge was my ability as a researcher to constantly shift from the subjective experience to an objective view aimed at better communicating the essence of the phenomenon (Langdridge 2007). In order to do so, I followed Yardley's (2000) guidelines; thus, I carefully related my findings to studies done within the UK context—exploring a similar topic through a mixed-methods procedure. Additionally, I was sensitive to the broader social cultural context of the study and to the researcher–participant interview context and its influence on the data collection. Furthermore, data collection procedures and analysis were thorough and systematic, reflecting the complexity of the data. Additionally, the findings were presented in a way that clearly and coherently features the complexity of the phenomenon in question. Finally, by addressing two agencies, parents and kindergarten teachers, I was able to negotiate between the various perspectives and construct an objective view of the placement activity.

Furthermore, I chose to discuss controversial issues with a colleague who had previously carried out phenomenological research within a school context, and regarded her as an interpretive/critical colleague. The dialogue between us, through raising contradictions and conflicting thoughts, facilitated bracketing by thoroughly questioning the assumptions raised. This dialogue contributed to my ability to recognize with sensitivity the details and the wholeness of the phenomenon within the Israeli context, thus enabling me to better apprehend and communicate the complexity of the phenomenon.

Within the Israeli context, no research focusing on the placement process as social has been found to support or to reject both theory and findings. However, by comparing the findings to research done within the UK, I was able to extend my understanding of the placement activity by looking at the structure and the components of the process. Although the two contexts are culturally and historically different, it seems that the debate about who is responsible for the young ASD

child's education and about the features of the partnership activity between parents, professionals and local officials is universally shared.

6.3 Implications

The findings revealed that within the placement activity for young ASD children exists the need to develop a practice by which no one, especially parents, is excluded from the placement activity. Thus, the following implications suggest a process by which others' motives and perspectives are constantly revealed, discussed and accepted. As a teacher's educator I find it important to first address my implications to pre-service teachers' programs, stressing that these should enhance future kindergarten teachers' sense of self-efficacy when interacting with parents and officials in the placement activity.

6.3.1 Implications for higher education

Studies done by Sewell (2012) and Forlin and Hopewell (2006) suggest that pre-service teachers fear interactions with parents, and at times tend to avoid interacting with them. This is related to the fact that they have little or no contact with them throughout their studies. Consequently, in practice they report lacking skills and strategies to regulate their discourse with parents (Greenbaum & Fried 2011). Therefore, it becomes essential to provide them with opportunities to face dilemmas and practical implications of parental involvement mainly with regard to issues of school placement for SEN children. Therefore, I make the following recommendations:

- Teacher training should begin with addressing pre-service teachers' attitudes towards parental involvement and their notion of self-efficacy when working with parents.
- Students should be well familiar with the SEN law mainly relating to placement procedures and the roles of the different agencies involved within the placement activity.
- Students should be acquainted with complementary official documents expanding on conflicting issues within the Israeli SEN policy and implementation.

- Parents of ASD children should be directly involved in pre-service training programs. Through direct engagements with parents, students might better comprehend parental life-world experiences as they relate to their activity within the placement process.
- There should be an extended focus both in theory and practice on the issue of parental involvement.
- Students should be trained to effectively manage multi-agency collaboration within the placement activity.

6.3.2 Implications for formal agencies

In order to decrease tension between parents and formal agencies within the placement activity, I make the following recommendations:

- The role of local authorities' officials in the placement activity should be clearly defined as not only providing a placement solution but also as fully involved from the beginning through the end of the process.
- Within the local authority there should be only one figure who regulates all placement procedures, presenting parents with accurate and practical information about procedures and options available as well as offering emotional support when controversies arise.
- The placement activity should follow a systematic path, commencing at the beginning of the year with an analysis of needs, rights and expectations, followed by a mutual (parents, professionals and officials) conceiving of a schema plan continued with joint action taken within the placement process. The final phase should include a shared reflection on and evaluation of all agencies involved, examining the partnering process and the outcome.
- The placement activity should be clearly defined in terms of the limitations of authority and responsibility—when and how to encourage parental involvement.
- Parental voice within the placement activity should be enhanced by regarding parents' knowledge of their child as valuable, emphasizing their individuality and

uniqueness among other parents. Thus, there is a need to develop a practice that creates a dialogue based on recognizing parents' worldviews as well as their coping strategies and, in particular, the features of their social networks.

- One of the strategies suggested to prevent disputes between parents and a system is the menu-based package (Pianta et al. 2001). Hence, the need to address the individuality of each family is highlighted by presenting parents with optional features of their involvement in the activity. Accordingly, parents are given the opportunity to construct the features of their involvement to suit their aims and needs within the activity.
- Finally, the placement activity should promote greater parental choice; however, in situations lacking free choice, it is crucial to offer parents a sense of control by engaging them with incidents that allow choice.

6.4 The contributions of the present study

This study's main contribution is first related to the exploration of the phenomenon of early-age school placement for ASD Israeli children, looking at what can be learnt about the *process* rather than the placement solution. This aspect of the placement activity has not been yet researched within the Israeli context.

The second contribution is related to the positioning of the phenomenon within a social context, exploring it as it is experienced and perceived by both parents and kindergarten teachers and looking at the activity as it is evolving through social interactions.

The third contribution is related to the use of the life-world concept within the research. This has contributed greatly to a wider and deeper understanding of the placement activity since it related the daily subjective experiences of both kindergarten teachers and parents to their experience within the placement activity. The individual subjective experience was described clearly and in detail (Hodge 2008), giving voice to parents' experience of raising an ASD child as well as kindergarten teachers' experience of educating ASD children. Thus, both parents' and kindergarten teachers' narratives presented the impact of raising and educating an ASD child on the placement process and final decision.

Last, through the use of the life-world, the sources of differences between parents and professionals perspectives within the activity were recognized, enabling a non-judgmental interpretation of each agency's experience. Individuals' life-world experiences are by nature not interchangeable; therefore, notions of emerging empathy don't naturally derive from them. Hence, it is argued that through the use of the life-world the sources of these differences are revealed, allowing through mediation reciprocity of motives and perspectives within the placement activity—enabling negotiations of differences and reaching out to the other, reducing the levels of tension and stress within the activity.

6.5 Future research

Future research should be first conducted on a larger scale, and involve an exploration process by which the experience is described and interpreted from a broader range of perspectives, including that of fathers, significant others, official institutional representatives, and the voices of the children themselves.

The research should be longitudinal, in which the school-placement process is explored across space and time, covering pre-decision and post-decision activities. This would enable a deeper and wider understanding of the activity as an on-going process of structuring various meanings in different contexts.

In future data collection, there should be more emphasis on observations carried out within various meetings and encounters across space and time, between parents and other agencies, characterizing the use of language—oral and written, verbal and non-verbal—as it relates to the dynamics of role and power. Furthermore, additional attention should be paid to written official documentation, looking at how the language is formulated in order to present a certain position.

Finally, the aspect of language as a means of communication was apparent in the present research, However, it was not deeply researched; therefore, future research should address this issue in depth, mainly while observing interactions between parents and other agencies.

6.6 Concluding thoughts

The present research emphasized the placement process as including interrelated elements: the child, the parents' life-world experience and the education system. However, the issue of reaching an agreement on what best suits the child's needs has been found to be complex and controversial, raising tension between parents and professionals.

It is clear that in some cases there is no single obvious placement decision—one that best suits the needs of all agencies involved in the activity. This uncertainty, however, emphasizes the need to focus on the process itself, stressing the need to partner with parents to enhance their role within the placement activity. This is of major importance since parents consider their involvement in the process a basic expression of their human rights. Additionally, through parents' devoted involvement in the placement activity, the child's voice within the activity is empowered. Above all, the present study has revealed that both parents and kindergarten teachers share a goal: they both care about the child. When both agencies are able to recognize the shared goal, tensions tend to decrease, and the placement activity can be defined as effective independently of the final outcome.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: EdD Programme : Ethical Implications of Proposed Research

University of Bath Department of Education

EdD PROGRAMME: ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

To be completed by the student and supervisor(s), and approved by the Director of Studies for the EdD before any data collection takes place

Introduction

1. Name(s) of researcher(s) Rachel Ravid

2. Provisional title of your research

Israeli parents of young HFASD children and AD children experience of early years school choice - personal and social meanings

3. Justification of Research

1. Relatively little worldwide and Israeli research has been done on parents of young HFASD (high functioning autistic spectrum disorder) and AD (Asperger disorder) children early years school choice.

2. The educational placement of HFASD or AD children creates friction between parents' preferred choice and the Israeli SEN educational policy and its implementations. By obtaining knowledge regarding the meanings parents attach to their school choice we can better understand their motives for the decision. This will eventually decrease tension between parents and the educational system, meeting the needs of parents, children and policy.

Consent

4. Who are the main participants in your research (interviewees, respondents, raconteurs and so forth)? Israeli parents of young HFASD or AD children whose age ranges from 3- 6 years

5. How will you find and contact these participants?

By addressing nursery teachers working with children on the spectrum and other parents whom I have already been in touch with

6. How will you obtain consent? From whom?

Parents who will agree to participate will sign a consent form.

Deception

7. How will you present the purpose of your research? Do you foresee any problems including presenting yourself as the researcher?

I intend to present the purpose of the research as a way to help parents present their own perspectives and meanings regarding their experience of school choice. I do not foresee any problems since most parents are keen to present their own views regarding their child's educational placement. They need and want to be heard.

8. In what ways might your research cause harm (physical or psychological distress or discomfort) to yourself or others? What will you do to minimise this?

Having a child with Autism is traumatic for the parents. It introduces information and experience about the child and about parenting that challenges parents' existing beliefs, feelings and expectations. Therefore, the interview questions and other tasks should be designed and phrased cautiously so that parents would not feel stressed, hurt or threatened by their existence.

Confidentiality

9. What measures are in place to safeguard the identity of participants and locations?

Respondents will be addressed using pseudonyms all through the case study protocol and final presentation. No information will be passed from one parent to the other.

Accuracy

10. How will you record information faithfully and accurately?

Interviews will be recorded using mp3 player and immediately transcribed into Hebrew. All other data collection tools will be documented using digital camera or portfolios.

11. At what stages of your research, and in what ways will participants be involved?

I will interview parents at different occasions and will brief them at different points of time, as for the dynamic nature and purposes of the research. They will be advised to go over transcription and analysis of the interviews and other data collection procedures.

12. Have you considered how to share your findings with participants and how to thank them for their participation? As I have mentioned before I intend to involve parents in most of the data collection and analysis procedures and furthermore hand them the final copy of the research.

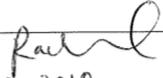
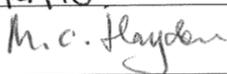
Additional Information

13. Have you approached any other body or organisation for permission to conduct this research? No

14. Who will supervise this research?

DR JILL PORTER
DR SETH CHAIKLIN

15. Any other relevant information.

Student: RACHEL RAVID	Signature:  Date: 9.3.2010
Supervising Member(s) of Staff:	Signature(s):  Date: 22/4/10
Director of Studies for EdD	Signature:  22/4/10 Date:

A copy of this form to be placed in [1] the student file, and [2] an Ethics Approval File held by the Director of Studies for EdD Research Students. The Director of Studies (EdD) will report annually to the Department's Research Students Committee (white paper business) on ethical issues of particular interest that have been raised during the year.

Appendix 2: Consent Form (translated from Hebrew)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study exploring the placement process of young ASD children. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required and your rights as a participant.

The purpose of this study is:

- To gain insight into the placement process of young ASD children within the Israeli context from the perspective of kindergarten teachers and parents.

The benefits of the research would be:

- Raise awareness as to the complexity of the placement process.
- Offer recommendations enabling an effective placement activity.

The methods that would be used to meet this purpose include:

- One-on-one interviews
- Documents
- Email exchange
- Visual tools
- Phone conversations

You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. Please contact me at anytime at the email address or telephone number listed above.

Our discussion will be audio taped to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words. The tapes will only be heard by me for the purpose of this study. If you feel uncomfortable with the recorder, you may ask that it be turned off at any time.

You also have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide (including tapes) will be destroyed and omitted from the final paper.

Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research report, which will be read by my supervisor and examined by external

readers. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous.

By signing this consent form I certify that I _____ agree to the terms of this agreement.

Signature: _____ Date: _____