Special educational needs inclusion and diversity: a textbook

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Part 1

Principles and concepts
Chapter 1

Children, families, schools and the wider community: an integrated approach

Objectives

When you have studied this chapter you should:
1 be able to explain the implications of describing special educational needs as one aspect of social and cultural diversity;
2 be aware of major changes that have affected the relationships between children, families and schools over recent years, and be able to outline some implications of these changes for work with children who have special educational needs;
3 be familiar with the way in which this book is structured and the main themes running through it.

Contents

Diversity in society
A changing society
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The changing situation of schools

An integrated approach
SEN and educational provision
Theoretical approaches to SEN
Research and practice
Multi-disciplinary teamwork
Organizational and individual issues
Decision making at case conferences
Concluding comments about the structure of this book
A changing society

We have written this book because almost all the books that we read about special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion did not seem to us to reflect adequately the rapidly changing, increasingly diverse nature of the society we live in. What was once a relatively homogeneous and stable population has been transformed. Every aspect of society that affects the treatment of disabilities and learning difficulties has changed radically and continues to evolve – the cultural, ethnic and religious profile, patterns of family organization, economic and occupational structures, the relative status of men and women, and the perception of human rights and social responsibilities.

We will illustrate the pace of change in the UK by outlining two of the dimensions of diversity that have particular implications for those working with children and young people who have SEN. The first dimension is ethnic background. In 1951 the non-white population of Britain was very small, perhaps less than 50,000 (Peach 1982). By the academic year 1996/7 there were just under three quarters of a million pupils in England alone recorded as having an ethnic minority background – about 11 per cent of all pupils in maintained schools. At the same time there were just over half a million pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL) – about 7.5 per cent of all pupils (Department for Education and Employment 1999a). While the great majority of ethnic minority children and children learning EAL live in urban areas, there has been a good deal of dispersal from the initial areas of settlement. In the local authorities in English counties in 1997, one in seven primary schools and almost one in five secondary schools had more than 5 per cent ethnic minority pupils (figures derived from Department for Education and Employment 1999a, Table E).

The second dimension is family organization. Fewer people than in the past spend the whole of their childhood with their biological parents and siblings in a household comprising a traditional nuclear family. Divorce is more common, and more men and women choose to cohabit without marrying. By the mid-1990s it was estimated that just over 1 in 14 of all families with dependent children in Great Britain were stepfamilies (Haskey 1996). Adoption by stepfathers is increasingly common: almost one half of adoption orders made in England and Wales each year are to birth parents (usually mothers) and their spouses (Batchelor 2000). O’Donnell (1999) reports that there has been increased appreciation in recent years within the law of different family structures and of functional parenthood. However she observes that ‘lesbian and gay families present more of a challenge for this new approach to relationships with children than other forms of family diversity, because they are so clearly removed from the norm of the heterosexual ideal’ (1999: 87). Many schools have felt confused about the extent to which they can acknowledge this aspect of the diverse family types to which their pupils belong. On the one hand Section 28 of the Local Government Act (Department of the Environment 1988) stipulates that a local authority shall not
‘promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. On the other hand, Department of Education and Science guidance to schools advised that Section 28 does not affect the activities of school governors nor of teachers and does not prevent the objective discussion of homosexuality in the classroom, nor the counselling of students concerning their sexuality.

It is much more common than in the past for both parents in households with dependent children to be in paid employment (Ferri and Smith 1996), but the increasing numbers of lone parents find it difficult to obtain jobs and keep them. Parents of children with SEN find themselves under particular pressure. For example, Beresford (1995) found that in a sample of 1000 families of children with physical disabilities:

- household income tended to be lower on average than among families with non-disabled children (although they faced additional costs);
- fewer parents were in full-time employment;
- the family home was often unsuitable for the care of a child with disabilities;
- two thirds of the parents did not belong to a parent support group, though those who did found them helpful;
- almost half of the parents had not found their relationships with professionals supportive.

The arrangements for family organization and welfare support which meet the needs of most families in society appear to fall short in relation to families with children who have disabilities. There are good reasons to believe that the difficulties are exacerbated in lone parent families and among some ethnic and linguistic minority communities (Caesar et al. 1994). Any analysis of the education of children with SEN needs to take full account of the increasing diversity of society and the impact this has on the kinds of professional services and educational provision that are required.

**Key concepts in charting diversity**

As society becomes more heterogeneous, the terms that are used to describe its diversity become themselves a focus of debate and dissent. This applies equally to concepts that are associated with visible markers of diversity such as *race* or *ethnicity* (Ryan 1999) and to concepts that are associated with changing views on diversity such as *handicap* and *disability* (Corbett 1995, 1998). It is important to be explicit and clear about what one means when using such terms. We will attempt to clarify in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 how the concepts of SEN and *inclusion* are used in this book. At this point it is necessary to clarify how we intend to use the terms relating to racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. It is very common for terms in this area to be used loosely. At worst the effect is demeaning and racist. It may be helpful to have not only working definitions of some of the key terms but also observations on ways of using them that we have tried to avoid in this book.
Race was originally a biological concept categorizing a group of people who are connected by common descent or origin and have some common physical features. This term is often used in a metaphorical and over-generalized way in accounts of the speaker’s own group or other groups. Talking in terms of race tends to reinforce traditional stereotypes.

Culture encompasses the learned traditions and aspects of lifestyle that are shared by members of a society, including their habitual ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. The use of this term is often based on an unjustified assumption that there is a high level of cultural cohesion and homogeneity in the social group that is being described (especially when it is a group of which one is not a member).

Ethnicity is a label that reflects perceived membership of, and a sense of belonging to, a distinctive social group. The crucial distinguishing features of an ethnic group vary between different contexts and change over time. They may include physical appearance, first language, religious beliefs and practices, national allegiance, family structure and occupation (Thomas 1994). A person’s ethnic identity may be defined by their own categorization of themselves or by how others see them.

The use of terms such as ethnic group tends to focus attention on a particular aspect of an individual’s identity. But in contemporary society everyone, whether adult or child, has multiple roles and complex identities. It is beyond the scope of this book to explore issues of cultural change and ethnic evolution in detail. We recognize that the definitions that are given here represent just one serviceable way of clarifying the scope of each concept. Fuller discussions of the implications of adopting different definitions may be found in Verma (1986, Ch. 2) and Hutnik (1992).

One reason why it seems important to highlight these dimensions of diversity in a book on SEN is that there is strong evidence of the operation of institutional racism in the delivery of services to children with SEN in many western societies. Institutional racism has been defined as:

the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.  
(Macpherson Committee of Enquiry 1999, para. 6.34)

When SEN provision began to expand in the West during the post-war period, once ethnically based statistics were collected, it became clear that there were higher than expected numbers of children from some minority communities in some forms of special provision. This was true both in the UK (Tomlinson 1984) and the USA (Franks 1971; Tucker 1980). For example, in England and Wales in 1972 children from the newly established West Indian communities in many cities constituted only 1.1 per cent of all children in maintained primary and secondary schools, but 4.9 per cent of all children in schools for the educationally subnormal (Tomlinson 1984: 21–2). Over the years in both countries the most
dramatic forms of over-representation of black pupils in SEN provision were reduced, but there remained important areas where anomalies persisted. For example, African-Caribbean pupils continued to be over-represented in schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Inner London Education Authority 1984: 15) and among pupils who are excluded from school (Bourne et al. 1995).

Such findings reflect a more widespread phenomenon: SEN provision reflects a diverse society in uneven ways across a range of dimensions of diversity. For example, boys tend to outnumber girls by a large margin in schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, but by only a very small amount in schools for those with profound learning difficulties and hearing difficulties (Riddell 1996). Similarly, children from working-class backgrounds are over-represented among those assessed as having moderate learning difficulties but not among those assessed as having severe learning difficulties (Inner London Education Authority 1984). These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapters 6, 9 and 14.

Sociologists of education have drawn a distinction between the forms of SEN that are usually identified in terms of apparently ‘objective’ criteria (e.g. the existence of visual impairment) and forms of SEN where subjective and relativistic judgement has a greater influence on diagnosis (e.g. emotional and behaviour difficulties). It seems likely that the risk of social bias affecting the processes of identification and assessment will be greater when teachers and other professionals are working with children in the second ‘non-normative’ category (Tomlinson 1982). As in the case of institutional racism, discrimination may occur through ‘unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and . . . stereotyping’. Those insights and strategies that minimize the risk of institutional racism will also be likely to improve equity and effectiveness in relation to other dimensions of diversity.

Thus, although ethnic and linguistic minorities constitute a relatively small proportion of the country’s population, an analysis of SEN in relation to these groups has a significance far beyond their numbers. A key question in every chapter of this book will be whether any analysis or intervention that is described can measure up to the diversity of those minorities and to the challenges of racism that they face. If they pass that criterion, they are likely to stand the test of time with the broader and less heterogeneous groupings that make up the rest of the population. As we saw above, these groupings are themselves becoming increasingly heterogeneous in many ways. We will employ an interactional model in order to ensure appropriate sensitivity to cultural context, and we believe that this will also enhance the analysis of SEN issues for all children within a range of educational contexts.

Children, families and schools

The key stakeholders in education are children, families and schools. If an integrated approach is to be developed towards SEN, it will need to take account of the individual perspectives of each of these stakeholders. Social changes and legal
reform have affected their position *vis-à-vis* one another during the latter part of the twentieth century. Before introducing an interactional model and laying the basis for an integrated approach it is necessary to review those changes and consider their implications for practice.

The child's perspective – hearing the voice of the child

It might seem self-evident that children’s views should be taken into account when decisions are being made about them. But this principle was not made explicit in English law until the Children Act 1989 which reformed legislation on children’s welfare. The guiding principle in that Act was that local authorities and the courts should treat a child’s welfare as the paramount consideration in any decision. The Act listed various factors that a court was to take into account in determining whether to make an order about a child. One of these factors was ‘the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child (considered in the light of his age and understanding)’ (Department of Health 1989, Section 1).

Two years after that law was passed, the UK agreed to be bound by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 of the convention states that:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

(Newell 1991: 44)

At that time there was no statutory requirement in the education service to take children’s views into account. It was after a further three years that the first SEN Code of Practice introduced guidance on the issue, advising that schools should ‘make every effort to identify the ascertainable views and wishes of the child or young person about his or her current and future education’ (Department for Education 1994a, para. 2: 36). This guidance has been considerably strengthened in the revised Code of Practice in which one of five ‘fundamental principles’ is that ‘the views of the child should be sought and taken into account’ (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para 1.5). A whole chapter is devoted to pupil participation on the basis that children with SEN have a right ‘to be involved in making decisions and exercising choice’ (para 3.1).

What has led politicians, social workers and teachers to come to give such status to children’s views on their own future after centuries in which children were treated legally as simply the possession of their parents? Two main arguments were set out in the first SEN Code of Practice:


- **Practical**: children have important and relevant information; their support is crucial to the effective implementation of any individual education programme.
- **Principle**: children have a right to be heard (Department for Education 1994a, para. 2.35; cf. Gersch 1992: 26).

Davie (1996) has argued that, when schools introduce arrangements for consulting and involving pupils, there is such immediate evidence of the value of the exercise that the principle has ‘the characteristic of self-reinforcement’. It is increasingly common to seek pupils’ views across a range of school situations (Cade 1989; Davie and Galloway 1996; Breen and Littlejohn 2000; Lewis and Lindsay 2000). Although they will not have a clear overall appreciation of the scope and structure of the curriculum, they may have a great deal to contribute to thinking on how it is presented and on effective conditions for learning (Rudduck and Flutter 2000). These are issues of considerable relevance to children with SEN. The question for the future is not whether or why educators should listen to the views of children with SEN, but how.

Gersch (1987) and Gersch et al. (1993) piloted a ‘Student Report’ as a framework for enabling children aged 10+ to present their views in a formal way as part of the SEN assessment procedure. It covers seven sections:

1. School
2. Special needs
3. Friends
4. Out of school
5. Feelings
6. The future
7. Anything else

Figure 1.1 illustrates how this framework is intended to work. A key advantage of a strategy of this kind is that, within the constraints of that structure, the communication is controlled by the children themselves. It seems important that, wherever possible, they should have direct access to the process and express what they wish to say without the ‘support’ of others. Figg et al. (1996) showed in a small-scale study that there are risks of distortion when children’s observations are reported by others, such as educational psychologists. These investigators were particularly concerned that the risks appeared to increase when the child and the person describing the child’s views came from different social or cultural backgrounds. Armstrong et al. (1993) showed how the failure to investigate a child’s perspective in an SEN assessment may lead to misleading conclusions. For example, a child who did not want to transfer to a residential school refused cooperation in an interview with a psychologist about it but was not led to explain his reasons for not cooperating. The authors argue that, while training might improve professionals’ skills in conducting such interviews, that would not on its own change how they decide their priorities. The dilemma of professionals such as educational psychologists is seen as arising from ‘the demands of a complex situation in which the needs of competing clients (schools, parents, LEA and
child) determine the extent to which the child’s perspective is allowed to be relevant’ (Armstrong et al. 1993: 130).

With increasing frequency, children with SEN are now invited to contribute their views on other occasions and not solely during the process of formal assessment. Morton (1996) described booklets entitled *My Learning Plan* in which children are guided through a process of setting learning targets. The series of
questions that they answer enables them to specify the help they think they will need to achieve their targets and encourages them to specify success criteria by writing down (or dictating for an adult to write down) how they will know that they have achieved each target. Glenny (1996) has shown that exploring a child’s own perspective can enhance the value of regular reviews of SEN Statements when progress on an Individual Education Plan is evaluated. Such reviews often rely on the collection of data on curriculum achievements and professionals’ reports about children’s work and behaviour. Jelly et al. (2000) point out that where SEN Statement annual review meetings are conducted in the absence of the pupil concerned and without consulting them, the pupil is likely to feel that such a review has little meaning for them. By contrast they describe a process, developed through an ‘Involving Pupils’ action research project in Essex local education authority (LEA) where pupils’ active participation is supported. Prior to the annual review, pupils are provided with an opportunity in a one-to-one tutorial with an adult to contribute their views using the schedule shown in Figure 1.2. They also participate in most, if not all, of the annual review meetings held in the project schools. Jelly et al. (2000) report that pupils have responded

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<tr>
<td><strong>A: Last year at school</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>What things did you most like doing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you do best?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What improvements did you make?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What helped you to learn or get on better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What things did you not like doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What things did you find difficult?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B: Next year at school</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What things do you want to do better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What things do you need help with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you worried about anything? If so, what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to talk to anyone else? If so, who?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed:</td>
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*Source: Jelly et al. (2000).*
with enthusiasm and have often made perceptive and self-reflective contributions that have taken the adults involved by surprise.

Others have also found that when the children themselves are asked to say how they think others believe they are doing, the situation may be illuminated from a different angle:

One hearing-impaired child . . . relaxed and opened up when asked about the view of his hearing-impaired teacher of whom he was very fond. This pupil’s perception of an apparently well-organised and comprehensive procedure revealed that his mother was very unhappy about the process and that he felt that teachers other than his hearing-impaired teacher did not understand his difficulties.

(Glenny 1996: 10)

A similar point was made by Sinclair Taylor (1995) after investigating the working of a free-standing SEN unit situated on the campus of a mainstream secondary school. She showed that it was only when the pupils in the unit expressed their views that it became clear that ‘the unit, rather than promoting integration, fostered the marginalisation of its pupils’ (1995: 263).

A range of methods may be used to empower children with SEN to articulate their perspective for themselves. Older children and young people may be able to respond to an invitation to give their views in writing or by speaking into a tape recorder. They are likely to appreciate the rationale for doing so and, even if learning difficulties sometimes set a limit on how clearly they can articulate their wishes and feelings, they are likely to be able to convey the main thrust of what they wish to say. Figure 1.3 shows a proforma developed by The Edith Borthwick School which uses the Widgit symbols programme to assist pupils who have communication difficulties to contribute their views to their annual review. Safeguards are required so that children are provided with a listener in whom they feel they can trust and in order to ensure that they do not simply say what they assume their listener wants to hear (Dockrell et al. 2000). It is important that their understanding of the situation is elucidated: do they feel that they are being interrogated because something is wrong? Do they understand what their views are being collected for and how their contribution will be used?

It has been shown that young people with severe disabilities can contribute to policy development in education and other fields if their contribution is facilitated in focus groups (e.g. Educable (Young People with Disabilities Able to be Educated) 2000) or through flexible communication methods (e.g. Morris 1998; Detheridge 2000). Children with less severe difficulties can contribute in larger numbers if questionnaires are adapted to their competence level and if researchers are prepared to read items aloud for them and act as scribes when needed. Wade and Moore 1993 used a sentence completion technique to give children the opportunity to offer open-ended comments on their views, even when they could not manage extended free writing. When the children were asked to complete the sentence ‘I get worried in some lessons because . . .’, they expressed their lack of confidence in completions such as:
Techniques are needed for working with children who find it difficult to express their feelings and ideas verbally. Role-play methods may allow some to express their views indirectly (Sweeney 1995). For others a possible approach may be to elicit drawings in order to elucidate their attitudes. This approach has strong advocates (e.g. Dalton 1996) and severe critics (e.g. Dockrell et al. 2000). On the one hand, drawing may reflect ‘aspects of knowing which exist at lower levels of awareness than that of verbal articulation’ (Ravenette quoted by Dalton 1996). On the other hand, drawings are ambiguous and the factors that determine what a child draws are complex. It is not easy to decide unequivocally for any single drawing what message it conveys about the child’s views of the subject: ‘A child may draw a person crying for many reasons’ (Dockrell et al. 2000: 57).

Those who think that problems of interpretation need not eliminate the use of drawing tasks for this purpose altogether, tend to emphasize the value of specific...
safeguards. These tend to be introduced to prevent investigators imposing their
own projected ideas onto their version of what the child is communicating.
Most commonly what is advocated is the principle of triangulation – seeking con-
firmatory evidence from other sources. Multi-method approaches to assessment
are advocated throughout this book. Steps can also be taken ‘within method’
to provide checks on the reliability of the interpretations made. For example,
Ravenette (1997, 1999) invited children to construct the opposite of a picture
they had created in order to help them to explain or show what they thought the
first picture signified. This strategy has its roots in Kelly’s (1991) personal con-
struct theory in which people’s ideas about their personal world are represented
as a continuum between opposites (cf. Salmon 1988; Stoker and Walker 1996).
Ultimately, investigating the perspectives of children with SEN simply reflects in
a particularly stark form the key dilemmas that face investigators with all chil-
dren: how can adults learn what children think and feel without influencing and
distorting the message?

The changing role and contributions of parents in schools

Over the last 40 years increasing emphasis has been placed on the value of
parental involvement in the education of their children. Initially attention was
primarily focused on the negative consequences of mismatches between home
and school. For example, Bernstein’s (1971) research showed that there were
marked differences between classrooms and middle-class homes on the one hand
and many working-class homes on the other in the way in which language was
used. He argued that these differences could inhibit the school achievements of
children from working-class homes. The Central Advisory Council for Education
(1967) (the Plowden Committee) concluded that children’s educational achieve-
ments could be significantly influenced in a more general way by parental attitudes
to schooling. They were the first of a series of official committees and other bodies
to stress the importance for schools of encouraging good working relationships
with parents and their closer involvement in schools (Cullingford 1985; Vincent
1996, Chs 1–3).

By the end of the century, Kelley-Laine (1998) was reporting on an Organization
for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) survey that showed wide-
spread encouragement of parental involvement in education across nine countries,
including the UK. The following reasons for increasing parental involvement were
identified:

- **Democracy.** In some countries parents are considered to have a right to in-
  volvement in their child’s education.
- **Accountability.** Parental involvement is seen as a means of making schools
  more accountable to the community that finances them.
- **Consumer choice.** Parents are encouraged to choose the education they want for
  their child and complain if it falls short of their expectations. This is seen as a
  mechanism for making schools more responsive to society’s requirements of them.
• **Means of raising standards.** Research has shown that high achieving, well-ordered schools are characterized by good home–school relationships. It is hoped that improving home–school relationships will have a positive impact on standards.

• **Tackling disadvantages and improving equity.** Here the focus is on raising the achievements of individual children by helping their parents to support them more effectively at home. This is seen as particularly important where there are cultural differences between family and school.

• **Addressing social problems.** In some countries school–family programmes are being developed to tackle serious social problems affecting young people (e.g. targeting drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy or delinquency and violent crime).

• **Resources.** Parents are regarded as a source of extra funds for schools and of unpaid staffing for school trips, sporting activities and additional support in the classroom.

There is thus a wide range of reasons why schools and public authorities endorse effective partnership between home and school. But one goal in particular is emphasized more frequently than any other – the enhancement of student learning. With this goal in mind, Chrispeels (1996) presented an overview of those school practices that have been seen as most effective in this respect, especially in communities where families have few socioeconomic advantages and are likely to be helped by active outreach initiatives from their children’s schools (see Figure 1.4).

Reporting on a study of Asian-American, Latino and European-American families, Okagaki and Frensch (1998) highlighted the need to be sensitive to ethnic

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**Figure 1.4**

Effective school practices for reinforcing parents’ efforts to enhance their children’s learning

group differences in parents’ beliefs about education and goals for their children. Working in the USA they pointed out that it cannot be assumed that what works in some family contexts will necessarily work in all. Huss-Keeler (1997) reported a case study in an urban primary school in the North of England where 80 per cent of the pupils were from Punjabi speaking Pakistani families. She showed that parents from this community were very interested in their children’s learning but demonstrated their interest in different ways from middle-class white parents. This was misinterpreted by teachers in the school as lack of interest. De Abreu et al. (in preparation) carried out a series of case studies in a similar community in the South of England. They found that, where parents’ own experience of mathematics learning had been different from their children’s (e.g. in terms of the strategies they were taught for simple arithmetic), their success in supporting the children’s learning of mathematics depended on how they negotiated the gap. This applied to both monolingual and bilingual parents, but for the latter group uncertainties about the use of language for mathematics were a central concern. As in Huss-Keeler’s sample, it was noted that the children’s teachers appeared not to be aware of how important this worry was to the parents.

Parents whose children have SEN

The involvement in education of parents whose children have SEN should be considered in the context of the general trends in parental involvement that were outlined above. The Warnock Committee suggested that the relationship between parents and professionals be conceptualized as ‘a partnership and ideally an equal one’ (Department of Education and Science 1978: 151). However almost ten years later Wolfendale was to reflect that partnership ‘is a slippery concept, probably because it is rarely manifest’ (Wolfendale 1989: 107). Cunningham and Davis (1985) suggested that the ways in which parent–professional relationships around SEN have been described over the years might be characterized in terms of three models:

• **An expert model** in which professionals are construed as the source of all knowledge about children who have SEN and where parents are cast in the role of passive recipients of advice from the experts.

• **A transplant model** in which professionals are regarded as the key decision makers and main source of expertise. However, parents are regarded as a valuable resource and source of active support and intervention for their child. Some of the professional’s expertise can be transplanted to the parents who are taught to carry out programmes at home.

• **A consumer model** in which the parent becomes the key decision maker and the professionals offer information and services from which the parent can select according to their needs.

These three models are contrasted with a partnership model in which: ‘teachers are viewed as being experts on education and parents are viewed as being experts on their children. The relationship between teachers and parents can then be a partnership which involves sharing of expertise and control in order to provide the optimum education for children with special needs’ (Hornby 1995: 20–1).
Following on from the Warnock Committee’s advocacy of the partnership model in their 1978 report, the 1981 Education Act on SEN appeared to place new power in the hands of parents of children with SEN. However, a review of the implementation of the Act by the House of Lords Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts after six years highlighted a number of concerns:

Although the Act, and the climate of opinion behind it, enhanced the position of parents in a way which is welcomed by LEAs and teachers, nevertheless there are still situations in which parents feel their contribution to the process of assessment has been insufficient or ineffective. The most common difficulties experienced by parents are:

(i) inadequate or unclear information about the local education authority’s assessment procedures and about the range of special educational provision available;
(ii) insufficient help in completing the parental contribution to assessment;
(iii) a lack of weight being given to their views during the assessment process;
(iv) a lack of choice from a range of forms of provision.

(House of Commons 1987, para 16: ix)

There was evidence that the problems may have been even more acute for parents from black and ethnic minority communities. For example, research carried out by Rehal (1989) in one London borough highlighted particularly poor levels of communication with and involvement of Punjabi-speaking parents. Of the 14 parents interviewed only one was aware that their child had been formally assessed under the provisions of the Education Act 1981 and issued with a statement of SEN. Similar concerns were expressed at that time by agencies working with the Bangladeshi community in London (Chaudhury 1986), by investigators of South Asian communities in other cities (Shah 1992) and by researchers working with the African-Caribbean community (Inner London Education Authority 1985: 69–71).

A case study by Grugeon (1992) illustrates vividly the way in which parents and professionals from different cultural backgrounds can misunderstand each other in the course of an SEN assessment. She shows in detail how ‘the process . . . has not taken into account the evident disjuncture between the cultural norms of his [the Child’s] home and community and those of the school’ (1992: 92).

It appears that many authorities and schools ignored the official guidance that the formal notification to parents of SEN assessment and the subsequent reporting should be in a language they understood or for which they could obtain an interpreter (Department of Education and Science 1983). Over the years the guidance has been considerably strengthened. For example, where access to interpreters or translated information material is needed in the early years, the revised Code of Practice makes clear that it is for the LEA (and not the parents) to ensure that it is provided (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para 2.13). When such arrangements are made, it is essential that there is sensitivity to the position of the parents and children. In some (probably rare) situations what is required is exact, word-for-word translation, while in others the bilingual worker may need to take on a wider advisory and liaison function, helping both the family and the
professionals to understand the social and cultural assumptions that each is making (Martin 1994; Shackman 1984).

In recent years the perception has grown that professionals and LEAs have generally been slow to embrace partnership in so far as it requires active sharing of information and control. Legislation has increasingly been used to attempt to level out the power imbalance in parent–professional relationships, ensuring that parents are empowered and are not denied their rights. This increasing emphasis on parental rights can be seen in the establishment of bodies independent of LEAs to which parents can appeal against LEA decisions and turn for information. The establishment by the Education Act 1993 of the SEN Tribunal was a major step in this direction. The *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (Department for Education and Employment 2001) outlines two steps (in Chapter 10, Part I, Sections 2 and 3) which it is hoped will prevent many cases from going to the SEN Tribunal by providing better information and opportunities for negotiation at an early stage. Information on these developments was provided in the revised SEN Code of Practice:

- All LEAs must make arrangements for parent partnership services and are encouraged to work together with voluntary organizations in doing so. The aim of these services is to ensure that parents of children who have additional needs (not just those with statements) ‘have access to information, advice and guidance in relation to the special educational needs of their children so they can make appropriate, informed decisions’ (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para. 2.19).
- All LEAs must provide arrangements ‘which demonstrate independence and credibility in working towards early and informal resolution of disagreements (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para. 2.24) . . . Confidence in disagreement resolution arrangements will be greatest when all concerned consider that the service offered is genuinely independent’ (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para. 2.26).

The changing situation of schools

Across the developed world the situation of schools has changed substantially in recent years. These changes are perhaps even more radical than the developments affecting the position of children and parents (McLaughlin and Rouse 2000). Previously in the UK the dominant voice in the development of policy on school management and the curriculum was that of professional educators. Schools in the public sector were accountable to governing bodies and subject to inspection, and they worked within a framework of law and regulation that was set by elected politicians. But the democratic touch on the tiller was a rather light one locally and nationally, and it appeared to many observers that the main consumers of the service – the children and their parents – had little influence.

Politicians of the right began to argue against the ‘stranglehold’ exerted by ‘public monopoly’ schools. Their case has been summarized as follows:
• Financial support for schools (via taxation) was not linked directly to the satisfaction of their clients.
• The absence of profit or loss motives for school managers led to conservative, self-serving, minimalist, survival strategies.
• Schools’ decision making was dominated by the pursuit of staff self-interest.

ACTIVITY 1.1 Parental diversity and principles of partnership

The following statement of key principles in partnership with parents is derived from a policy document produced by the National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASSEN 2000). The last of these principles refers to ‘diversity’. Consider each of the other bullet points. Can you identify how two aspects of diversity might impact on each of them in practical terms – (i) cultural diversity and (ii) lone parenthood?

• **Parental rights.** Parents have legal responsibility for the proper care and development of their children. They should therefore be regarded as having a major stake in the way education and other services are provided. For parents of children with SEN, this extends to the provision of a range of inputs from different agencies as well as formal schooling.

• **Parental responsibilities.** The rights and needs of children are fundamental and parents have responsibilities that arise from these. For parents of children with SEN these responsibilities extend to working constructively with other education and care providers and with relevant agencies that contribute to children’s well-being and development.

• **Parity in partnerships.** Partnership between parents and professionals implies mutuality of respect, complementary expectations and a willingness to learn from each other. The fact that parents are experts on their child and can influence attitudes and attainment needs to be recognized, respected and acted upon. In best partnership practice, the process of decision making is most effective when professionals acknowledge and incorporate parental perspectives and seek constructive ways of reconciling different viewpoints.

• **Empowerment.** Parents should be encouraged and empowered to work with professionals to ensure that their child’s needs are properly identified and met as early as possible. In order to play an active part in their child’s development, parents should have access to all the information that is available and relevant to their child’s education as well as to appropriate training that enables them to reinforce learning in the home.

• **Effective communication.** Parents are assisted in playing an active role if professionals communicate clearly with them and with other professional colleagues. Parents need to be able to understand any differences in professional opinion and the evidence on which these are based. Professionals should seek where possible to resolve such differences in a way that ensures more effective cooperation between all concerned.

• **Support.** It should be recognized that parents of children with SEN will at times have their own needs for emotional and moral support. Adequately addressing these needs will help ensure that parents can play a full part in planning for and responding to the needs of their children.

• **Diversity.** While there are some common issues for parents, they do not all have the same or similar needs. There is diversity not just in the culture and interests of different parents but also in the resources that they can bring to bear. Proper account should be taken of such differences to ensure that all parents can be supported in making as actively as possible a contribution to meeting their children’s SEN.
• There were inadequate checks and incentives to foster efficient administration or to force schools to be responsive to parental concerns.

It was argued that these features of the situation allowed educational standards to remain depressed and inhibited any urge to achieve excellence. Furthermore, the fact that schools in the public sector were designed to be similar and that there were restrictions on enrolment meant that parents effectively had no choice and that children’s diverse needs could not be met. (This summary has been adapted from Ball 1993: 4.)

The reforms presented as a solution to these problems involved:

• enhancing quality by creating more competition between schools for resources and public support;
• encouraging greater diversity in the organization and funding of schools;
• enhancing parental choice by making enrolment more open and providing more information on which parents could base their decisions about which school would best suit their children;
• giving schools greater autonomy from LEAs in their day-to-day management while making them more accountable.

The overall effect of the changes was intended to be that individual parents would have greater responsibility for the quality of their child’s education. There was certainly a considerable reduction in the powers of LEAs. Schools had greater freedom to compete for pupils, and since resources were linked to pupil numbers, a school needed to be popular in order to guarantee its income.

A key lever in the improvement in academic standards was the introduction of the National Curriculum. Schools maintained by LEAs were required to provide for all pupils of statutory school age a basic menu of three core subjects and six foundation subjects (seven in Key Stages 3 and 4 when modern foreign languages was added), plus religious education. Each core and foundation subject would have its objectives and programmes of study specified nationally. All pupils, including those with SEN, would share the right to a broad and balanced curriculum which would be designed to ‘promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils’ (Department of Education and Science 1989b, para. 16).

The national specification of the curriculum removed the substantial degree of control that teachers had previously had over what was taught in schools and how it was taught. The reforms went further. At fixed age points (the end of every ‘Key Stage’ of compulsory education) children’s learning would be assessed, and the results for each school would be published. Teachers would thus be accountable for the delivery of the curriculum in a different way from before. The aims were to:

• give a clear incentive for weaker schools to catch up with the best while the best were challenged to do even better;
• provide teachers with detailed and precise objectives;
• provide parents with clear, accurate information;
• ensure continuity and progression from one year to another, from one school to another;
• help teachers concentrate on the task of getting the best possible results from each individual child.

Parallel changes took place in the Scottish education system, though sometimes with less constraining central control (Riddell and Brown 1995). In England and Wales there have been substantial developments in the working of the new curriculum arrangements since 1989, but the fundamental structure remains in place. (More recent initiatives such as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies will be covered in Chapters 11 and 12.)

What impact would these radical changes have on the experience of children with SEN? Official documents were optimistic, pointing out that:

the principle that pupils with SEN share a common entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum with their peers has taken many years to gain acceptance . . . The right extends to every registered pupil of compulsory school age attending a maintained or grant maintained school, whether or not he or she has a statement of SEN. This right is implicit in the 1988 Education Reform Act.

(National Curriculum Council 1989b: 1)

At the same time it was acknowledged that:

the right to share in the curriculum defined in Section 1 of the Act does not automatically ensure access to it nor progress within it. Some pupils will have physical and sensory impairments which make access into a challenge; others have intellectual or emotional difficulties in learning. Some will meet attitudes and practices in schools which do not actively encourage full participation. Achieving maximum access and subsequent progress for pupils with SEN will challenge the co-operation, understanding and planning skills of teachers, support agencies, parents, governors and many others.

(National Curriculum Council 1989b: 1–2)

Commentators from the SEN field mostly adopted a more pessimistic tone and emphasized that many of the challenges in the new context arose from aspects of the new policies themselves. For example, Upton (1990: 4) reported that many were 'concerned about the relevance of traditional subjects to children who present severe learning difficulties and the effects which the introduction of an apparently narrowly conceived academic curriculum may have on the teaching of cross curricular issues such as social and life skills'.

In the event, many of the concerns about the curriculum were soon allayed, and resolute efforts have been made to ensure that there is meaningful access to an appropriate version of the full curriculum for all pupils. (See Chapter 9 for a discussion of what this means in the case of children with profound and multiple learning difficulties.) The most serious challenges for children with SEN and their parents appeared to arise not from the National Curriculum but from other provisions in the reform programme.
The arrangements for financial delegation to schools – ‘Local Management of Schools’ (LMS) – might, in principle, have enabled schools to make more flexible provision for pupils with SEN, because it gave them greater control over resources. But the allocation of funds depended on pupil numbers; schools were ranked on ‘league tables’ that were to be based on the overall performance of their pupils in National Curriculum subjects. If schools allocated resources to pupils with SEN whose performance might not raise the aggregate achievement level, they were making what would appear in an open financial market a risky investment. Another effect of LMS has been to force LEAs to delegate a steadily higher proportion of their funds to schools. LEAs are now smaller, leaner organizations, and hence cannot provide central services to support schools with SEN in the same way as in the past. Decentralizing such provision risks the advantages of scale being lost and other priorities swallowing up the available funding at school level (except where there is statutory safeguard – see Chapter 2).

Tomlinson (2000: 28) has argued that the new emphasis on market forces and consumer choice have operated to create new disadvantages for those cast as ‘undesirable customers’ by the system on account of ‘social class, race and ethnicity, special educational needs and behaviour problems’. This is illustrated through discussion of failing schools. Research has indicated that the application of LMS has tended in practice to bring about a redistribution of resources from urban schools to rural and suburban schools. This exacerbates the difficulties of schools in deprived urban areas, which are disproportionately attended by minority ethnic and other socially disadvantaged groups, and contributes to their failure. It is of relevance that the 700 failing schools identified between 1993 and 2000 were concentrated in deprived urban areas. It is further argued that media coverage in which the ethnic composition of the population of these schools is often apparent ‘perpetuates the xenophobic reaction that the very presence of minorities lowers standards in schools’ (Tomlinson 2000: 32). Tomlinson (2000) argues that such disadvantages have resulted primarily from failure to consider or make reference to minority issues in constructing the new framework of educational legislation. While giving a tentative welcome to the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit, designed to tackle low educational achievement and poor life changes of young people living in disadvantaged circumstances, questions are asked about the broader effectiveness of this initiative, given a continuing commitment to market principles in education. Nevertheless initiatives to date on school truancy and exclusions, in particular of black pupils, do appear to have had a positive impact in increasing inclusion.

With regard to the inclusion of pupils with SEN, this has slowly become a central goal of government policy and the rhetoric of inclusion is increasingly espoused at every level. But schools are still caught in a tension between the inclusion agenda and the education reform agenda (tighter curriculum control, the testing and inspection regimes, the pressure to improve ‘standards’, competition for pupils). There has been a shift of emphasis from some of the market principles that were enshrined in law in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the pace of education reform has not slowed down, and key central features remain,
such as aiming to improve standards by publishing assessment and inspection results and by encouraging competition for enrolment between schools. The impact on vulnerable children during much of the 1990s was charted in terms of increased rates of exclusion from school and an increased proportion of children being given a Statement of SEN. The first has the effect of enabling some schools ‘both to rid themselves of “difficult” students and to demonstrate to potential clients that discipline and safety are taken very seriously’ (Ball 1993: 8). The second enables schools to guarantee external provision to support their work with pupils who make considerable demands on resources. In Chapter 2 we will examine how the concept of SEN has evolved in response to these developments and how new guidance is intended to counteract the worst effects of the major reforms on children at risk.

The pessimism expressed by Tomlinson and Ball is to some extent countered by other observations about school trends. On the basis of research on school improvement and school effectiveness a number of investigators have

ACTIVITY 1.2 Collaboration between schools over pupils with SEN

The following extracts are taken from a 1993 news report (Pyke 1993):

A grant-maintained school . . . has reneged on a 20 year agreement to take children from a nearby school for the partially sighted, according to the Royal National Institute for the Blind . . . For the past two decades the all-age JC School (which provides for pupils with visual impairment) has sent its pupils across the playing field to HP secondary for some lessons. A few partially sighted pupils have been fully integrated. In 1991 HP opted out of local authority control and became a grant maintained school. Now it is refusing to continue the arrangement unless it receives £26,000 from the LEA plus staff support from JC. The school says it cannot afford this and will have to send the pupils two miles to another secondary school. The RNIB added that HP has refused to integrate a wholly blind girl after a successful first year of partial integration. ‘The head told me that, irrespective of financial considerations, he did not believe it right to educate a wholly blind child in a mainstream school,’ said an RNIB spokesman. ‘Given this comment and the amount of money the school is charging to take the other, partially-sighted pupils, I can only conclude that the head doesn’t really want special needs children in the school.’ The LEA’s Chief Education Officer said: ‘Arrangements had worked up to this point, and it’s a great pity they are not working now.’ HP’s headteacher and the school’s chairman of governors both refused to comment.

1 On the basis of this report would you agree with a teacher from another secondary school who said that the working relationship between the schools ‘appears to be one-sided – not real collaboration’?
2 What features of the overall system might have led the headteachers of the two schools to adopt the positions attributed to them?
3 What changes in the law or in the approach of the LEA or the special school might lead the HP head to revise his view on the prospect of working with selected pupils from JC?
pointed out that some of the factors that are found in schools that achieve general improvements in standards are also found in schools with a strong record for inclusion: ‘Put simply, this means that by improving overall conditions a school supports staff in developing a wider range of responses to pupils who experience difficulties in their learning. In so doing, it adopts a way of working that is essentially about the reformation of ordinary education, to make it more comprehensive’ (Vislie 1994, quoted in Ainscow 1995: 153). ‘Furthermore it seems likely that such moves will be to the benefit of all children in the school’ (Ainscow 1995: 153). Such an ambitious goal can only be achieved if schools and other agencies develop an integrated approach in their work on SEN.

An integrated approach

This book seeks to promote an integrated approach to SEN along a number of dimensions:

- SEN and educational provision;
- theoretical approaches to SEN;
- research and practice.

These themes are introduced in this section and developed throughout the book. A major challenge in developing and sustaining an integrated approach in practice is that most children who have SEN require the support of professionals from many disciplines. In the next section we consider how effective multidisciplinary team work can be promoted.

SEN and educational provision

SEN are taken to be the outcome of an interaction between the individual characteristics of learners and the educational environments in which they are learning. This means that, if we are to fully understand the learning difficulties experienced by some children, we have to consider the curriculum and learning environment being provided for them. An analysis of learning difficulties in literacy or mathematics, for example, should incorporate a consideration of the curriculum demands and methods of teaching generally employed in these subject areas.

The importance of this sort of integrated approach is widely recognized and advocated. The Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of pupils with SEN advises: ‘The assessment process should always be fourfold. It should focus on the child’s learning characteristics, the learning environment that the school is providing for the child, the task and the teaching style’ (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para. 5.6).

However, it appears that what has happened in practice has more often reflected a ‘within-child’ model of SEN. Goacher et al. (1988) reported that Statements of SEN and the professional reports on which they were based focused largely
on deficits within the child in discussing their SEN. They found that very little attention was given to the learning environment. Seven years later a similar conclusion was reached by a working group of educational psychologists set up to review and develop approaches to assessing the learning environments of pupils who have SEN (Frederickson and Cline 1995). A recent small-scale study of teachers’ views on emotional and behavioural difficulties suggests that many teachers continue to focus solely on within-child and family factors when seeking to explain such problems (Avramidis and Bayliss 1998).

Throughout this book we discuss ways of integrating SEN identification, assessment and intervention into an analysis of the educational curriculum and the learning environment that is provided. For example, two of the four chapters in Part 2 on approaches to assessment of SEN concern curriculum related assessment and the assessment of learning environments. This is line with the SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills 2001) which has made it clear that the learning environment, the learning task and teaching style should be assessed, as well as the learning characteristics of individual children. McKee and Witt (1990) have suggested that one reason why so much SEN assessment focuses on within-child factors is that professionals lack knowledge and confidence in other forms of assessment. We aim to support readers in developing the knowledge and expertise that are required.

Theoretical approaches to SEN

There are a number of theoretical approaches to SEN that start from different perspectives. Often, different theoretical approaches focus on different aspects so that it is difficult to integrate the insights and ideas that they offer. The definition and explanation of what children and teachers experience as ‘learning difficulties’ become a site for fruitless debates between theorists and practitioners who adopt incompatible terminology to reflect different perspectives and then cannot engage in a meaningful dialogue. This happened when sociologists of education and educational psychologists studied SEN assessment with different assumptions and when geneticists, neurologists, cognitive psychologists and teachers each tried to understand dyslexia by looking at a different aspect of the phenomenon. For many years the field of emotional and behavioural difficulties was the site of confused debates about the competing insights of behavioural, cognitive, psychodynamic and systemic theories.

In some respects the accounts offered by different theoretical approaches to SEN conflict with each other, but in other respects they may be considered to complement each other. It would appear desirable to be able to draw on different approaches in order both to ensure a comprehensive consideration of the area involved and to capitalize on the relative usefulness of different approaches for different purposes. Morton and Frith (1995) achieved a significant breakthrough in the integration of different theoretical perspectives on problems in child development and SEN. They developed a visual framework on which it is possible to
represent different theories so that their commonalities and differences are readily apparent. The framework allows both difficulties of development and hypothesized causal influences to be described in terms of biology, cognition, behaviour and environmental factors or interactions. In this book we make considerable use of this framework to offer an integrated account of the diverse theoretical formulations that are available for many aspects of SEN.

Research and practice

A further theme that permeates this book is the interplay between research and practice. There has been extensive debate in recent years about the quality of much educational research and its relevance either to educational policy or classroom practice (Hargreaves 1996; Hillage et al. 1998; Tooley and Darby 1998). A central issue has been the extent to which practice can and should be based on research evidence. On the one hand Hillage et al. (1998: 60) recommend that ‘more evidence-based decision-making should be encouraged where appropriate’. On the other hand, Hammersley (1997: 156) concludes:

there is much wrong with the quality of teaching in schools . . . But it seems to me that educational research can only play a fairly limited role in resolving the problems. It can highlight and analyse them, and attempt to provide some understanding. But remedying the failings of schools is a practical business that necessarily depends on professional expertise of a kind that is not reducible to publicly available evidence, even that provided by research.

The proponents of evidence-based practice do not maintain that research evidence is the only knowledge base which will be drawn on in professional practice. However, they do highlight the extent to which other kinds of professional expertise also suffer from limitations. Hargreaves (1997: 411) draws an analogy with medicine which has been much discussed:

Much clinical work depends on best practice (i.e. what works) derived from tradition and personal experience. Both are potentially deeply flawed, so must be subject to scientific test. When evidence is produced on whether one therapy rather than another makes for a more effective or speedier benefit to patients in certain categories or circumstances, it becomes a valuable component in the matrix of factors considered by a doctor in making a clinical decision. Research transforms individual tinkering into public knowledge that has greater validity and can be shared among the profession as the evidential base for better clinical practice.

Hargreaves argues that teachers also need to make complex decisions and that their decision making could be enhanced by the establishment of a more relevant research base in education. He also identifies a need to establish a culture of accountability in education and openness to new ideas wherein there is an
expectation that the best available knowledge on ‘what works with whom, under what conditions and with what effects’ (Hargreaves 1997: 414) will be sought and utilized. This book aims to support teachers, educational psychologists and others who are seeking to update and develop their knowledge of the research base in key areas of practice for pupils who have SEN.

At the same time critics of an evidence-informed approach to educational practice have highlighted the dangers of a simplistic view, arguing that ‘knowledge cannot be applied, like paint, to a blandly receptive body’ (Edwards 1998: 89). In addition the relationship between research and practice cannot be a one-way street. Research findings may be generalizations drawn from work with representative groups. Or they may be insights drawn from case studies in which the researcher focuses on a unique individual or situation. ‘Good practice’ that is based on findings from either type of research will not be effective with every child. The only way to learn if an approach is successful in promoting the learning of an individual pupil is through the careful collection of data in monitoring their progress (Good et al. 1998). There are many parallels between the process of research and the approach to assessment recommended in the revised Code of Practice and adopted in this text. Such an approach involves:

- generating hypotheses about the difficulties being experienced by a pupil in a particular learning environment;
- collecting a range of data and information from different sources to test out the hypotheses being considered;
- giving careful attention to the reliability and validity of the information collected;
- drawing conclusions about the actions most likely to be effective in promoting the pupil’s progress;
- monitoring changes in pupil progress in response to the action taken so that its effectiveness can be evaluated and any further assessment and intervention initiated.

Teachers who undertake extended and repeated cycles of assessment and teaching with pupils who have learning difficulties are actively engaged in a form of investigation of SEN that can contribute to enhancing how we think about the phenomenon in general as well as advancing an individual’s learning. Edwards (1998) suggests that such activities can provide a basis for research that is reflexive and conducted on the analogy of a ‘conversation’ with its participants, where there is the potential for mutually illuminating outcomes. Other researchers who have investigated ways of increasing the contribution of research to the improvement of practice have reached very similar conclusions. Robinson (1993: vii) writes from a New Zealand perspective that:

Researchers must conduct . . . processes of problem understanding and resolution as a critical dialogue with practitioners, so that competing theories of the problem can be adjudicated and new theories of action learned during the course of the research itself, rather than left to some subsequent process of dissemination.
It seems that the different approaches to research which have been touched on in this section may each have a contribution to make to practice. Selection of strategies may valuably be informed by evidence about what generally is found to work in a specific kind of situation. The development of an application which is tailor-made for a particular context is likely to require the engagement of those involved in a problem solving process from which some more broadly generalizable learning is likely also to result. Finally there will be a need for systematic collection of data that will allow evaluation of the success of a particular application of a specific strategy in relation to the objectives identified for the pupil or pupils involved.

Multi-disciplinary teamwork

Organizational and individual issues

SEN are complex and heterogeneous: ‘Meeting the special educational needs of children requires flexible working on the part of statutory agencies. They need to communicate and agree policies and protocols that ensure there is a “seamless” service’ (Department for Education and Skills 2001, para. 10.1). Yet there are many obstacles to successful collaboration between colleagues from different disciplines. At an organizational level, ‘fragmentation of services between different statutory agencies, competition and tight budgets’ (Department for Education and Employment 1997: 71) have been identified as key problems. At an individual level other factors may impede successful collaboration between professionals from different disciplines:

- They have chosen to work in their field because it interests them and seems important to them. Such preconceptions are often reinforced during their training, so each professional may view the concerns of other groups as having lower priority.
- They are socialized during training to use a particular professional vocabulary. Differences in the use of language create problems of communication.
- They often work for different agencies which are funded in different ways and have different priorities. This sets up barriers, for example, to speech and language therapists working with teachers of children with language difficulties in mainstream schools – though such barriers are not insurmountable (Jowett and Evans 1996; Department for Education and Skills 2001, paras 8.49–8.53).
- Tensions may develop between professional groups because of differences in perceived status, management arrangements or workload.
- Some professional groups have strict codes of confidentiality which make it difficult to share records or information, even if the client agrees.

Some of the problems of communication arise not just between people in different professions but between people in different subspecialties in the same profession.
ACTIVITY 1.3  
**Expectations and communication in multi-disciplinary collaboration**

A team in Boston carried out a retrospective study of the work undertaken by medical consultants in a hospital over two separate one-week periods. They found that the physicians who referred patients and the consultants to whom they were referred completely disagreed on what had been the reason for the consultation in as many as 14 per cent of the cases. They concluded that 'breakdowns in communication are not uncommon in the consultation process and may adversely affect patient care' (Lee et al. 1983).

Review your own experience and consider whether you can recall problems arising in work with a child with SEN for a similar reason.

- What was the problem, and how did it arise?
- With the benefit of hindsight, what do you think could have been done to avoid it?

profession. In Activity 1.3 you are asked to review any experience you may have had of this in relation to work with children who have SEN.

Just as problems in multidisciplinary working may be identified at both organizational and individual levels, so too may positive influences on effective practice be identified at each of these levels. Problems will be less likely to occur if there are clear requirements for joint planning and provision. For example, sections 117–24 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act (Department for Education and Employment 1998d) established Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships which have responsibility for the planning and provision of local services (education and care) for children aged 0–14 years. They include representatives of parents, LEAs, social services departments, health services and early education providers from the maintained, private and voluntary sectors, and have successfully forged effective partnerships in many areas.

It is often useful to identify a senior post in each organization as carrying the responsibility to liaise with other services and manage effective collaboration with them. For example, the medical officers designated by health authorities to work with LEAs on behalf of children with SEN have both strategic and operational coordination responsibilities across health authorities, National Health Service (NHS) Trusts, Primary Care groups and general practitioners (GPs). These are clearly detailed in Chapter 10 of the SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills 2001).

It is sometimes helpful to have written contracts between agencies that specify how collaboration between them will be organized and monitored. This is particularly important where jointly funded teams are established between agencies. A good example of such teams are those relating to the education of children and young people in public care that have been established by local authorities in response to the guidance on the education of children in public care (Department for Education and Employment/Department of Health 2000). This is typically a joint education department/social services department team whose main aim is to
improve the educational experiences and achievements of children in public care. In one medium-sized county, for example, this team comprises a full-time team leader and four team members who each work half-time on the team: a reintegration officer, a senior educational psychologist, a liaison teacher and an administrator. While good coordination at the systemic or organizational level is very important, at the individual level attention should be given to the knowledge and skills an individual needs in order to be an effective team worker. Barker (1989) led a working group which attempted to define the team working competencies required by social workers for this purpose. With minor adaptations the list appears to apply equally to professionals in the SEN field. The working group considered that the following were required in order to contribute effectively to a multidisciplinary team:

1 A distinctive discipline-based knowledge base:
   - being confident in one’s own area of expertise without being arrogant;
   - being clear about the rationale, the scope, the boundaries and the limitations of one’s own knowledge base.

2 Skills for collaboration:
   - partnership, e.g. identifying shared interests, stating agreed goals clearly, sharing/allocating specific tasks;
   - negotiation, e.g. making clear formulations of one’s own view and the desired outcome, listening to and empathizing with the views of others;
   - networking, e.g. gathering and disseminating information about resources, linking individuals/agencies for reciprocal help;
   - communicating, e.g. writing reports for the team and for clients, using a common language (and avoiding specialist jargon unless it is genuinely necessary);
   - reframing, e.g. offering a different perspective on a problem discussed by the team or clients;
   - confronting, e.g. maintaining one’s own integrity and being aware of one’s own feelings and values, resisting being swamped by a dominant culture;
   - flexibility, e.g. having the ability and the humility to learn from the skills and working methods of others;
   - monitoring and evaluation.

3 Values:
   - client-centredness, i.e. putting the interests of the client or pupil first and not allowing oneself to give priority to scoring points off other disciplines, protecting one’s own organization, etc.;
   - respect for colleagues and for service users;
   - openness.

Decision making at case conferences

When people from different professions have to take important decisions about children at risk, a common arena for enforced collaboration is a case conference.
A great deal of importance may be attached to the outcome of a case conference, but over an extended period there has been evidence of frequent weaknesses in the way they are run (Castle 1976; Hallett and Stephenson 1980). Cline (1989) drew up an observation checklist for participants that may be used in training and may be adapted to monitor effectiveness. It focuses on five basic processes in case conferences:

1. **Preparation**, e.g. was it clear before arrival why the conference was being held so that participants were able to prepare themselves adequately for the discussion that took place?

2. **Initiating the discussion**, e.g. were the objectives of the conference made explicit at the outset and agreed upon by all parties? Was the status of the meeting made clear and accepted by all (e.g. as to what it could take decisions about and what and to whom it could make recommendations about where it did not have executive powers itself)?

3. **Resolving the discussion and taking decisions**, e.g. did the discussion move towards a resolution too early (when the picture of relevant aspects of the current situation was still incomplete) or too late (when insufficient time was left to explore the available options fully)? Did any of the participants appear to have an interest in premature or delayed resolution?

4. **Observations of the process**, e.g. was any professional or specialist perspective overlooked or given less significance than you thought it deserved? Pay particular attention to professional groups who appear to be accorded low status in this context. Was any professional or specialist perspective given more significance than you thought it deserved?

5. **Parents, guardians and children**, e.g. were parents and children aware that the meeting was taking place? Did they participate for all or some of the meeting? What positive and negative effects did their presence or absence have? If they were not present at the end what arrangements were made to inform them of the recommendations made/decisions taken? Were they to be given any opportunity to comment on them and to influence the outcome?

Activity 1.4 invites you to consider this fifth point in more detail.

**ACTIVITY 1.4 The changing role of parents**

Consider the fifth point in the list concerning case conferences taken from Cline (1989) which concerns the involvement of parents, guardians and children.

Now look back at Activity 1.1 and consider the statement of key principles for partnership with parents that were set out by NASPEN (2000).

What changes in the role and status of parents over the intervening 11 years are implied by the differences between the two?
Throughout this book we attempt to analyse SEN in a way that takes account of the diversity of modern British society and respects the range of individual perspectives and rights of different stakeholders in the education system. We argue for the integration of different strands of theory, research and practice. We also explore the implications of an interactional perspective which on the one hand considers the different layers of environmental influence that impact on individual functioning and, on the other hand, recognizes the extent to which such influences are mediated by the meanings that individuals ascribe to them. Ethnic and cultural differences represent important dimensions of diversity along which differences in the ways individuals interpret their worlds may be identified and environmental influences may vary.

Part 1, including this chapter, is concerned with key principles and concepts that influence work with SEN. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the key concepts of SEN and inclusion. The last chapter examines how SEN develop in children’s lives and will introduce Morton and Frith’s causal modelling framework which allows an integrated consideration of different theoretical perspectives on problems in child development and SEN.

Part 2 examines how SEN have been identified and assessed. Assessment is seen in its social and cultural context, and the contentious issue of bias is addressed. The last two chapters outline key approaches to assessment in educational settings that have particular importance when an interactional approach is adopted but which have often received insufficient emphasis in individually focused approaches to assessment – curriculum-based assessment and the assessment of learning environments.

Part 3 examines specific areas of SEN, including learning difficulties, literacy and mathematics. A book that attempts to address the challenges of SEN in a multiethnic society must take problems of communication very seriously. Part 3 includes extended chapters on language and on hearing impairment. The book ends with an examination of the area of need that possibly poses the greatest challenge to the goals of inclusion: emotional and behavioural difficulties and the development of social skills.