

Meeting Special Needs in the Early Years

Directions in Policy and Practice

Sheila Wolfendale

A **David Fulton** Book

MEETING SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Directions in Policy and Practice

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Sheila Wolfendale

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Stephanie Lorenz is a qualified and experienced educational psychologist who has worked in both LEA and Health Authority settings. She gained her PhD at the Hester Adrian Research Centre at Manchester University and has developed a special interest in inclusive education, particularly of children with Down's Syndrome. Since taking early retirement in 1994, she has worked as a freelance consultant as well as sitting on the Special Educational Needs Tribunal.

Hannah Mortimer is an educational psychologist in North Yorkshire. She specialises in working with children under 5 who have special educational needs,

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Mary Robinson has worked as a teacher in both mainstream and special schools. For the last 6 years she has worked as an educational psychologist in the London Borough of Newham where she leads a team of psychologists working with preschool children through the Child Development Centre. Her interest in the education of deaf children has developed through her work with two mainstream schools with inclusive provision for deaf children.

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Sue Sheppard is an educational psychologist working for the London Borough of Redbridge. She also works for the National Autistic Society at their diagnostic, assessment, training and research centre, as well as being a course tutor for the Open University. She has a varied background in special education and has been involved over time in provision development and the evaluation of teaching approaches for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders.

Ann Warn is an educational psychologist who is currently working as the Early Years Assessment Manager in North West Kent.

Sheila Wolfendale has been a primary school and remedial reading teacher, an educational psychologist in several local education authorities and is currently director of a Doctorate in Educational Psychology programme in the Psychology Department at the University of East London. She has authored and edited many books, booklets, chapters, articles and handbooks on aspects of special needs, early years, educational psychology and parental involvement. She was awarded a professorship in 1988 and in 1995 gained a PhD by published works.

Janine Wooster is currently working as the Special Educational Services Manager in North West Kent, having previously co-ordinated the PreSchool Home Visiting Team in the London Borough of Newham.

Editor's Foreword

Since this book was first published in early 1997, there has been a change of Government. The Labour Government elected in May 1997 adopted a firm policy commitment to bringing about an integrated system of early years provision and child care, within which young children with special needs are to have an inclusive place, as of right. Further reference to the Government's strategy, within the context of this book, which is made throughout Chapter 1, has been accordingly updated, to take account of these and related developments. The other chapters in this book will be variously affected, over time, by government policy, but essentially the principles, strategies and provision described here stand as solid beacons of contemporary thinking and practice.

Sheila Wolfendale,
London,
April 2000

Chapter 1

The State and Status of Special Educational Needs in the Early Years

Sheila Wolfendale

Introducing the book

We welcome readers to a book that celebrates the burgeoning field of early years special educational needs practice, and we invite those of you who work in this area to read, relate to, identify with ideas and their applications; perhaps to be stimulated and challenged in your own practice. The book is aimed at those who work within early years/SEN, as teachers, their non-teaching colleagues, educational psychologists, administrators, policy-makers and practitioners in training.

The authors all have a strong teaching and SEN background; many of them now work or have worked as educational psychologists; others work as lecturers, administrators, advisers. Collectively they bring a wealth of experience in working with young children or on their behalf across a range of special needs and disabilities.

I would like to acknowledge at the outset the help and support given to the preparation of this book by members of a group of educational psychologists who have a brief or remit for working with early years/SEN within their local education authorities, and who meet, twice a year, at the University of East London to share, debate and discuss issues and developments in that area. The group endorsed the idea of and need for a book that would bring together contemporary practice, and indeed several of the authors are members of that group.

Reason and rationale for the book

Few texts currently exist in this area. There are several chapters in a number of edited early years or special needs books (Herbert and Moir, 1996; Wolfendale and Wooster, 1996) and two other recent texts on early years/SEN (Wilson, 1998; Roffey, 1999). There is a wealth of effective

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and innovative local practice that could and should be disseminated and shared more widely and which could provide the source and stimulus for other work. There is, correspondingly, considerable practitioner expertise and there is scope for practitioners to describe and discuss their work within a wider forum, such as this book.

Various pieces of legislation with associated Guidance are now in force, the policy and practice effects of which need to be explored within the public domain – the 1993 Education Act, Part Three; the 1994 Code of Practice and its section on Under Fives; due for revision during 2000 and implementation during 2001; the 1989 Children Act requirements for provision for (young) children in need; the OFSTED inspection and early years/*SEN Framework for Inspection*; the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999) which has implications for curriculum for young children with special needs.

The state and status of SEN within the early years

Wolfendale and Wooster (1996) provided a chronological résumé of the increasing profile of SEN in the early years, and this provides the context for this section.

The Warnock Report (1978) gave under-fives and special needs a higher profile than previously by recommending it as a priority area in terms of teacher training and increased provision. Emphasis was given to the proven effectiveness of intervention programmes, including Portage, to partly justify this call for increased investment in the early years as both a preventive and 'remedial' measure.

Warnock paved the way for the legislation that amended existing law on special education, namely the 1981 Education Act (implemented from April 1983), which conferred new duties on local education and health authorities in respect of identifying and assessing young children with possible special needs. The accompanying circular to this act was updated in 1989 (Circular 22/89) to take account of the 1988 Education Reform Act as well as recent developments and contained a whole section on under-fives with special needs, reflecting developments that had taken place.

The next significant legislative landmark in the arena of special educational needs was the 1993 Education Act, Part Three of which referred exclusively to SEN (please note, the 1993 Education Act was subsumed along with other Education Acts, into the consolidated 1996 Education Act). That Part of the Act repealed the 1981 Education Act, retaining core principles and formal assessment procedures, but strengthening a number of parental rights and clarifying the processes. Schools are now required by law to have written accountable SEN

policies. The 1994 Code of Practice constituted a set of guidelines to which LEAs and schools must have 'due regard' in the planning and delivery of SEN services, from pre-school onwards.

The Code of Practice acknowledges the importance of partnership between LEAs, child health and social services in working together to meet the needs of children under five with SEN. A whole section in the existing Code of Practice is devoted to 'Assessments and Statements for Under Fives'. The revised Code, mentioned above, will still have an early years section and indications are that this will be strengthened and cross referenced to existing early years initiatives such as *Sure Start* (Glass, 1999, and see below) and the QCA Early Learning Goals.

There is now plenty of evidence to show that at every level of practice, management and policy-making, special needs in the early years is in receipt of more attention, resources and provision than at any other time. Personnel working within these areas are bound to implement and have due regard to such legislation, including the 1989 Children Act and its emphasis upon: needs definition, service provision for young children 'in need' and with disabilities, registration and review. Strong encouragement is given in these various Acts of Parliament for practitioners to work together more effectively. Some local authorities began to consider and implement joint commissioning of early years, mental health and children's services, and indeed Children's Services Plans have been mandatory since April 1996.

The framework for such inter-agency and collective responsibility is now The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, required for each locality (DfEE, 1999) which, amongst other requirements, must provide for SEN in early years settings.

The Partnerships must, in written form, provide information about the following: details of the support which will be provided to ensure that all early years education providers have means and procedures to identify and address special educational needs; the range of childcare and early education provision available and appropriate for children with SEN and disabilities; how the Partnership plans to make provision more inclusive; training opportunities in SEN for early years staff; advice and written information available to parents/carers about child care and education opportunities for their children and support for themselves.

This is the broader context within which quality in the delivery of early years SEN services is to be judged, and some of the key themes relating to that context are further explored in this chapter.

There is considerable progress to celebrate; both the state and the status of SEN within the early years have been elevated in recent years. This book, whilst celebrating developments and innovations, also provides a

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reminder that these foundation years must be properly invested in and resourced.

Content and organisation of the book

The book's coverage is intended to portray some of the range and depth of contemporary early years/SEN work at all stages from identification, assessment, intervention, provision, review. It is an explicitly practice-focused text, showing, we hope, the complex interplay between theory, principles, policy and practice in an area which encompasses statutory procedures (i.e. statutory assessment under the 1993 Education Act) within non-statutory provision.

It was decided at the outset that the book should include a greater number of chapters, sacrificing chapter length for range and diversity. Collectively the chapters show differing angles and perspectives upon key activities referred to in the preceding paragraph. The chapters have been loosely 'clumped' and progress somewhat schematically, throughout the book. We have tried to be as inclusive as possible and hope that readers will forgive us for any perceived omissions.

The next three chapters (2–4) provide accounts of facilities and provision and encompass assessment and intervention, illustrating models of practice (and see Sayeed and Guerin, 2000). Chapters 5–9 explore assessment and intervention with and provision for young children with identified areas of special needs and disabilities. Chapter 10 presents the relationship between policy and practice, and can be said to provide a macro-systemic perspective. Chapter 11 discusses implementing educational psychologist practice in assessment from a set of articulated principles and theoretical formulations. Chapters 12 and 13 focus on inter- and multi-agency working. Chapter 14 explores basic principles underpinning nursery education with reference to special needs and critically appraises the Nursery Voucher Scheme (this scheme is now defunct; the chapter stands as a useful historical marker). Chapter 15 provides a reminder of principles of an inclusive approach towards young children with special educational needs, which should underpin good quality provision. Several of the above themes will be commented upon in the remainder of this chapter.

Assessment

The Code of Practice constitutes the blueprint for effective early years SEN practice. It could be said to codify existing good assessment practice in the early years, into which context specifically assessing for special educational needs forms a legitimate part. In other words, assessment for special needs is *inclusive* assessment practice.

The range of approaches to assessment – direct observation of children at play or involved in specific learning tasks, systematic record-keeping, checklist completion, cognitive testing – are not the monopoly of SEN specialists (Hinton, 1993) and practitioners such as the chapter authors would not want to divorce their assessment approaches from such mainstream practice. What is specialised about assessing young children with a view to identifying their special needs is competence in:

- closely focusing on specific behaviours
- relating these to a child's overall functioning
- appraising functioning, within a broader, ecological or situation-specific context
- analysing and interpreting a range of assessment findings
- synthesising all the evidence
- presenting to and sharing the information with others
- taking single/collective action as a consequence of the assessment evidence.

Some of the chapters in this book show (a) how a number of 'acts of assessment' cohere in these ways, and that (b) assessment leads to action, (c) that the participants in *acts of assessment* share and act upon the information. Such interlocking assessment practice betokens a shift in the last few years, away from single-discipline assessment, the results of which might or might not be shared. The Code of Practice reinforces the view that assessment *per se* (of whatever sort, testing, observation, etc.) is sterile unless it is a collective activity.

The nursery/playgroup/day care practitioners play a significant 'front line' part in keeping close, detailed records on children which constitute the basis from which more 'specialist' assessment can take place – by special needs teachers, educational psychologists, speech therapists, and others. Principles of assessment, as set out by Drummond and Nutbrown (1996) and Wolfendale (1993) for example, inform *all* early years practice, including, integrally, special educational needs. What crucially drives these principles is something which might be called 'the ethics of assessment' (Nutbrown's equivalent phrase is 'respectful assessment', 1996) which emphasises that:

- The 'best interests' of children be paramount at all times.
- Children's prior experience and achievements be valued and celebrated.
- Diversity and difference in children's experience be welcomed and respected.

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- All children are entitled to differential assessment as meets their learning and personal needs.
- Children have the right to have representation from and recourse to others, on their behalf on assessment issues.
- Assessment practice is an equitable, just reflection of a child's functioning.
- Assessment is effected in partnership ... and reciprocal exchange of information on the basis of equality is integral.
- The results of assessment be acted upon, openly and accountably.

(Wolfendale, 1993: 40)

Intervention

Intervention, as applied to early years/SEN, can be broadly conceived, and I have provided a definition that encompasses mainstream, specialist, home settings, involvement of various agencies and a range of curriculum approaches (and see Wolfendale, 2000). Several of the chapters in this book epitomise the range and diversity of 'intervention' which usually is seen to be post-assessment action and provision.

In this early years/SEN realm, intervention is purposeful and designed to effect as close a match as possible between a young child's identified *special* needs and that provision or resource which will meet his or her needs and best facilitate learning and development. In other words, the intervention should manifestly 'make a difference'.

Again, an inclusive approach is one that acknowledges a young child's right to differential treatment but within a context of 'provision for all' (see Chapters 14 and 15). Hannah Mortimer (1995) exemplifies such an inclusive philosophy in an article outlining ways in which mainstream nursery and reception staff can welcome and support special needs children. Barry Carpenter expresses this holistic view in these words:

'more than ever we need dynamic early intervention services that can enable families to work in an active dialogue with professionals towards meeting the needs of their children.'

(Carpenter, 1994: 10)

Intervention approaches for young children with special needs have also evolved in an increasingly sophisticated way as several chapters attest.

Indeed the 'message' that early intervention pays dividends has been comprehensively adopted by the current government, as evinced in the DfEE SEN Green Paper (1997) and the ensuing Programme of Action (1998). The Green Paper singled out the STAR Children's Centre, the

subject of Chapter 3 of this book, as an example of good practice, and the Programme of Action referred to the Government's 'flagship' ambitious early years intervention programme, *Sure Start* alluded to earlier. This programme aims to put into practice a number of the hard won lessons gained from earlier intervention projects, most notably the American *Head Start* programme and it is part of the Government's plan to tackle childhood poverty, social exclusion, and ensure sound foundations for development and learning. These are some of the key features of the UK *Sure Start* programme:

- the aim is to have 250 *Sure Start* programmes running eventually (it is a ten year programme, started during 1999)
- at Government level, it is an inter-departmental initiative, with Education (DfEE) as the lead department
- inter-departmental partnership is expected to be a core feature of local *Sure Start* schemes
- *Sure Start* areas are ones identified as being areas of deprivation
- core services aim to offer parenting support, and encourage and support parents with their child-rearing responsibilities, including their early development and learning
- each programme has to make a clear statement on special needs and develop ways of working with families in partnership
- as with Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, information for parents/carers on provision, including special needs, must be readily available.

Thus, there is a prime emphasis in *Sure Start* on prevention as well as early action/intervention (see Glass 1999 for further information).

Collective responsibility for the delivery of early years special needs services

A key message emerging from this book is surely that of corporate responsibility. The chapters illustrate the interrelation between services at every level, whether this works effectively or not.

We are all committed to these foundation years. The Royal Society of Arts report (1994) on the importance of early learning, spelled out the nature of our commitment – it is educational, it is societal, it is an obligation to the adult citizens of tomorrow to give them the best possible start. The report also spelled out how commitment should be matched with material investment in high-quality early years provision.

Within a vision of such investment, the notion of shared, collective responsibility is integral. This vision is described in Hillary Clinton's book

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It Takes a Village ... (1996). She redefines the old African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' in the context of our contemporary world, with instant mass communication and high degree of mobility, and says:

the village can no longer be defined as a place on a map, or a list of people or organisations, but its essence remains the same – it is the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives.

(Clinton, 1996: 12)

There have long been pious exhortations upon practitioners to collaborate in the planning and delivery of children's services. Yet, on the ground, co-operation and co-working have been hampered by lack of systemic, structural frameworks and by the divides created by having a range of disciplines, all representing the same area.

A number of models have been proposed to describe the varying degrees of professional closeness both extant and possible – see for example the Levels of Co-operation outlined in Lloyd (1994): no contact – communication – co-operation – annexation – co-ordination – merger. Lloyd's research identified characteristics of good practice for inter-agency work.

The advent of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships referred to above and operational in all localities, will, without doubt, effect the long-desired corporate responsibility for all young children.

The place of parents

Several chapters in this book indicate that parents occupy a central place in service delivery. There is intentionally no separate chapter on parents; one main reason is that a book on parents and special needs in the David Fulton Publishers' *Home and School – Working Alliance* series, was published around the same time as the first version of this book. That book (Wolfendale, 1997) is an edited collection of chapters written by parents and professionals and it reviews developments in partnership with parents, especially since the Code of Practice; it describes SEN parent partnership schemes and considers future directions in parent-professional relations. The DfEE Programme of Action already referred to sets out the expectation (to be ratified in law during 2000) that all LEAs will have to have a Parent Partnership Service in place, along with Conciliation services, to try to resolve a number of 'disputes' with parents before they reach the SEN Tribunal. Readers are also referred to Bastiani and Wolfendale (1996) and Wolfendale and Bastiani (2000) for general texts on parental involvement; and to Hornby (1994), Gascoigne (1995) and Dale (1996) for parental involvement in the area of special needs.

Notwithstanding this array of parallel texts, it is essential to make several points about the inclusion of parents, carers and families into the service delivery.

Collaborative approaches must surely include the home, as the earlier quote from Barry Carpenter stated. The Portage scheme epitomises the 'different but equal' contribution of parents as partners in this early years home-based intervention in which parents are the educators of their own children and also co-planners of the service as a whole. (For a detailed review of Portage see Wolfendale, 1997:10-26).

The principles of partnership as elaborated in the Code of Practice are intended to apply to all parents/carers of children with SEN, right across the age span. Likewise, irrespective of age of children, parents have intermittent if not enduring needs to have access to support for a wide-ranging array of parenting tasks, responsibilities and child behaviours. Recent surveys Family Policies Studies Centre, 1996) confirm the needs of families for access to such support (and see Smith's survey, 1996, of over fifty parent training and support programmes).

Caesar (1993:18) lists four principles that she says should underpin work with children and their families, especially in the early years. These are:

- *Universalism*: We all use and need services, and families of children 'in need' have full rights to the wide range and diversity of universalist provisions, as well as to specialist services.
- *Equality and equity of access to services*: Everyone in our community has rights to accessible family support services; parents requesting help should not be stigmatised and their access to services must be facilitated.
- *The normality of difficulties in parenting*: Services should support and supplement families' endeavours, especially when parenting difficulties are compounded by poverty and deprivation.
- *Participation*: Parents usually know what their needs are and their views should be taken seriously.

Assuring quality in early years SEN services

Agreeing principles and values is one of the fundamental first steps in setting out a number of quality assurance indicators (Elfer and Wedge, 1996). Such indicators or *characteristics* determining the *quality* of services on offer have been identified in a number of reports and publications – see Moss and Pence (1994) for inclusion of *equality*, and Williams (1995) for an overview of ten approaches to the definition and

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measurement of quality in early years provision. Katz (1994) proposed multiple perspectives on the quality of early years provision. These are:

1. The view from above (e.g. supervisors, inspectors).
2. The view from below (experienced by the children).
3. The view from inside (experienced by the staff).
4. The view from outside-in (experienced by parents).
5. The outside (society and posterity).

These approaches to 'quality audit' surely equally apply to special needs contexts, especially within an *inclusive* ideology. The same determinants of 'value added' (DfE, 1995) as apply to early years services must be applicable to SEN-oriented services. Indeed the Audit Commission (1996) defines special needs broadly and perceives that the SEN 'population' is part of such universal pre-school services.

These overarching quality assurance mechanisms can provide the broader framework within which we can identify special needs-specific criteria of effective practice. Mittler and Mittler (1994: 24–25) list 21 Good Practice Indicators – also see Daly in the same volume discussing quality in relation to Portage services, Mollie White's chapter in Wolfendale (1997), and Wolfendale and Wooster (1996) for a suggested list of values and principles which could form the basis of a 'partnership charter' and which could, in turn, be used as indicators of quality.

OFSTED is to rationalise the several early years inspection systems currently in operation, with effect from 2001, into an unified separate arm of OFSTED.

An entitlement for children in the early years: towards an inclusive social policy

Further evidence that the early years and special needs realm has attained respectable status and is now seen as an area in its own right comes from the policy statement on *Early Years* developed by NASEN (National Association for Special Educational Needs) during 1999 (NASEN 1999). It sets out key principles and outlines the various responsibilities of government and local agencies in ensuring realisation of policy in practice. Inclusion is the broadest, unifying principle.

Threading through this chapter and the book are key concepts associated with *equal opportunities* and children's *rights* to have full access to educational opportunities. Shah (1995), with reference to service delivery, and Siraj-Blatchford (1994) with reference to early years provision, graphically illustrate how such rhetoric has to be translated into practice and what vigilance and resources are required to be *inclusive* on behalf of all children in their foundation years.

The Government has also affirmed a commitment to inclusive education, one of the themes of this book (and see Dickins and Denizloe 1998). We are seeing the evolution of a coherent, integrated child care and early years education policy, which embraces 'provision for all' and which surely can only benefit all young children in their crucial foundation years.

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