The Special Education Needs Code of Practice (2001) states that both parents and children should be actively involved in the decisions that surround the child's special educational need. In particular, it acknowledges the 'unique knowledge' that children have of their own needs and advocates that they should take part in the setting and evaluating of Individual Education Plan (IEP) targets. This small-scale research project, involving Year 6 students in a mainstream junior school, investigates to what extent there is common agreement between the teacher, parent and child with regard to the nature of the child's need. Additionally, it examines to what extent partnership is expressed through the targets shown on the IEP and in particular whether the voice of the child is heeded. This article concludes by suggesting that while some children may be willing to engage with IEP targets that are teacher-initiated, children whose voice is overlooked are in danger of becoming disengaged from learning.

**Keywords:** IEP, partnership, participation, targets.

### Introduction

The revised Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs introduced in 2001 provides guidance for local authorities, schools and Early Years settings in carrying out their statutory duties with regard to the identification, assessment and provision for children's special educational needs (DfES, 2001a). It also embodies the rights and responsibilities of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SEND Act) 2001. Within this revised Code of Practice there is an increased emphasis on the participation of both parents and children in the decision-making processes and choices concerning the child's special educational needs. There is particular regard to participation in the setting of learning targets which form a significant component of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) (DfES, 2001a).

An IEP should record what is 'additional to' and 'different from' the teacher's regular differentiated planning and should be reviewed at least twice annually. The COP states that the child should take part in the review or at the very least their 'ascertainable views' should be taken into account (DfES, 2001a, p. 54). In this way they are seen as 'partners in education' (DfES, 2001a, p. 27). Similarly, schools are strongly encouraged to 'welcome and encourage parents to participate . . . throughout their child's educational career at the school' (DfES, 2001a, p. 17). One of the main forums for involving both the child and the parent in the child's special education is the meeting to review the IEP. It is at such meetings that new targets are frequently discussed, the delivery of which is the responsibility of the class teacher. It can therefore be seen that the partnership between the teacher, the child and the parent is fundamental to the successful outworking of the IEP as well as to progress in the child's learning.

This article reports on research into the partnership between teacher, parent and child in one junior school in England. It examines what each party considers to be the need that requires special provision to be made and evaluates the extent to which there is agreement regarding this. Furthermore, the child's IEP was examined in order to discover whether the needs being addressed were consistent with the perception of need verbalised by teacher, parent and/or child. Additional investigation demonstrated the extent to which the child was aware of the targets on the IEP and was involved in working towards them. The expectation for parents and children to be actively engaged in the education of the child has gathered strength over more recent years; however, this has not always been provided for in policy and, in my experience, is not consistent practice.

### Partnership in context

Teachers have always been expected, as part of their professional practice, to make decisions regarding the education of
the children in their class. However, the expectation that parents and pupils will contribute, and the opportunity for them to do so within this process is more recent.

The Warnock Report (1978) gave parents the right to have access to the information collected during the assessment process for a child with special educational needs. Subsequent Education Acts (1986, 1988, 1992 and 1996) have given further emphasis to the rights of parents to be involved in partnership regarding the educational needs of their children. The guidance given in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001a, p. 16) recognises that ‘the work of professionals can be more effective when parents are involved’. Government policy and guidance is therefore explicit in its intention that parents should be seen as partners in their child’s education and that their views should be taken into account.

It was not until the 1989 Children Act that a requirement to seek the perspective of the child became statutory. This was restated in the 1993 Education Act and the 1994 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice gave guidance as to how this should be made practical. The revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001a) takes this requirement further and builds on Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child which state:

‘Children, who are capable of forming views, have a right to receive and make known information, to express an opinion, and to have their opinion taken into account in any matters affecting them. The views of the child should be given due weight according to the age, maturity and capability of each child’ (quoted in DfES, 2001a, p. 27).

Furthermore the 2001 Code of Practice outlines the ‘unique knowledge’ that children with special educational needs have of their own needs and circumstances as well as their own views about the kind of help they would like in order to benefit from their education (DfES, 2001a, p. 27). This includes being involved in the decision-making processes around their education, the setting of learning targets and contributing to IEPs. It is also advocated that children ‘should feel confident that they will be listened to and that their views are valued’ (DfES, 2001a, p. 27). This research investigates to what extent children consider they are being listened to and whether their views are reflected in the targets on the IEPs. It also investigates the extent to which parents are aware of the nature of the IEP and how children’s special needs are being supported.

The purpose of the IEP is clearly stated as being a working document that conveys the strategies and interventions used to enable children with special educational needs to raise their achievement (DfES, 2001b). It should be written in jargon-free language, be accessible and understandable to all concerned and agreed wherever possible with the involvement of the parents and pupil. It is specifically recommended that children should be in agreement with the strategies used and how these will be implemented, stating that ‘IEPs are likely to be most effective when the pupil is fully involved in the process’ (DfES, 2001b, p. 5).

Pupil involvement in their learning is a principle component of assessment for learning as researched by Black and Wiliam (1998). Assessment for learning, or formative assessment, is concerned with sharing learning goals, effective questioning, self and peer evaluation and effective feedback and provides the opportunity for the child to become involved as an active learner, with the teacher becoming a co-ordinator of learning rather than the controller (Clarke, 2005). These principles of assessment for learning have been shown by teachers to increase pupil motivation and independence. It is therefore possible to consider developing the IEP for a child with special educational needs in such a way as to become a formative tool as well as a summative assessment tool. However, this would demand that the pupil is actively involved in the setting and monitoring of IEP targets and that the teacher sees the IEP as an ongoing and developing planning and monitoring tool rather than a tick sheet of targets to be gained.

Teachers are increasingly expected to make personalised provision for all children. The Every Child Matters agenda states that learning should be ‘tailored to the needs, interests and aspirations of each individual’ and that barriers to learning should be tackled (DCSF, 2007). Personalised learning should also involve parents in their child’s development and learning and should take into account the well-being of the child, including how the child learns. In this way the teaching and learning offered to all children takes into account difference and individualised planning. It may be considered that effective personalised planning reduces the need for elaborate IEPs. Indeed, there is no statutory requirement for schools to prepare separate IEPs for all pupils with special educational needs as long as they have ‘sound arrangements for monitoring their progress in conjunction with the child and their parents’ (DfES, 2004, p. 23). In planning for personalisation for all pupils, Frankl (2005, pp. 79–80) suggests that teachers can annotate whole-class curriculum planning for pupils with special educational needs, leaving the IEP targets to focus on ‘learning behaviours that will enhance the pupils’ access to all areas, both inside and outside of the classroom’. By involving children in setting success criteria and monitoring their achievements and progress, the focus is on teaching and learning rather than the behaviourist approach suggested by the IEP.

While the government places increasing responsibility on teachers to view the IEP as a collaborative document, Pawley and Tennant (2008) suggest that this is time-consuming and that teachers and pupils alike require training. Indeed, they go further, suggesting that the skills required by pupils with special educational needs in participating in the formulation of IEP targets ‘might reasonably be developed during a psychology degree course’ (Pawley and Tennant, 2008, p. 184). It would seem that teachers are finding the practical outworking of involving parents and
pupils in the development of the IEP more problematic than the ideals expressed in government guidance.

**Methodology**

The context for this research is a large junior school (453 pupils) in the suburbs of a northern city in England. The catchment area comprises mostly private housing. Many of the parents are professionals in the health service, teaching or business sectors and as such are articulate and knowledgeable. Very few children receive free school meals.

The children who took part in the fieldwork were aged 10 and 11 and in their final year at the junior school. All pupils were receiving support for their special educational needs through school-based interventions as well as from outside agencies and as such were being supported at the School Action Plus stage of the Code of Practice. Of eight pupils eligible to participate in the fieldwork, only four completed all the data collection permissions and processes requested. The data collected therefore reflect the information and perspectives of four pupils, their parents and their teachers.

While the main purpose of this research is to consider the partnership that is in evidence through the knowledge and use of the IEP, it was considered important to discover what the various stakeholders’ perspectives were concerning the nature of the pupils’ special educational needs. As the IEP is constructed in order to address learning needs, then having a common understanding of the nature of those needs would presumably lead to a better likelihood of a commonly understood way of addressing those needs.

A questionnaire to gain understanding of the perceived needs of the child was devised for teachers, pupils and parents with a parallel set of questions. Teachers and parents responded to their questionnaires in written form, while the pupils were interviewed by a teaching assistant who was known to them, using the questionnaire as a framework to guide discussion. The pupils’ interviews were also recorded except in one instance where the pupil declined permission. In this instance, notes were made of the interview.

It was considered important to value the whole of the child and not just to concentrate on difficulties or barriers to learning, and so all stakeholders were asked to comment on the perceived strengths of the child as well as things that were considered to be difficulties or concerns. All stakeholders were also asked to comment on improvements they would like to see for the child and how the school could support these improvements. When the data had been collected, a grid was drawn up showing the perspectives of all stakeholders side by side so that similarities and differences could be easily seen, as shown in Figure 1.

Clearly, for the purposes of planning effective strategies to meet perceived needs, a common understanding of what that need is considered to be would be fundamental. As can be seen in Figure 1 and the following case studies, this was not always the case.

**Tim**

Tim is articulate and confident and was keen to co-operate, although he did not wish his interview to be recorded. It is acknowledged that he has some motor skills difficulties and that he does not always socialise appropriately, which had resulted in some behavioural difficulties. Tim had much to contribute concerning the things he enjoyed at school and areas where he felt he had improved.

From the sample of the data shown above, it is possible to see that all stakeholders agreed that music was considered to be one of Tim’s strengths and that mathematics was perceived as a difficulty. Tim went on to mention specifically a difficulty with using a compass because ‘it was fiddly’. The class teacher was aware that Tim had difficulty with fine motor skills but did not relate this to specific equipment. She did, however, acknowledge that he found it hard ‘being neat’. This was not mentioned by his parents. The teacher also considered that Tim had co-ordination difficulties in PE and expressed concerns regarding his concentration, writing and transfer to secondary school. With regard to the latter, she was particularly concerned about his relationships with peers, a concern also expressed by his parents. None of

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Figure 1. Comparing perception of need – Tim
these issues were identified by Tim, but he was clear about the strategies and support he considered to be necessary to aid his work, mentioning specifically the small-group support and help received from his father with homework. Both the class teacher and parents recognised the value of this support. Tim felt he had difficulties in listening to the teacher or parent but neither of these two adults considered this to be of concern.

The concerns of the class teacher were generally related to specific areas of the curriculum, while Tim’s parents were mostly concerned with social and personal matters. It can therefore be seen that while there was some overlap of perception of need, there were also significant areas where commonality of perception was not held.

A similar picture was seen for the second child, Laura.

Laura

Laura is a lively, chatty character whose practical skills are well developed. She is a good organiser and often volunteers for tasks in the classroom and beyond. She has gained a great deal of confidence during her four years at the junior school. She is an only child and lives with her mother.

Laura’s practical skills were recognised by all as her strength. It was also agreed that both mathematics and English were difficult for her. Both Laura and her mother commented on friendship issues on several occasions, asking for further support from school. Laura clearly expressed the subject-specific help she was looking for while her mother and the class teacher were in agreement about the kind of improvements they would like to see in her work. All parties recognised that support from both home and school would facilitate the learning of times tables. Again the concerns raised by the teacher were largely related to the curriculum, including matters of attitude and concentration. Laura’s mother, however, was primarily concerned with friendship and mathematics difficulties. Laura shared the concerns expressed by both her mother and her teacher. Of the total number of issues raised concerning Laura’s needs, about half of them were only raised by one of the parties. A very small number of the total issues showed agreement by all three members of the partnership. This shows that there is little commonality of perception of need.

Simon

Simon is the third child in his family, having a much older brother and sister. His father is his main carer and is keen to support. While Simon was willing to take part in the research, his verbal responses were brief and limited.

Simon and his parents agreed that his strengths were in PE and science, but interestingly Simon himself thought that he was good at a number of other curriculum and non-curriculum areas which neither his teacher nor parents recognised and that he had made progress in a number of areas which they did not acknowledge. There was little overlap concerning perceived difficulties, although Simon did acknowledge that ‘timed work’, which was raised by his parents, and ‘extended writing tasks’, as mentioned by his teacher, were areas of difficulty. The issues that concerned Simon most were not mentioned by his teacher or his parents. Simon commented that he would appreciate having someone to sit beside him in class to support his work and mentioned that he appreciated his father’s help with homework. This homework support was the only strategy where all three parties were in agreement. Both the parents and the class teacher considered that Simon should complete his written work and that school could support Simon in this more fully. All other areas of concern were single, non-overlapping issues. This indicates that the amount of common understanding of need was minimal and while there was some commonality expressed between the views of the parents and the teacher, the child was frequently a lone voice. This is in contrast to Sally, as seen below.

Sally

Sally does not have obvious friends in the class and is a solitary figure in the playground. She speaks slowly and deliberately and plays games that other children appear to find immature. Nevertheless, most of the children are happy to work with her in groups in class. She finds gripping a pencil and the physical process of handwriting difficult.

Sally had a very positive outlook on school life. This included curriculum areas as well as social issues. These perspectives were shared by Sally’s teacher and her parents. Similarly, all parties acknowledged that Sally’s handwriting had improved, but also saw this as the most significant area for continued work. Sally and her class teacher were able to suggest a wide range of activities that she could do well; however, her parents’ only suggestion was spelling. While Sally’s teacher and parents both expressed concerns about mathematics, Sally only accepted this when it was suggested. She was willing also to accept the teacher’s suggestion that science was difficult, but refused to accept the suggestion that art was hard. Sally’s parents were concerned about her imminent transfer to secondary school, in particular the standard of work that would be required. They wanted her to improve in ‘all aspects’. However, the teacher’s anxiety about transition was more concerned with social interaction and friendship. Sally did not mention this in particular, but referred to what she felt was bullying. In exploring this issue further, Sally remarked that she was not concerned about friendships, and that she did not mind being alone as long as ‘no one was unkind’ to her. With regard to curriculum areas, Sally stated clearly that she would like to be able to use aids for writing. The teacher agreed with this and developed this further into the need for her to become more confident to ‘communicate ideas in
investigate whether they were aware of the targets and strategies put in place to address their needs. Each child was shown their IEP and asked for their views regarding the proposed interventions. These responses were recorded on the IEP. By this means it was possible to ascertain the extent to which the child was aware of and willing to be engaged in the targets and strategies intended to support their learning. The response from each child is outlined below.

**Tim**

Tim was familiar with the IEP, which ran to three pages. He was able to comment on the strategies that were being put into place to address his needs. There were some IEP targets that he had not raised, but he was still willing to give allegiance to these and was working with the strategies suggested. There were two matters of concern that Tim had raised that were not included on the IEP, but in discussion he commented that these concerns had been dealt with. Every area of concern that had been raised by his parents featured on the current IEP. Tim was satisfied with the extent and nature of the support he was receiving for his needs and requested that the strategies remain in place. Tim’s IEP demonstrated signs of a healthy partnership, with Tim himself being a strong partner, well motivated to make good progress with his learning. Despite there being limited common understanding expressed regarding the perception of Tim’s need, there was good partnership being expressed with regard to the IEP. As the IEP was written by the teacher, it seemed that the parent and the child were both willing to bow to her professional expertise.

**Laura**

Laura expressed a keenness to comment on her IEP. She was aware of each of the three targets represented on this document and had discussed them with her mother who was fully supportive. However, none of the issues raised on the IEP were acknowledged by all three stakeholders when discussing perception of need. While there was clear evidence of informal partnership between Laura and other stakeholders, this was not reflected on her IEP. Only three of the issues Laura had raised were addressed by the IEP, leaving a further nine issues unaddressed. While the class teacher was aware that not all of Laura’s concerns were addressed she stated that this was deliberate so as to keep the IEP focused and give maximum opportunity for success. There was a specific target that was designed to encourage Laura to ask for help which was thought to provide opportunity for assistance to be given in a range of curriculum areas. Laura was aware of this strategy and gave it her full ownership. It was clear that the targets reflected the concerns of the teacher, although they did have some overlap with the concerns of the parent. Laura was willing to accept the targets on the IEP and to give her allegiance to them. It is therefore possible to see that the IEP was not specifically concerned with the issues raised by the child and indeed many of the child’s own concerns were being held in abeyance. Such
partnership as did exist with regard to the IEP was largely because Laura was willing to work with the targets that the teacher considered to be of most importance. This is in contrast to Simon who did not give allegiance to the targets that had been selected on his behalf.

**Simon**

Simon came gladly to talk about his IEP, but revealed that it was because he was not enjoying his class lesson. He was familiar with most of the five targets on his IEP, having attended the recent review of the IEP, and was able to offer comment on the effectiveness of the strategies used. There was one concern on the IEP that all stakeholders acknowledged and one other that was acknowledged by the class teacher and parent only. However, while there was some evidence of partnership between Simon and his parents, and his parents and class teacher, there were no areas of partnership identified between the class teacher and the child either on or beyond the IEP. None of the issues specifically raised by Simon featured on the IEP and none of the interventions he requested were also suggested by any of the other parties. His perception of the IEP was that it was not effective and he did not give it his allegiance. It is clear that Simon’s voice is not being fully acknowledged by either of the other parties. This has led to a lack of engagement by Simon which places him in a vulnerable position with regard to reaching the targets on his IEP and thereby with regard to progress in his learning.

**Sally**

The investigation of Sally’s IEP showed that there were a considerable number of targets that were acknowledged by all of the stakeholders, with a further two that were not raised by the child but by the class teacher and parent. However, Sally did acknowledge the effectiveness of the strategies selected and had given them her allegiance. Sally had raised a number of additional issues, one of them being significant and demanding acknowledgement and intervention, yet none of these appeared on her IEP. She did however consider that her IEP was generally helpful. Sally’s IEP showed the greatest amount of common understanding between all stakeholders leading to the strongest expression of partnership. This places her in a strong position with regard to progress and achievement in learning.

**Conclusion**

From this research it can be seen that gaining a common understanding of the perception of need from all stakeholders was problematic. Such common understanding was considered fundamental to a robust and supportive partnership and to the drawing up of an effective IEP to which all parties could give allegiance. However, where differences of perception of need occurred, confusion and misunderstanding were evident. With such lack of clarity, writing an effective and appropriate IEP that demonstrated effective partnership between all stakeholders was much less likely. As demonstrated with Simon, partnerships that specifically exclude the child are least effective. Simon was disengaged from his learning and was not willing to be compliant with the targets imposed upon him by adults. All of the other three children had targets on their IEP that they had not raised, yet were willing to give allegiance to. Some of the children could see the value of targets that they had not been party to initially and yet had provided benefit for them. These three children valued their IEP and approached their learning targets positively, thereby providing optimum opportunities for progress and achievement.

All children had raised issues that were not being acknowledged. In every case, the voice of the teacher was dominant as she wrote the IEP, to which all other parties were required to give allegiance. While it seems appropriate for her professional expertise and opinion to be given due weight, questions can be raised as to whether the balance of voices is right.

Goldthorpe (2001) believes that one of the reasons why IEPs fail is that there has never been any clear consensus about the nature of the child’s difficulty or the targets and strategies to meet those needs. While she refers to consensus between teachers, this partnership can and should be extended to the parents and the child. Indeed she goes on to state that a further reason why IEPs fail is that ‘no one had thought to share the whole plan with the child concerned’ (Goldthorpe, 2001, p. 12). A child needs an awareness of the content of their IEP in order to be able to participate in the strategies being suggested. Their attitude is fundamental in securing a good working environment and motivation for learning. A child who is unaware of the targets on their IEP and whose perceived needs are being overlooked is in danger of becoming disengaged and isolated both from the curriculum and socially. Booth and Ainscow (2002, p. 3) maintain that the process of increasing learning and participation for pupils leads to greater inclusion and that the demonstration of such participation is through ‘active engagement’ and ‘having a say about how education is experienced’. ‘Having a say’ is about the child being empowered and engaging much more fully than in the giving of allegiance to well-intentioned but predetermined targets. It is also not only about enabling a child to achieve, but as Booth and Ainscow (2002, p. 3) state, ‘it is about being recognised, accepted and valued for oneself’.

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**Correspondence**

Dr Janet Goepel
Faculty of Development and Society
Sheffield Hallam University
City Campus
Howard St
Sheffield
S1 1WB
Email: j.goepel@shu.ac.uk

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