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Todd L. [Inter-agency Working and Special Education: Beyond 'Virtuous' Ideas of Partnership Towards Alternative Frameworks for Collaborative Work with Children](#). *In:* Florian, L, ed. *The SAGE Handbook of Special Education*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014.

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Interagency working and special education: beyond 'virtuous' ideas of partnership towards alternative frameworks for collaborative work with children
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Inter-agency working has been a prime focus of attention in the field of special education for many years (Mittler & McConachie 1983; Campbell 1996; Daniels et al. 2010). Schools in many countries have not always been able to cater adequately for all children without additional provision or different school placement, both often subject to some form of multi-disciplinary process. More recently, the loss of access to life chances for young people and the view that solutions lie in a holistic approach supported by a range of different professionals has drawn attention to the manner in which practitioners work together. The underlying assumption has been that different kinds of expertise are required to 'disentangle' educational failure or needs and that these reside in people of different professional roles with a range of complex practices. The working together of practitioners who have different professional roles, backgrounds or are employed in different agencies (health, education, social care) with a variety of professional cultures is what we refer to as inter-agency working. That inter-agency working has presented substantial challenges has led to repeated efforts to find ways to make such working more effective.

This chapter charts the growth of inter-agency working from a time before we spoke in such terms and thought instead of individuals carrying out separate roles, side-by-side, to the integration and co-location of many services. Alongside a growing call for agencies to work together has been inter-agency working seen as problematic – and the need for professionals to work *better* together. There have been recurrent investigations into the difficulties and issues of working together, with development being repeatedly understood in terms of *better working relationships* between practitioners or an improvement in *partnership*. This has been the focus of systemic analysis of inter-agency working. It has led in general terms to managerial solutions looking, for example, at mutual understanding of roles. Such solutions have not been without good effect but, overall, problems have proved hard to shift. More importantly, an emphasis on working better together has led to a lack of attention to a number of key areas. These include: the goals and impact of inter-agency working; the professional learning needed to evolve effective services; and the involvement of parents and children in decision-making. Aiming for better partnership also underplays the technologies of power of professional practices: in working together professionals do not simply 'help' or 'treat' people, but regulate actions and create social identities. Other approaches, including activity theory, social capital and complexity theory, offer a way out of the notion of 'interagency working as a virtuous solution' (Warmington 2007, p. 4).

This chapter will look first at the three phases of professionals working together before examining the failure of inter-agency working to provide for the involvement of parents and children in decision-making in a section that considers 'partnership with parents and children'. Next, the failure to acknowledge adequately the politics of practice and provision is discusses in a section on 'Professional practices: technologies of power'. The final section looks at alternatives to, a 'rethinking' of the 'virtuous partnership' model of inter-agency working, ones that amongst other things focus on goals and professional learning. Social capital theory and activity theory are

shown to provide more useful tools with which to re-examine the ways professionals work together.

First, a note about terminology. Several decades of policy about improving the ways practitioners work together has generated a plethora of terms, including inter-agency, multi-agency, inter-professional and partnership (Lloyd et al. 2001; Warmington et al. 2007). For some commentators on this area, these terms have particular meanings that explain the kind of joint working, but they are often used interchangeably. This review will not be concerned with arriving at a particular definition. This review will use the terms inter-agency and multi-agency interchangeably, but will make specific meanings clear when they are of importance.

The policy context that provides the lens through which to view the areas considered in this review is that of the UK and, more specifically, England. Overall policy changes and the main issues raised are pertinent in other international contexts. It is also worth noting that this paper draws on research contexts that involve children deemed vulnerable in a range of different ways other than being understood to have special educational needs.

From co-operation between separate professionals to integrated working
Inter-agency working has changed immeasurably over the last few decades. It is possible to identify three general phases: co-operation between separate professionals; multi-professional working; and integrated services.

It is worth noting the time before the prime concern was with how professionals work together. This is the first phase, a process of *co-operation between separate professionals* and was mostly pre-Warnock and the Education Act, 1981. It was characterized by decisions about educational provision for children with special needs, largely made by a small collection of individual practitioners, that is, medical officers, educational psychologists and head teachers, operating a process of assessment and placement. Although this obviously involved more than one professional, it was not an inter-agency process in the sense we speak of today. Given the evidence of critical writers of the time, the need for professionals to work better together to implement the 1981 Act for children with special educational needs did not yet seem on the agenda (Tomlinson 1986). That agencies would need to work together was certainly heralded and had featured in important policy in both education (the Plowden inquiry into primary education, DES 1967) and health (HMSO 1976).

The second phase, in which a growing number of professionals would start to work together in a range of models of *multi-professional working*, was announced by the 1981 Education Act. The Act replaced the categories of handicap with the concept of special needs and forced professionals to work together to focus on and negotiate understandings of need and related resources (Fulcher 1989; Russell 1992). There were some multi-agency teams such as child guidance and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). However, a multi-professional model of working consisted in practitioners from more-or-less single professional groups (ie educational psychologists, education welfare officers, behaviour support workers, social workers) who came together to work jointly on cases or as part of a growing number of multi-agency groups. An example of the latter is the teams formed to consider the special educational needs of particular groups such as pre-school children.

The main theme of this phase was the need for 'partnership' working, although the precise nature of this was not clearly understood in practice. It included concern with how to enable practitioners to work better together to share information, reach decisions and discuss systems and provisions. I have previously characterized this time in terms of a jigsaw approach to the individual, 'seeing the person as separate parts all with differing needs to be met from the contrasting expertise, skills and knowledges of people from different professional backgrounds' (Todd 2010, p. 67).

A strong impetus to improve inter-agency working has come from recurrent enquiries into child abuse (HMSO 1988; House of Commons Health Committee 2003; The Lord Laming 2009). Partnership here referred to knowledge about children and families, and about professional actions to be shared between professionals so that the appropriate support could be given. This kind of partnership was assumed, in the important Children Act 1989, to go a long way towards securing child protection. Partnership was also strongly highlighted in the Code of Practice for assessing special educational needs (DFES 2001), citing partnership both between professionals and between professionals and parents. Recognition of how difficult special needs assessment could be for parents led to parent partnership projects in many local authorities that provided volunteers to support parents though the process (Kerr et al. 1994; Mencap 1995; Wolfendale 2002).

Attention to the systems in which professionals work led to much research into what needs to happen to facilitate joint working and a mountain of recommendations (Kendrick 1995; Easen et al. 2000; Atkinson et al. 2001; Lloyd et al. 2001; Stead et al. 2004; Townsley et al. 2004). In one notable example, Roaf (2002) summarized the good inter-agency practice as involving:

- Formal commitment and support from senior management and from political to practitioner level;
- Formal and regular inter-agency meetings to discuss ethical issues, changes in legislation and practice, gaps in provision and information-sharing at all levels to develop short-and long-term strategies;
- Common work practices in relation to legislation, referral/assessment, joint vocabulary, agreed definitions, procedures and outcomes;
- Common agreement of client group and collective ownership of the problems, leading to early intervention;
- Mechanisms for exchange of confidential information;
- A framework for collecting data and statistical information across all agencies that can inform all practice, including 'ethnic' monitoring;
- Monitoring and evaluation of services in relation to inter-agency work;
- Joint training in order to understand each other's professional role. (p. 87)

Much attention was devoted within and across services to how to improve multi-agency working – how to work better in partnership. Whilst success was documented and celebrated (Wolfendale 2002), it was as if the holy grail of partnership working was forever just out of reach.

Integration of services at an institutional level characterizes the third phase. At the turn of the millennium, some councils were starting to make more far-reaching

adjustments to the way they organized and structured services for children. This referred to the radical merging of previously separate areas of council work, such as education and social work, and the assimilation of funding streams. Reorganization started to include the co-location of practitioners into multi-agency teams. These systemic and institutional barriers were thought to be impeding inter-agency working.

The 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) agenda in England (DfES 2003) gave the development of integrated services more impetus by broadening the aims of all services (including schools) to consider a range of goals for all children: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and economic wellbeing. The national initiative of extended schools and services brought a diverse range of professionals into many schools. The rationale for this was a widening role for schools beyond the classroom. In order to tackle the problems of educational disadvantage, some schools saw the need to take on a more explicit role that involved families and the community, not just pupils. ECM (the every child matters agenda) supported the development of extended services through the policy requirement to ensure that in England every child 'has the chance to fulfill their potential by reducing levels of educational failure, ill health, substance abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour among children and young people' (HMSO 2003, p11).

Since the start of the millennium there has been a significant increase in the number of inter-agency teams and in the development of new practitioner roles within them across children's services. This has included many different areas of assessment and provision in special educational needs. In order to illustrate the variety of teams in terms of composition, structure and focus, and drawing on Rose (2011), there is a network for the education of looked after children with a co-ordinator at the hub. This team includes: social worker; community support worker; nurse (looked after children); advisory teacher; residential childcare worker; education link worker; and educational development worker. There is also a co-located behaviour support team (bst) with full- and part-time members that plan service delivery together. This consists of: bst manager; advisory teachers; primary mental health workers; behaviour support workers; and early years support worker. Finally there is a loose network with a bst at the hub in which different members occasionally plan and deliver together. This includes: parenting co-ordinator; educational psychologist (bst); educational psychologist (local authority); clinical psychologist; art gallery education officers; learning and mentor lead behaviour professional; children's centre manager; pupil support officer for education improvement partnership; bst parent support worker.

The increase in numbers of teams found a similar increase in different models of working. The focus of how to solve the problem of inter-agency working has largely been on organizational forms, strategies and routines. Robinson et al. (2008) looked at 35 papers of models and theories of multi-agency working, integration and collaboration and the review found the following dimensions:

- the extent of integration: the 'stage' or depth of the collaborative activity in integrated services
- the integration of structures: layers of an organisation's functioning, for example, governance and strategic levels, and frontline operational service delivery levels

- the integration of processes: the ordering of work activities across time and place, at different organisational levels
- the reach of integration: the extent to which partnerships in integrated services reach out to include diverse agencies. (p. vii)

ECM was a strong national initiative that emphasized the improvement of joint working between professionals. It aimed to address several aspects of the multi-professional delivery of services that were repeatedly identified as problematic in the literature. This included: 'swift and easy' referral of children and families to the services they needed; the new role of 'lead professional' to oversee case management so that clients experienced a more seamless service; a common assessment framework (CAF) to ensure that children were not lost in the system; and organizing the team of professionals 'around the child' rather than around existing professional functions (later, in 'think family', the focus became the family). Similar policy changes that combined transformations in organizational structures with the integration of teams have come about in many other international contexts, and are in evidence in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (US Congress 2002) in the USA, in Scotland's Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Executive 2005) and a Fair Future for Our Children (Welsh Assembly Government 2005) in Wales.

Where integrated working has involved co-location of services it might have taken practitioners away from their 'silos' in structural terms, but it has not always done so in terms of other aspects of working practices. Co-location has hastened the need to develop new and unfamiliar working patterns. Interagency working was to become easier if colleagues were in the same building if not the same room, according to the theory, but this did not in fact necessarily mean that people knew how to work together. With co-location questions arise about leadership and management as practitioners accustomed to being managed by someone with the same professional background are now managed by someone from a different professional group. Similar questions arise about supervision. Once working side-by-side, the gaps in mutual understanding of roles and ways of working may be more discernible and become obstructive to the delivery of services. In other words, whilst some of the problems of multi-agency working identified by Roaf (2002) and others were indeed being addressed in the move to integrated services, many continued to be work in progress. One of the main problems was the failure of professionals to involve parents or children as co-collaborators rather than clients. It is to this omission that I turn to next, before looking at other possible ways to conceptualise the working together of professionals.

Partnership with parents and children
Analyses of the problems of interagency working have largely not included any consideration of the relationships between professionals and those with whom they work, principally parents and children. That the *ways professionals work together*, and *parent partnership* are informed by largely separate research literatures underlines the discrete ways in which they have been regarded. I look at parent partnership first. The relationships between professionals and parents have been characterized by multiple co-existing and often conflicting roles (professional aide, child advocate, partner, problem) (Bastiani 1987). There is a tension with the

professional, legal and bureaucratic frameworks that has assessment controlled by time-limits and overshadowed by the possibility of recourse to tribunals (Riddell et al. 2000). Many parents have consistently found it difficult to interact with different agencies in the negotiation of help and support for children with special educational needs (Munn 1993; Galloway et al. 1994; Sandow 1994; Armstrong 1995; Duncan 2003; Clavering et al. 2007b; Hodge & Runswick-Cole 2008). The claim for partnership with parents has proved largely elusive. Clavering, Goodley and McLaughlin (2007b), in their study of the interactions between parents and professionals studying 39 families, found that:

> Parents generally struggle more with coming to terms with fragmented service than the 'disabilities' of their children…. Parents still experience secrecy and lack of information around decisions made about their children (p. 8)

There has been a tendency to introduce managerial and administrative solutions to these problems. This has involved: the call for 'seamless', joined-up services (Roaf & Lloyd 1995; Dessent 1996; Harnett et al. 2003), so that parents only need to tell their story once; the provision of a key worker or a lead professional to co-ordinate support (Greco & Sloper 2004); and the enabling of an advocate for the parent to give support in contributing to aspects of assessments (Sloper 1999).

Solutions have largely failed to materialize. Key workers and parent advocates have proved effective for parents when they have been well-resourced, but provision has been sparse. More crucially, the problems experienced by parents are unlikely to be remedied simply by improving partnership between parents and professionals. Parents who negotiate the machinery surrounding special needs and provisions are not a homogenous group and are differentiated in terms of the power they hold to be heard and to have influence. Several decades ago Tomlinson (1981) distinguished between parents that have been 'sent for and told' about their children's difficulties from those who have been 'consulted'. Parents of a child with severe learning difficulties (Sandow et al. 1987, p. 25) are likely to have a very different relationship with professionals from those with a child who has a reading difficulty first discussed when the child is 6 years old. Parents also vary in the possibility of drawing upon the resources of pressure groups. There is evidence that the existence of powerful pressure groups behind certain types of special educational need has led to advantages in terms of securing scarce educational resources (Riddell et al. 1994, p. 342). Reay (2004) has shown the failure of parent partnership as a policy for all. Parent partnership inevitably benefits the already advantaged middle-class parents who are more knowledgeable about how to engage with schools than those more disadvantaged parents who are less able to engage with 'hard to reach schools' (Crozier & Davies 2007, p. 295). Partnership in the processes of special needs assessment has the potential to disempower as parents might be co-opted via 'effective relationships' into the views of professionals (Galloway 1985; Armstrong 1995).

Analysis of the relationship between parents and professionals suggests the need to reassess whether 'partnership' is a helpful metaphor and to reconsider what parents and professionals together bring to the challenges of special educational needs provisions. The analysis of Clavering et al (2007a), talking to parents of disabled babies, suggests a very different relationship between parents and professionals:

> professionals and parents work best together when they view their roles as constantly shifting and developing. Rather than viewing parents (or professionals) as ready made individuals fit for the purpose of parents, enabling professionals accept and support the uncertainties and questions of parenting and care rather than writing them off as 'in denial' or ignorant. Consequently, in this dynamic process parents adopt roles of the *extended carer* including advocate for their child; activist for parents of disabled children; administrator of medical interventions and family lynchpin (p. 8)

In other words, a process of 'active becoming' is needed for both parents and professionals, an openness and facility to develop new possibilities in relationships and ways of working (Todd 2010).

I turn now to the question of the relationship between children and multi-professional teams. Over the last few decades there has been a general change in the position of young people to having a more active role in their own lives (Christensen & Prout 2005; Prout 2005). Professionals working to make provision for special educational needs have engaged with this change by endeavouring to involve children more in assessment. This has most often been expressed in the provision of some kind of tool, such as a questionnaire, for the child to provide views on their abilities, needs or schooling (Roller 1998; Harding & Atkinson 2009). However, this has been little more than tokenism in terms of any greater influence of the young person on decisions that involve them. In any general sense, children still have neither been put in a position to understand the role of the professionals to whom they have been sent, nor the implications of outcomes of professional actions, let alone been able to influence the roles and actions (Galloway et al. 1994; Armstrong 1995; Todd 2007). With some exceptions (Lingard 2002; Hobbs 2005), children with special educational needs maintain a position of the 'absent special guest' (Todd 2007). Practices of assessment and provision used by professionals have generally viewed children as objects of professional gaze and this has not made it easy for children's agency to be active in the process and to have any influence. It is not a case of working better together, communicating more effectively, or even developing better systems of assessment to include child views: it is the politics of professional practice that need to be more fully considered.

Professional practices: technologies of power
The political nature of arrangements for making professional decisions and judgements about children and apportioning educational provision, what is often referred to as 'special' rather than usual or normal arrangements, is often ignored. These are the technologies of power of professional practice. As education was extended to all, systems evolved for the purpose of deciding who went to mainstream school and who not, and to work out what to do with those excluded. Tomlinson, for example, charts the disturbing history of the category of educational subnormality (1981).

The lack of a clear definition of 'special need' post-1981 and the absence of engagement with the politics of need was a vacuum into which stepped a massive expanded number and range of professionals eager to respond to statutory demands to

measure and describe the different aspects of a child. This refers, of course, to the pre-requisite psychological, medical and educational advice for a decision about whether to create a statement of special educational needs. The different reports giving alternative perspectives on special needs seemed, according to Corbett (1993), more an expression of:

> professional ownership, in which medical and educational definitions classify what can be special and who can claim a need. (p. 549)

So the number and range of professional roles deemed necessary to apportion 'special education' increased, and similarly practices and terms were developed by which children were categorized. Multi-disciplinary assessment can be reconceptualized as an arena for negotiations of professional ownership, as demonstrated by Billington (1996, p. 43):

> In order to seize each new opportunity, for example in being able to contribute to definitions of children who are 'at risk', educational psychologists are brought into competition with other professionals in health and social services. (p. 43)

Professional practices that many think of as helpful in order to cater for children's needs also play an important role in creating the identities of children. As a result of the practices of 'assessment', children are not merely described or catered for. Labels are provided, even if this is no more than 'one of the people who leaves the room to go to Mrs so-and-so' and, whether welcome or not, have consequences for identity (Billington 2000). Such identities are not always in keeping with the intentions of young people themselves, and this prescription of identity does not always serve them well (Allen 1999). Clavering et al (2007a, p. 10) found that the most common identity is of 'having a problem', or some other kind of 'deficit', with the assumption that the professional is able to define and cater in some way for the problem:

> Many parents said that the assessment procedures for disability living allowance or statements of educational need framed their children in negative, lacking, and exaggerated ways. (p. 10)

An emphasis on working better together has underplayed the technologies of power of professional practices. Those goals of inter-agency working that have more to do with professional needs have been largely ignored, in the focus on the needs of the child. In other words, good practice systemic solutions seem to under-emphasize the political nature of the arrangements for allocating educational provision to children. Such politics is part and parcel of professional practice, with roots in the history of services, structures and tools. Whatever the approach to making effective the ways that professionals work with each other, it will need to take full account of practice as politics.

Rethinking virtuous partnership
Over the last decade we have seen the emergence of interagency working as central to educational provision for children with special educational needs, leading to the increasing integration of services. What has characterized recurrent attempts to

address the problems in interagency working has been the improvement of *working relationships between professionals* and *partnership* as an ideal. This has gone a long way to give professionals in teams a way to develop working relationships in some effective services (Anning et al. 2006; Bagley & Ackerley 2006; Edwards et al. 2006; Edwards et al. 2009). However, over the last decade has emerged a view that what is seen as problems in interagency working may point to a need for a more fundamental reconceptualization of the domain we refer to as interagency working, going beyond thinking about partnership.

In discussions of how to improve interagency working there has been a lack of focus on the goals of professional work (Rose 2011), on what working together is likely to achieve and on evidence of outcomes. It seems likely that the emphasis on partnership as a 'virtuous solution' (Warmington et al. 2007, p. 4), the 'pretty story of joined-up working' (Forbes & Watson 2012), has obscured thinking about goals and outcomes. Evidence for the impact of integrated working on outcomes for users is scarce for children. Indeed, there is some evidence to the contrary (Anning et al. 2006, p. 9; Hughes 2006), and there is little to show that educational provision for children with special educational needs was markedly improved by the increase in integrated working following the ECM (Todd 2010). This chapter has already considered evidence to suggest that the active involvement of parents and children in decision-making is unlikely to be accomplished by focusing on partnership alone.

In the last decade there has emerged a different critique of interagency working, drawing not on ideas of partnership but on a range of theoretical frameworks including complexity theory, post-structrualism, collective preferences, social capital theory and activity theory. These offer alternative means of improving collaboration between professionals, parents and children in order to evolve educational provision. They are also approaches that are cognizant of the politics of practice.

Glenny & Roaf (2008) and Forbes & Watson et al. (2012) use complexity theory in 'mak(ing) sense of the fluid, uncertain and less predictable kinds of professional relationships'. What complexity theory leads to is, for Glenny and Roaf (2008), a focus on feedback loops in successful organizational contexts that ensures that good quality information is shared by all and effective communication is encouraged to enable difficulties to be resolved. Rose (2011) shows the potential for collective preferences or team reasoning to influence construction and pursuit of inter-professional goals. Capper et al (1993) show how a post-structuralist analysis of community-based inter-agency working shows what seems on the surface to be empowerment is moreover the maintenance of the status quo.

Social capital theory is proving a useful lens through which to consider changes in working patterns and changes at the boundaries of professional working (Bagley 2011; Forbes & Watson 2012). Bonding and bridging capital provides a language to use to look at what happens between professionals, children and parents. This helps to make sense of the impact on inter-agency settings of policy changes (Bagley 2011). Social capital has often been used to demonstrate client deficits and how these are addressed by professional actions. However, social capital theory does also provide a way to conceptualize the resources and skills of parents and children that are often ignored in professional contexts. Such resources can be articulated in terms of the

different kinds of capital brought by parents and children to collaborations (Gewirtz et al. 2005; Bagley & Ackerley 2006).

Activity theory literature draws on the work of Engestrom (2010; Engestrom et al.1999) and emphasizes the object of the activity system in distributive work settings. The object is what individuals or groups are seeking to change or act upon. Activity theory looks at what all those involved (professionals, parents, children) are working on and their perceptions of outcomes. Practices are understood as 'knowledge-laden and emotionally freighted sites of purposeful and expert activity' (Edwards 2011, p. 33). Warmington et al. (2007) explain how activity theory conceptualizes practice:

> Engestrom (2010) sees object-orientated joint practice as the unit of analysis for activity theory not individual actions; and sees instability, internal tensions and contradictions as the drivers of change and development in professional and organizational practice… object-orientated activity is always characterized by ambiguity, surprise, sense-making and potential for change. (p. 23)

Activity theory allows tensions to be brought into the discussion of how to develop services. The focus is on how professionals learn as they are involved in these tensions, what tools are used, and how new practices are formed in this learning. Edwards explains the emphasis on complex solutions to complex problems (2011):

> Activity theory literature emphasises the importance of focusing on the object of the activity system in collaborative, distributed work settings. In other words, its principal concern is with identifying what professionals are working on and their perceptions of the ends that are to be achieved. The object serves as a centring and integrating device in complex, multi-voiced settings; it becomes a way of conceptually framing diffuse professional groups, individual agents and complex practices and services. (p. 33)

An activity system is the nexus of multiple points of view traditions and interests. The idea in activity theory that objects contain motives is an example of how this approach enables exploration of the politics of practice. For example, the politically laden object such as a child's route to provision, where the child is assessed and given the label ADHD, is very different from contrasting perspectives. Such an object may be interpreted alternatively by different professionals who would then want to act on it in disimilar ways (Edwards et al. 2009, p. 196).

Inter-agency working conjures neatly formed teams. However, Warmington et al. (2007) show that emergent forms of practice seem to rely on 'knotworking'. This refers to constantly changing arrangements of people combining to undertake tasks of a relatively brief duration. Knotworking provides a concept that might help to explain the appearance of effective multi-agency provisions for vulnerable children in extended schools' in the 'zone-in-between' schools and statutory services. Dyson et al. (2009) observed that these 'spaces' seemed to create the possibility for different professionals to work in a flexible way at the point of need. Activity theory provides a way to explore knotworking and consider whether professional development can prepare for it.

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Activity theory uses the idea of expansive learning to focus on the kinds of learning that occurs when work practices and organizations are undergoing rapid change and workers are creating new knowledge and new ways of working. Edwards looks at how common knowledge is built, using relational expertise, in interactions at the points where the boundaries of practices intersect. Responsive collaboration with other professionals calls for relational agency that makes it possible to work with others to 'expand understandings of the work problem as, in activity theory terms, an "object of activity"' is defined and to align 'one's own responses to the newly enhanced interpretations with the responses being made by the other professionals while acting on the expanded object' (Edwards 2011, p. 34).

In summary, activity theory is proving fruitful in helping 'to identify and conceptualise the key features of learning and practice in work settings in which a range of agencies and otherwise loosely connected professionals are required to collaborate with young people and their families to innovate and develop forms of provision over extended periods of time' (Warmington et al. 2007, p. 4; see also Daniels et al. 2010).

Conclusion
The working arrangements of professionals involved in making decisions about special educational needs have changed immeasurably over the last three decades, with an increase in the number and range of professional roles, a move to integrated working and the co-location of professionals in inter-agency teams. Whether such changes in inter-agency working may be regarded as effective is open to debate, since outcomes have rarely been evaluated. There is still a long way to go in fully involving parents and children in decision-making and even further in involving them in the evolution of services and provisions. Efforts to improve inter-agency working have, by and large, chased the illusive ideal of improved working arrangements and better partnership. As a result, engagement with the goals of inter-agency working and with the politics of practice have been under-acknowledged.

Activity theory and social capital theory both enable conceptualizations of inter-agency working with much to offer. Both promise creative ways to move forward a participation agenda with children and parents. And both offer tools, a language and a framework as a means to collaborate with young people and their families to innovate and develop forms of provision. These are not the only approaches, as Clark (2010) shows how participatory methods emphasizing visual and verbal communication can support new relationships between professionals and between professionals and young children in the development of educational environments.

Professionals involved in special needs provision are, arguably, to some degree agents of the maintenance of whatever provisions are available for children with special needs, be that a more segregated or a more inclusive educational system. It can therefore be argued that, given the absence of political critique from the use of the partnership metaphor, a focus on how to help professionals to work better together may draw attention away from a more critical consideration of how professional actions contribute to these different kinds of educational inclusions or exclusions. Similarly obscured is the relationship between poverty, socio-economic position and special educational needs, and thus action at a macro rather than micro level to

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address special educational needs (Tomlinson 1982; Sloper 1999; Blackburn et al. 2010). There is a need, therefore, for inter-agency work to operate at the macro level, bringing activity theory and social capital theory to bear. Furthermore, as we move further into a decreasing role for public services with more marketization of services, the need has never been greater for alternative frameworks for the development of more collaborative and effective educational provision for children.

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