

**Language difference as a barrier to learning:
bilingualism and special educational needs**

Tony Cline

Educational Psychology Group, University College London

This presentation will examine bilingualism and special educational needs (SEN) from two perspectives. In the first part of the talk I will adopt a social policy perspective and show how devolved government in the United Kingdom has led to very different approaches to provision for children who have learning difficulties and disabilities. There are contrasting arrangements in England and Scotland and a distinct position in Wales. The different practical arrangements express profound differences in both the ways in which disabilities and learning difficulties are conceptualized and the ways in which the rights and obligations of society and families are perceived. What are the implications of these differences for the identification, assessment and support of children who are learning English as an additional language and children educated in two languages who may have SEN? The relatively new “Coordinated Support Plan” in Scotland and the soon to be introduced “Education, Health and Care Plan” in England must present major challenges to professionals working with these groups.

Adopting the different perspective of developmental psychology, I will focus on two groups of children who have significant disabilities and learning difficulties - those with autism and those with hearing impairment. Recent neuropsychological findings have challenged the static models of impaired and intact aspects of development that have had a major influence on special education for many years. There is a dynamic interaction between aspects of development associated with such difficulties as autism and aspects that are associated with language difference. A dynamic model of development in a bilingual or multilingual context has substantial implications for those who must implement early intervention and subsequent education on the basis of a blueprint from a single Education, Health and Care Plan. How can such challenges best be confronted at a time of reduced bilingual and EAL provision?