

# 'Cheap Labour' or Neglected Resource?

## *The role of the peer group and efficient, effective support for children with special needs*

Gerv Leyden

### Summary

*This paper challenges some common assumptions about 'the efficient use of resources' which are embedded in many attempts to implement the 1981 and 1993 special needs legislation. The often cumbersome and time-consuming procedures for the allocation of additional resources are seldom matched by measures to monitor the effectiveness of that support. It is argued that some current classroom practices risk isolating the pupil with special needs from the potential support of the peer group. An alternative model of learning support is proposed which redefines the complementary roles of adult and peer support. All children, including those with significant special needs, can benefit from peer and collaborative learning opportunities.*

### Introduction: changing attitudes towards special needs assessment

During the 1960s a significant part of the educational psychologist's (EP) role was the 'ascertainment' of those children believed to benefit by transfer to segregated special schools, day or residential. Local authorities were required to ascertain pupils 'who suffer from any disability of mind or body'.

Curious as it now seems, psychometry, especially IQ testing, was the invariable response of the EP (and many school medical officers) when taking part in the ascertainment process. Although other factors were considered, IQ scores largely determined whether or not a child remained in a mainstream setting. Curriculum analysis, consideration of teaching and learning styles, classroom management and the development of good in-school practices to support special needs were not part of the assessment

framework, nor were they encouraged by the legislative perspective of the time.

While most local authorities were rapidly expanding their special school provision, somehow this never quite kept pace with the escalating numbers of children being recommended for places. Three themes tended to characterise the referral and assessment process: (i) an emphasis on 'The Gap', current or prospective, between this pupil and his/her educational peers; (ii) the statement that this pupil demands an inordinate amount of teacher time at the expense of the class peer group; (iii) the belief that this child can only be educated if taught individually by specially trained experts.

Until 1974 the Health Services had been responsible for those children ascertained as 'unsuitable' for education in school and therefore transferred out of the education system into the care of Junior Training Centres (JTC). In most instances the definition of 'ineducable' was a score of less than 50 on a standardised intelligence test administered by a school medical officer or EP. Psychologists fought hard to take over that role completely, on the basis that we thought our testing achieved 'better IQs'.

Although it was argued that the IQ score was only one component of the assessment, most children attending JTCs had IQs of less than 50 (Jackson, 1966). The determining factor for the education (or not) of many children we now describe as having 'special educational needs' (SEN) was therefore their score on a standardised test of intelligence. IQ scores, this time between 50 and 75, were also the basis for decisions by the medical officer or EP about whether to classify a child as 'educationally subnormal' (ESN/M) and recommend transfer to a separate special school.



The reaction to the overuse, inappropriate use, unskilled use and misuse of the IQ test in assessing and placing children was well documented in Gillham (1978). Similar misgivings were expressed in other countries, notably parts of the USA and Canada where IQ testing of slow learners was associated critically with the Eugenics Movement and 'the practice of shunting less-successful test takers onto educational sidings' (Weber, 1993). Perhaps the lesson for us to learn, as EPs, is that it is not sufficient to 'practise' psychology, but that we must challenge and justify that practice, the assumptions that underly it, and the uses to which it will be put.

The creaking special needs structures that had survived since the late 1940s were already crumbling by the time the Warnock Report was published in 1978. The formal ascertainment procedures, embodied in the completion by the medical officer of Form 2HP (the initials HP stood for 'handicapped pupils') and Form 3HP by the headteacher were superseded by the SE (Special Education) forms and procedures. Simple decisions about whether or not the child was 'ESN' or unsuitable for education in a school were replaced by an approach which attempted to distinguish between the child's needs and the categories of provision to meet those needs. This represented a step forward, and decision-making became a predominantly educational rather than medical responsibility. However, the process was still influenced by assumptions about the undesirability of the academic or social 'gap' between the pupil and his/her peers, or the adverse effects of the pupil with special needs on the peer group.

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) represented a significant change of thinking. It recommended the abolition of categories of handicap and an end to the labelling of children. The focus shifted to the special educational needs of the individual child, parental rights, LEA duties and the training needs of teachers. Whilst the report drew back from advocating an immediate move to a fully inclusive system of education, it rejected the notion of 'treating handicapped and non-handicapped children as forming two distinctive groups for whom separate educational provision should be made.' The Report's authors endorsed changing attitudes to handicap in all its manifestations and predicted 'an increasing proportion of children who at present receive separate special education to be educated in ordinary schools'. The spirit of the Report finds voice in the conclusion that 'we wholeheartedly support the principle of the development of common provision for all children' (DES, 1978).

The Warnock Report did not have the force of law and it was not until the 1981 Education Act (Special Needs) came into operation in 1983 (to be revised in 1993) that its full significance for assessing children's special educational needs could be appreciated. If the 1944 Education Act is popularly associated with educating the child according to 'age, aptitude and ability', then for many the 1981 Act is believed to mandate the integration into mainstream schools of pupils with special educational needs who would formerly have been educated in separate provision. The territory of the special needs debate had shifted from placement options to the provision of additional resources to achieve 'integration'.

The purpose of this paper is not to debate the nature or extent of moves to inclusive education, but to question the assumptions about peers and resources which derive from the caveats about mainstreaming written into the 1981 and 1993 legislation. What does the recent legislation say about placement decisions and resources?

## Assessing and meeting special educational needs

The 1993 Education Act, Part III, Section 160, describes the 'qualified duty' to ensure that children with special educational needs are taught in mainstream schools, subject to the following caveats:

- (a) his (the pupil) receiving the special educational provision which his learning difficulty calls for;
- (b) the provision of efficient education for the children with whom he will be educated;
- (c) the efficient use of resources.

(DES, Education Act 1993)

The above description sets the scene for an individual analysis of the child's special needs but fails to take into account the peer group, except to the extent that it may be disadvantaged by the presence of the pupil with special needs, or by the resources which are targeted to meet those needs. In the remainder of this paper I will draw on research evidence and experience of working in schools as an educational psychologist to comment on ways in which resources fail to be used efficiently, and an alternative way we might conceptualise support.

## Resources: additional, salaried adult support?

In view of the shift of emphasis from 'alternative placements' to 'additional resource allocation' we



need to examine what the latter has come to signify. The term 'resources' in this context generally implies the provision of an additional classroom assistant or support teacher to help meet the needs of the pupil, as set out in the Statement of Special Needs. (Some LEAs have developed alternative systems for special needs resource allocation, but the following points still apply.) If assessment within the 1944 Act was mediated by psychometry to determine placement, much current practice identifies curriculum objectives and targets for which additional adult resources are required.

We can identify much good practice in the collaboration between support teachers, classroom assistants, teachers and SENCOs in meeting pupils' special needs, particularly when teachers and support staff are able to interpret their roles flexibly (see DFE, 1995). But it is also possible to observe the inflexible and routinised use of the additional support worker solely to sit next to and provide one-to-one support for the 'targeted pupil'. (In one school I heard this practice referred to as 'yoking' the child with the Statement to the additionally provided resource. Another school calls it 'velcrosing'.) While Dessent (1987) pointedly drew attention to the practice of resource drift, whereby provision intended for special needs is re-allocated for other purposes, anchoring the child to the allocated adult does not supply an educationally effective antidote. Balshaw found that where the classroom support worker acted as 'little more than a personal servant' s/he became a barrier to the integration of the pupil into the class (Balshaw, 1992).

There are further criticisms of this practice which are worth rehearsing. Not only does it de-skill the teacher and remove ownership of the child's educational needs, it also takes away responsibility from the pupil for his/her own learning and isolates the struggling learner from classroom peers and support. Conversely, it places the burden of responsibility on the support assistant/worker for the education of the school's neediest pupils.

How long should support continue? Should the same assistant support the child from one year to the next? Problems can arise when the support worker, the pupil and the family become mutually over-dependent to the extent that there is reluctance from all parties for any change in the support arrangements. This is further complicated where the classroom assistant finds that his/her allocated hours, wages and job security decline in inverse proportion to any success in supporting the child to develop greater personal independence.

Some of the more inflexible practices may represent reluctance or anxiety on behalf of the school when faced with challenge, or perceived threat of educating a pupil with significant special needs. It is also often a training need. Thomas emphasised the specific research and training implications if teachers are to maximise the potential of additional resources or personnel in the mainstream classroom (Thomas, 1985; 1986). He also reported that in one special school classroom, unless there was specific training, increasing the number of staff from one even to as high as six did not necessarily increase the amount of time the pupils are engaged on task (Thomas, 1992).

Is any of the above necessarily and justifiably an efficient and effective use of resources?

Tashie et al (1993) offer a more comprehensive model. They emphasise the need for modified expectations and materials as well as a concept of support for pupils with special needs which, most importantly, pays full attention to the role of peers as well as adult helpers in providing the support. Can such an approach be justified by evidence about the benefits for the pupil and peers?

## Co-operative learning

Parents have long been recognised as a source of support for children who are struggling to learn, and Tizard argued that their effectiveness justified greater use of collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents (Tizard et al, 1982). Similarly, the class group as a whole represents a major, underutilised resource for the learning of all children within it. Children, like adults, learn from each other. Ainscow has argued this represents an untapped resource for the teacher attempting to meet individual special needs in the classroom. Yet, as he points out, it is not uncommon to see pupils working on their own for large parts of the day and, although pupils may be grouped round their desks 'it is still rare to see them carrying out their tasks collaboratively' (Ainscow, 1990).

Bennett's systematic studies of co-operative groupwork in the classroom have drawn attention to ways in which groups can contribute to greater pupil involvement in their learning and more effective educational outcomes (Bennett, 1991). Similar findings are reported by Cowie, who points to benefits in pupils' personal and social development (Cowie, 1992).

Further support for the potential benefits of co-operative learning comes from the USA. Johnson et al



(1981) in a meta-analysis of 122 research studies claimed that co-operative learning resulted in 'higher achievement and greater retention of learning than does competitive or individualistic learning'. While some of their interpretations were challenged, they were able to point to subsequent research which found that co-operative approaches generated more friendship between handicapped children in mainstream and their peers and higher levels of self-esteem for all students (Johnson and Johnson, 1986).

## Peer tutoring

While various forms of peer tutoring have been practised in schools for centuries (see Wagner, 1990, for a fascinating historical overview), most of the extensive research evidence about its effectiveness dates from the past 25 years. Cohen et al (1982) reviewed 65 such studies and found strong positive effects on attainments and attitudes for both tutors and tutees. Similar findings have emerged from subsequent reviews (see Topping, 1992). Peer tutoring gains have not been restricted to curriculum areas and Imich (1990) found improvements to pupil self-esteem and school attendance during the course of the tutoring programme.

Peer tutoring has also been introduced to boost the learning of children in special schools and as a tool to support them in mainstream settings. Osguthorpe and Scruggs (1986) reviewed studies which involved special needs pupils acting as tutors to tutees, most of whom also had special needs. They concluded that while tutors and tutees made measurable gains, 'learning disabled tutors' particularly benefited. Ashman and Elkins (1990) surveyed the advantages for special needs students acting as tutor or tutee and found evidence for (i) gains in curriculum areas; (ii) benefits in social development and acceptance by non-disabled peers; and (iii) enhanced learning and problem-solving independence. Lewis (1994) commented on the quality of interaction when pupils with severe learning difficulties in a special school worked as partners with pupils in a mainstream primary. Each member of the pair benefited and, 'in responding to a mutual push to communicate each was challenged in ways not found in talk with classmates from their own school' (Lewis, 1994). Similar work in an MLD school is currently being pursued by Wood and his colleagues (Lamb et al, 1995).

There is well-documented evidence about the effectiveness of peer-mediated learning. As Greenwood and colleagues concluded: 'Across a number of studies, peer-mediated strategies of various types have

been demonstrated to be as effective or more effective than traditional practices against which they were compared.' They also found that pupils with special needs benefited 'when either regular education peers or handicapped peers have been employed as tutors' (Greenwood et al, 1990). A similar conclusion about the education of students with special needs was reached by Ashman and Elkins: 'peer tutoring is a valuable tool in the classroom teacher's store of instructional strategies. Teaching by students has the capability of generating positive learning outcomes across academic and social domains.' This effect held even in studies when 'peer tutoring had been introduced into whole classroom groups where teachers have no specific training in working with special education students' (Ashman and Elkins, 1990). So why, with the amount of research evidence available, is there such reluctance to practise co-operative learning techniques more widely, especially for mainstream pupils with special educational needs?

Perhaps it is not so surprising. Journal publication does not guarantee the dissemination of research findings in an acceptable and palatable form in staffrooms and classrooms. Co-operative and other forms of peer-assisted learning also require teacher preparation and pupil training in collaborative ventures. As Wood points out, 'children need to learn how to collaborate in such situations before they can collaborate to learn' (Wood, 1992). the philosophy and practice of this approach may also challenge some teachers' views about how classrooms should be organised. Tasks require thoughtful structure, and care may be needed in the balancing of groups. Nor are all teachers familiar with the educational benefits, and one headteacher confided that colleagues and parents might suspect peer tutoring to be a form of exploitation, or 'cheap labour' in the school.

## Inclusive tools: a recent development

The emergence of fully inclusive educational systems in parts of the USA and Canada has been accompanied by the development of 'tools for inclusion' which emphasise the individual and community benefits of involving peers and significant others in the pupil's education and its planning. 'Circles of friends' described elsewhere in this issue, recognises the equal rights of children with special needs to full participation in the mainstream of the educational system (Forest et al, 1996; Newton et al, 1996; see also Pearpoint et al, 1993).

The 'Circles' technique represents a strong counter to what Lunt (1992) describes as the 'marginalisation of



special needs' and enables the child with a disability to tap into the informal support network, a powerful social process which most children and adults take for granted, but is absent for those with significant special needs.

Gold (1994) describes the application of this approach when working with disabled adults wishing to live within the community. As she points out, 'there is no implication that "paid" supports are "bad", while "natural" supports are "good". In fact it is hoped that people will have enough community supports at some time in the future to decrease the need for professional supports in their lives'. The 'Circles' process helps in 'creating accepting atmospheres in the midst of a rejecting culture' (Gold, 1994). In the UK, this work is being introduced into the practice of some educational psychologists, disseminated by the Bristol 'Circles' network and further developed through the visits and workshops of Jack Pearpoint and Marsha Forest.

MAPs is a collaborative action planning technique which shares the inclusive philosophy of 'Circles' and actively involves the focus person's peers or own circle of friends. A MAP session may parallel a school annual review and IEP formulation, where difficult decisions require more creative planning techniques.

Inclusive techniques directly tackle the inter-relationship between the pupil with special needs and the peer group, enlisting the latter in support of the former, to the benefit of all, including teaching staff.

## Discussion

If we return to Section 160 of the 1993 Education Act, the caveat that mainstreaming a child with special needs must be compatible with 'the provision of efficient education for the children with whom he will be educated' could be interpreted as an invitation for EPs and schools to review the teaching and learning arrangements for all. If we are serious about the special need to provide an efficient and quality education for all children and young people, the lessons reviewed here and in the papers of other contributors to this issue of the journal need not only to be learned, but also implemented.

Above all, there is a strong case for teachers and EPs carrying out an assessment of a child's special needs, at any stage of the Code of Practice, to include the peer and interpersonal classroom context when reviewing the child's learning history and ways in which s/he can become a more integrated, valued human being and effective learner. Context-embedded

assessment is not achieved solely by focusing on the curriculum.

Similarly, achieving an 'efficient use' of resources entails that schools and LEAs give as much (if not more) attention to the way in which the resources are actually used as they do to the identification, assessment and allocation procedures. And not only do we need to draw on the peer and collaborative opportunities for support, for all pupils, but we also need to aim at achieving a learning and valuing environment for all in the school. If schools are not looking to become 'learning environments' where else should we expect to find one?

Needy pupils will continue to require additional adult support, although we need to give more attention to training and organisational factors if that resource is to become fully efficient and effective. The link between learning and resources was made clear to me by the SENCO of a large, inclusive secondary school in Ontario who answered my (inevitable!) question about additional resources by saying 'You know, the more we have *learned* from including *all* children, whatever their needs, the fewer *resources* we need'.

Miller's (1996) paper in this issue draws attention to ways in which the classroom culture could provide a benign atmosphere 'in which pupils took it upon themselves to become either explicitly involved in aspects of the intervention [ie in respect of a pupil with a behavioural problem] ... or to become more specifically inclusive towards the particular pupil'. Pupils are a naturally occurring resource for each other, whether we recognise it or not. We must ensure that our ways of providing help for those with difficulties do not isolate them from that supportive network.

A more creative link between 'paid' and peer resources could be achieved if the additional support staff were allocated to the class group rather than solely to the individual child, as part of the strategy to ensure that the latter achieves a balance between individual, supported and collaborative learning. Regardless of the allocation arrangements, IEP planning provides an ideal opportunity for building-in such links.

Peer and co-operative learning is not a panacea. The teacher remains central and crucial both as the manager of pupil learning in the class, and as the teacher of children. But we need to 'integrate' into our educational practice and special needs planning the research evidence which points to the gains that can follow from collaborative learning, and the particular contribution of peer and paired learning for



children and students with special needs, whether working as tutors or tutees.

Not Say!

## Conclusions

Inclusive and collaborative techniques write the peer group back into the special-needs script, and the child with special needs back into the peer group. Peers are a major, constantly available resource for each other. Ignoring this well-documented fact detracts from the learning and educational opportunities for all pupils.

'Efficient use of resources' is not likely to be achieved by 'anchoring' or 'tagging' a classroom assistant to a pupil without regard to the effectiveness of the practice or the social consequences for that pupil's relationships with her/his peers. We need to activate and value the contribution to be made by pupils in supporting and working collaboratively with each other in the pursuit of learning and personal/social goals. Involving peers is not a trendy gimmick: it is a 'value added' component of the school's overall teaching strategies.

With appropriate planning and support, children with special needs do not interfere with the learning of others. Nor are they likely to be prepared for a life within their neighbourhood community if they are educated outside it. The evidence is available that in a carefully prepared classroom, children enhance each other's learning, development and humanity.

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## UPDATE

### Booklets for Parents/carers

Knowsley MBC Psychological Service has produced two booklets *My Child Needs Books* and *My Child Has Temper Tantrums*. Both are intended for parents/carers and give practical suggestions and ideas. Copies can be obtained from: Kirby Child Guidance Centre, St Chad's Drive, Kirby, Merseyside, L32 8RE.

### Reading Analogies and Young Children

Do children make analogies between words as an early reading strategy? Nigel Rathmell, an EP in Staffordshire, has been looking into this. Following a pilot study, 15 children from a reception class were assessed on a number of measures and five of these made one or more reading analogies. Anyone pursuing a similar theme who is interested in discussing this work in more detail place contact Nigel at: County Psychological Service, Lindsay Annexe, Cannon Street, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffs, ST1 4EB. Tel: 01782 279714.

### Beginner's Guide to Systemic Thinking

Bill Becker, an EP in Humberside, has written a brief account which describes and illustrates systemic thinking. If anyone is interested in receiving a copy, contact Bill at: County Psychological and Child Guidance Service, 100 Wellington Street, Grimsby, South Humberside, DN32 7DZ. Tel: 01472 350311.

### Curriculum Access for Students with Cerebral Palsy

Did you see the special issue of *The Psychologist* on Disability and Equal Opportunity (Vol 8, No 9, September 1995)? One of the articles in this is particularly relevant to EPs. Mike Davis, Senior EP working for SCOPE, looks at the implications in relation to curriculum access for schools and EPs of having students with cerebral palsy.

### 1993 Education Act Maze

Hugh Jones in Doncaster devised an Adventure Game for the 1981 Education Act which took the form of a computer program for the BBC B (Ref. EPIP Vol 4, No 3). He has recently revised this in the light of the 1993 Education Act in the form of a written maze which fits onto one sheet of A4 paper. If you would like to receive a copy send an sae to: Hugh Jones, Principal Educational Psychologist, Educational Psychology Service, PO Box 266, The Council House, College Road, Doncaster, DN1 3AD.

*Contributions to: Rachel Caffyn, Educational Psychology Service, 61 Carlton Road, Worksop, S80 1PP. Fax: 01909 479822.*



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EPS

Cheap Labour or Neglected Resource?

role of peer gp. and efficient, effective support for children with special needs.

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CRITICAL EXAM.  
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# "Deep Labels"

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