

EDITORS' NOTE

INTERVENING WITH PEER GROUPINGS: Research and Practice

Educational psychologists have no difficulty in acknowledging that their professional identity is or should be rooted in the academic discipline of psychology. Greater scope for debate and disagreement, however, may arise from attempts to make these links more explicit. How much of a typical undergraduate psychology degree does in fact find itself into the professional practice of the average educational psychologist, or vice versa? Major perspectives within psychology – the cognitive, developmental, social, organisational – clearly have the potential to inform and extend the practice of professionals. But educational psychologists are also charged to function within a wider social and political context dominated by such themes as equal opportunities, human rights, ethical and financial accountability, and the legislation surrounding pupils with special educational needs.

This themed edition of *Educational Psychology in Practice* is concerned with peer groupings within educational settings, a topic currently generating a wide range of interest both within academic psychology and in the practice of some applied psychologists. In addition to its contemporary salience, the diverse range of work in this area also has a special relevance to educational psychologists in that it links major psychological perspectives, and incorporates them within the political and social contexts in which educational psychologists operate.

This issue opens with a paper by David Wood and Claire O'Malley which presents an overview of peer collaboration in pupils' learning, drawing extensively on cognitive, developmental and social psychology. The findings that are presented have clear implications for equitability within classrooms. Ann Lewis adopts a similar perspective in her classroom-based research into the benefits of children with severe learning difficulties and mainstream partners working together. Human rights issues, in the form of the entitlement of pupils to an education that is free from the harassment and violence of bullying, are addressed by Sonia Sharp. Drawing upon social psychology, her paper reaches conclusions which have clear lessons for the organisational practice of schools.

Despite its obvious centrality to the practice of educational psychologists, the potential contribution of social psychology has not been fully recognised. In-

stead, it has often been easier to 'pepper' discussions with snippets from this sub-discipline than to articulate its coherent contribution. In Keith Topping's paper on peer counselling around highly sensitive topics, the barriers created by the institutional roles ascribed to teachers, youth leaders and others are strongly contrasted with the potential contained within the very different social climate of the peer group. This theme is continued in Andy Miller's paper on the 'ripple effects' of individual behavioural interventions, which introduces notions of the systemic nature of classrooms. Whereas educational psychologists have regularly employed concepts from systems theories, these have frequently been related to 'hard' systems features such as organisational structures and to 'soft' aspects such as teacher cultures. A number of the papers in this collection extend these deliberations to the ecosystemic nature of the rich and relatively unexplored area of informal peer cultures within schools and classrooms.

Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint and John O'Brien are highly effective advocates of inclusive education for all. Their writings, videos, workshops and practice marry an explicit and passionate human rights perspective with a detailed and pragmatic set of problem-solving techniques for use by professionals, parents and peers. Their paper introduces this influential contribution to a wider UK audience. Colin Newton, Gill Taylor and Derek Wilson contextualise this work into practice in British schools and support their account with the research literature on *pupil friendships and peer interactions*. In the concluding paper, Gerv Leyden challenges some of the explicit and implicit assumptions about working with peers which distort interpretations of the legislation concerning special educational needs. His paper argues that involving peers has the potential to incorporate a very real accountability into current special needs procedures.

Finally, bringing it all back home, educational psychologists need to debate and disseminate the growing literature concerning peer interventions. The task of further informing and enthusing teachers then awaits. And in order to feed back the contribution of educational psychologists to the discipline of psychology, it is important that practitioners look to publish their own evaluated activities. This themed edition provides some of the research evidence and justification in terms of examples of practice. Whatever the reasons in the past for tentative approaches towards working with peer groupings, there is now sufficient justification from a range of theoretical perspectives and practical examples, for action to be taken. By becoming informed and involved, educational psychologists can play a major part in furthering the practice of inclusive education by bringing in peers from the periphery to a position of prominence.

Gerv Leyden and Andy Miller