

**Just Support For Learning** (Full text of article which appeared in *Children In Scotland*, Issue 114, December 2010)

**As the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act is implemented, Elizabeth Herd considers some of the challenges it poses in the classroom.**

Current financial conditions will greatly influence how public services are provided. But while economics and politics frame the circumstances under which teachers work, and the current financial situation will be a major consideration in discussions about education services, there are other reasons why this is a time to reflect on how learning experiences are organised and delivered.

There is consensus that education should be inclusive, extend social justice, increase participation, and enable individuals to become active in creating the society they want to live in; and with Curriculum for Excellence and the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2009 as key policy documents taking these ideas forward, it is opportune to reflect on support for learning practices.

Is what is generally done, contributing to the learning and development of children and young people in line with expectations and requirements? Are practices fair, just and in the best interests of those they are intended to help?

The commonplace model of support for learning is based on practice changes following the Warnock Report in 1978 (and in Scotland, the 1978 document *The education of pupils with learning difficulties in primary and secondary schools in Scotland*). These publications acknowledged barriers to learning could be created by the curriculum – either its content or how it was taught – and established the expectation that, for most pupils, support could be provided in mainstream settings by curriculum differentiation and through specialist learning support teachers. The term ‘learning difficulties’ was introduced to describe problems across a continuum, from general difficulties with learning to severe and complex needs.

While the intention was to establish that a significant proportion of pupils could have their needs addressed within mainstream settings, having one wide category to cover the whole range of barriers to learning meant children whose difficulties were caused by the curriculum or its delivery were identified, ‘labelled’, and considered to require different treatment to their peers.

The practices of categorisation, separation and providing specialised teaching for some pupils was based on a medicalised system for identifying and grouping children, developed so they could receive the provision considered most appropriate. Despite acknowledging the role played by a range of factors around a child which could contribute to learning problems, the view that such practices were still necessary or acceptable was not challenged by the 1978 documents.

Continuing influences on teachers to categorise and separate pupils with additional support needs can be found in key policy and guidance documents of the last 30 years: *Educating pupils with learning difficulties in primary and secondary schools* in 1978, *Manual of good practice in special educational needs* in 1998, and the Additional Support For Learning Act 2009. This Act, although it acknowledges additional support needs can arise from a range of transient long or short term factors, requires pupils with additional support needs to be identified and categorised on the basis of the factors giving rise to those needs.

So although current policy directives are informed by an individual rights model which aspires to make available, to all children, the educational opportunity and support needed for full social integration and educational development, aspects of policy and guidance continue to support separatist, segregative practice and models of learning difficulties that are within-child. Teaching arrangements and practices reflect this: for example, pupils identified as having additional support needs being taught separately from their peers, identified pupils allocated adult support to help complete classwork tasks, or pupils deemed to have additional support needs given reduced curriculum options at secondary school.

Evidence suggests both the language used to identify and describe pupils, and the arrangements to help them, can have negative consequences. Pupils come to associate the terminology and practices used with negative views about themselves. When this terminology is used by adults they consider significant, is used frequently, or is used publicly, its effect becomes more powerful. This can lead pupils to develop a perception of themselves as failing, and unable to progress without help. This suggests some current practices might be having negative effects on learning capacity.

In keeping with the intention to ensure arrangements are actually helping pupils become successful learners and confident individuals, there is a need to examine what is being done to make sure support for learning practices not only remove barriers to learning and extend the participation of all learners, but makes certain children and young people experience equity and social justice in their day-to-day learning.

Research has identified practices and approaches where changes that could improve circumstances for pupils would be relatively easy to make. Based on what we now know, it seems successful learning, for all pupils, depends on the application of pedagogical principles supported by evidence of their effectiveness: in line with Vygotsky, talking to pupils to understand what and how they are learning and to help them move on. Thus, rather than focus on helping pupils complete tasks, adults could have a role working with groups or individuals to explore their understanding of their social world and learning, and to mediate for pupils to help connect the different cultures of the child's world (based on family, ethnic and child-centred viewpoints) and that of the school (formal, normative, rule-driven). Tried and tested methods which lead to success for all pupils, such as Assessment is for Learning techniques to engage pupils in a lesson, should be incorporated into class teaching, rather

than separate pupils into a 'failing' category. The focus of intervention to help pupils should be on the development of conceptual knowledge rather than supporting them to complete tasks, and should be of as short duration as possible (particularly when separation from the class is involved). Great attention needs to be paid to the language used to describe problems with learning experienced, and strategies used to change learning arrangements for individuals.

Any call for changes to practice raises the issue of appropriate continuing professional development for teachers, who, as a result of years of policy and guidance that supported separating pupils from their peers, have previously reported they did not feel they had the necessary knowledge or skills to include pupils with learning difficulties in their classes. There is also a need for policy and guidance that supports changes to established thinking and practice.

To ensure social justice and equity for pupils who have additional support needs these are matters which need to be addressed.

Interestingly, and encouragingly, there is evidence that pupils themselves (who are products of different times and thinking to the adults who work with them) are potentially open to the idea that it is systems, not they, who have to change. Perhaps a way ahead would be to involve them more in decisions about their learning?

This article is based on research undertaken for a doctoral thesis. The full thesis can be consulted at Edinburgh University Library or is available electronically from the author at [lherd@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:lherd@eastlothian.gov.uk)

For further information about some of the social equity issues raised in the article, see Georgina Glenny's article, 'The Ethics of Intervention', in Volume 20 of *Support For Learning*.