The rhetoric and reality of learning support in the classroom: towards a synthesis

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In this article Geoff Tennant reviews the literature on learning support, focusing particularly on the underlying principles and issues which need to be thought through. This is contrasted with his observations of learning support in classrooms in the London area, in which there was very little evidence that there had been any thinking behind what happened. Suggestions are then made as to how learning support can be used more effectively, representing better value for money and a more positive working environment for class teachers, those providing the extra support and, crucially, the children receiving it.

‘Yes Minister’ and ‘Yes Prime Minister’ were two popular television series broadcast during the 1980s, in which Jim Hacker was the hapless politician whose civil servants usually managed to get their own way giving every appearance of support and help. On one occasion the issue was cleaning up the City of London in the wake of a financial crisis. The accompanying book includes an editor’s note in response to Hacker’s insistence that something must be done:

[This line of thinking was] a result of what is known to the logicians in the Civil Service as the Politicians’ Syllogism:

Step One: We must do something.
Step Two: This is something.
Step Three: Therefore we must do this.

Logically this is akin to other equally famous syllogisms, such as:

Step One: All dogs have four legs.
Step Two: My cat has four legs.
Step Three: Therefore my cat is a dog.

The Politicians’ Syllogism has been responsible for many of the disasters that befell the United Kingdom in the twentieth century, including the Munich Agreement and the Suez Adventure.

(Lynn and Jay, 1989, pp.378–379)

The idea that, faced with an apparent problem, one must do something – anything – as a matter of urgency, is an extremely familiar one in the world of education. Certainly over the last twenty or so years there have been a number of occasions when an issue has been identified, a solution has been hastily put together and implemented, leading to many problems which have to be resolved. Perhaps the best example of this is the National Curriculum. Introduced at huge speed in 1988, all kinds of subsequent changes have been made to make it workable. For example, in mathematics the number of broad headings, or Attainment Targets, have come down from 14 to 5 to 4. Having started off with a ‘broad, balanced curriculum’, concern has subsequently been expressed by the Government about children’s ‘three Rs’, with the result that the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies have been introduced. And already there have been suggestions by, for example, Barnard (2000), that subjects such as PE and science are being squeezed out, with the result that the curriculum is becoming too narrow. All of this speaks of a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction to circumstances as they arise, with little coherent rationale, thought and planning behind them.

Many of the same things can be said about learning support in the classroom (which is taken to mean the presence of an adult in the classroom over and above the class teacher, to help the learning of children). My interest in this arose whilst undertaking classroom observation as a research student, which focused on children’s differential experience of, and attitudes towards, mathematics. I was following an observation schedule, and could not help but notice the sheer number of additional adults present in the classroom. Since these adults represented substantial resources being spent to enhance the experience of some children in
One of the responses in the move towards inclusion, and in order to combat underachievement, has been the deployment of extra people in the classroom. From my own observations, and from the literature, it appears that whilst much thought has gone into the issues which arise from the availability of these additional adults in the classroom, such a move may not enhance the learning of children.

In this article, I will first review the literature on learning support, in which certain themes are apparent, and then contrast the findings with my own observations in classrooms in London.

Support teaching: issues from the literature

Inclusion and the growth of LSAs

The growth in numbers of LSAs in recent years has been such that, according to Marr (2000), there were 5 times as many teachers as LSAs in primary schools in 1992, falling to 3 times in 1998 and a projected figure of 2.3 times in 2001. Also, Balshaw (1999) quoted a figure of 24,000 full time equivalent LSAs in English primary schools. More than anything else, this increase has been due to the policy of promoting increased inclusion, following on from the Warnock Report (1978). The report stressed that, if at all possible, children should be educated within mainstream schools, with additional support where necessary. One of the reasons for using LSAs is financial, and Marr (2000) suggests that the overall cost is approximately one third that of a support teacher (ST).

On examination it is clear that inclusion is interpreted differently by different people. Norwich (2000) cites a research project in which teachers expressed support for the principle of inclusion in general terms, and rather less when questioned about having children with particular special needs in their classroom. As suggested by Lunt and Norwich (1999), it can certainly be argued that there is a conflict between inclusion on the one hand, and raising standards in schools on the other.

Clearly, one of the major reasons for having LSAs in the mainstream classroom is in order that children with special educational needs (SEN) can be included. Indeed, some writers become very enthusiastic on this theme:

An immediate effect of fully integrating our special needs students is that it removes the problem of drawing a line between those with ‘special needs’ and those with ‘ordinary needs’. Because the support is relevant to the demands of the classroom and the support teacher can respond to many students’ needs as they arise, the stigma of being identified as a ‘special needs student’ is removed …

(Welding, 1996, p.113)

But, as will be discussed later, this is assuming a particular model of support which is frequently not reflected in practice. Indeed, it has been argued by Dyson (2000) that, in so far as LSAs are there to support one child in particular, the role is self-contradictory – on the one hand LSAs are promoting inclusion, on the other they are drawing attention to the child with SEN and so promoting exclusion.

Possible models of support and the role of the LSA

There appear to be four common ways of providing support in practice:

- working with individuals
- working with small groups
- providing an extra pair of hands in a classroom generally
- modifying materials outside the classroom.

If LSAs are working with individuals, Heeks and Kinnell (1997, pp.49–50) list eight possible roles which an LSA may be fulfilling: interpreter; scribe; organiser; motivator; partner; accessor; reinforcer and emotional/behavioural helper. It is worth noting that the role may also include being primarily responsible for the implementation of an individual education plan. In her work with LSAs, Balshaw (1999) found that the most rewarding aspects of the role as far as these colleagues were concerned included: working towards children’s independence; developing positive relationships; ensuring that their opinions were sought and valued, and enabling them to be classed as team members.

Against these aspects, as Lorenz (1998) pointed out, there are a number of possible roles which would appear to be unhelpful: servant of the child or the class teacher; translator; papering over the cracks of a poorly differentiated curriculum, and a foreman, policing the class. In a similar vein, Balshaw (1999) listed the frustrations experienced by LSAs which included: not knowing teachers’ expectations, being put in at the deep end, and having a constant string of temporary contracts.

Given the diversity of possible roles for LSAs, it would seem clear that some considerable thought needs to go into the identification of their responsibilities, both at the whole school policy level and also for each individual LSA. And yet, as Farrell, Balshaw and Polat (1999) found in their research for the DfEE, whilst most LSAs had job descriptions, these were seldom referred to and frequently the jobs they did bore very little relation to the actual description.

It is worth noting that different roles require rather different interests and personal qualities on the part of the LSA. Modifying materials outside the classroom, an approach advocated in an Audit Commission Report (1992), would enable a child to be rather more independent, and therefore possibly more included in the classroom.

Consider also the role of accessor, which the LSA may be asked to undertake. Let us suppose that a child has listened
to the teacher giving an explanation, and has not understood it. In acting as accessor, the LSA needs to give a different perspective on the same topic, which would seem to require both a good knowledge of the subject matter and also of different teaching methods. Indeed, one could argue that the LSA is fulfilling the most difficult teaching role of all.

**Training and working with teachers**

It is clear from the argument so far that, before LSAs begin work in the classroom, there needs to be some thought as to exactly what it is they are required to do and how training for both the LSA and the class teacher can be implemented in order to bring this about. The need for such training is a recurrent theme in the literature. Fox (1998) looked in detail at the key professional relationships an LSA would need, and stressed the importance of a clear understanding of these. Thomas (1992) made the point that considerable amounts of time and effort go into ensuring effective teamwork in an industrial context, whereas in the classroom it is assumed that all such issues will be resolved automatically. He also cited a number of research projects which would seem to demonstrate that there is a limit to the number of adults who can usefully be deployed in a classroom. In a nursery context a study undertaken by Clift, Cleave and Griffin (1980) suggested that the optimal number of adults is three.

Attitudes of class teachers towards pupils’ special educational needs can vary, as pointed out by Bearn and Smith (1998); and, as observed by Lovey (1995), LSAs can be made to feel like second class teachers, and not always treated with respect. On the other hand, Balshaw (1992) described a situation in which the class teacher apparently felt that the presence of an LSA meant there was no further need to consider whether any other resources might be required by the child to support his or her special educational needs. Similarly, Derrington, Evans and Lee (1996) suggest that, in practice, class teachers may well consider LSAs to be solely responsible for the implementation of children’s individual education plans. Effective teamwork requires training on both sides, time to work out the respective roles for class teacher and LSA in general terms, and then also to plan individual lessons. Clear guidance on issues to be considered whilst working out the ground rules for collaboration can be found, for example, in Fox (1998).

Nationally the picture on training would appear to be patchy with, according to Farrell et al. (1999), 72% of all LEAs offering some form of training to all LSAs in their authority, whilst less than 10% of those interviewed had obtained a recognised qualification; only a few were engaged on relevant courses.

**Review of the literature: summary**

In considering the literature on learning support in the classroom, the picture which emerges supports the trends identified above. Learning support can be provided in a number of different ways and fulfil a variety of different functions. Both class teachers, and those acting in the support role, need training to ensure they are conversant with the different ways in which the job can be undertaken, and to ensure they are familiar with the possibilities and boundaries of their respective roles. Without such training additional people in the classroom can be counterproductive.

There appears to be little argument from the research that it is necessary to ensure that all aspects are managed effectively and efficiently.

**Observation data on learning support in the classroom**

As part of a research project, I spent some time in a number of schools in the London area observing mathematics lessons. Whilst the primary focus of the observations I made were on pupil–teacher interactions, I was able to consider factors which would appear to have a bearing on the differential experience of children, especially those from ethnic minorities.

Early in the research, I found myself considering the effect of the additional adults in the classroom, including support teachers (STs) and LSAs. In four schools, including a special school, I observed 73 additional adults in 85 lessons. Within the special school, the number of additional adults was such that there were, on average, only 2.6 children to each adult. These adults represented a huge resource spent on enhancing children’s experience of mathematics. Since much of the support was given to children from minority ethnic groups, and this was only partly because of English acquisition, it seemed appropriate to consider the whole area of support teaching within my research.

**Support teachers (STs) and learning support assistants (LSAs)**

In my observations there was a very clear divide between STs on the one hand and LSAs on the other. With notable exceptions, STs would circulate around the room, contribute to class discussion in order to clarify a point or give an alternative view, and assist with classroom discipline.

LSAs, on the other hand, worked almost exclusively with the one child to whom she (and it usually was ‘she’) was assigned. There would appear to be two possible reasons for this. One is the strict interpretation of the statement of special needs, whereby the LSA is in the room for the benefit of one particular child, which is taken to mean that the LSA must stay by the side of that child for the duration of the lesson. The other is the fact that the discipline within the classroom was not always good, and the LSA may well feel less secure in trying to deal with children over and above the one designated child. Whilst there are negative implications of this, my observations showed that LSAs were attempting to fulfil a number of roles, particularly those of organiser and motivator for individual
pupils. At no time did I see any evidence of materials being modified for children.

Those who could have benefited were left alone …

On one notable occasion I observed a boy with clearly understandable, if less than perfect English, being supported on a one-to-one basis by an LSA. In the same class there were two other boys with virtually no English at all who were given word searches to complete. Whilst it can be argued that word searches can help to familiarise children with words and their spellings, it was quite clear in this context that the intention was to provide them with an already familiar activity to occupy them. It did not seem to have occurred to either the LSA or the class teacher that, once the boy with the statement was on task, it would be possible to give the other two some attention.

… those who were being supported finding it too much

On a number of occasions, particularly at the special school, there appeared to be friction between the LSA and the child being supported. This may have been due to the frustration the child felt in having someone constantly by his or her side explaining, cajoling, assisting and transcribing. I am quite clear in my own mind that, as a child, I would have found the continuous presence of an adult by my side throughout a lesson difficult to take. I invite the reader to make an independent judgement on this! Children working with LSAs in this manner may be unable to form relationships easily with other children. Lorenz (1998) is quite clear on this point: ‘However specific the statement, it is rarely in the interest of any child to have an assistant hovering over them the whole time’ (p.28). Similarly Farrell et al. state (1999): ‘Secondary aged pupils in particular did not want the LSA to spend large parts of the lesson sitting next to them as this served to highlight their problems and could cause them embarrassment’ (p.18).

A related issue raised by Balshaw (1992) is that of the child becoming over-dependent on the LSA. One would hope that any intervention to help a child will focus on encouraging independence and the ability to access opportunities in the classroom without additional support. It is important to recognise, however, that there are some children, particularly with physical disabilities, who will always require additional support. While, in the main, one of the major roles of an LSA is to reduce the support, in practice it appears that this is not at all easy, particularly as parents, having fought hard for the extra help in the first place, are not likely to be particularly pleased at the idea of it being reduced or withdrawn.

LSAs and class teachers

As already noted, Thomas (1992) stressed the need to put time and effort into building effective teamwork. However, I saw no evidence of this in my research. Indeed, quite the contrary. On one occasion I observed a boy who had an LSA with him, constantly calling for the attention of the class teacher, which he was duly given. This seemed to be accepted practice but it seemed to me that the credibility of the LSA was being undermined.

From my observations it would appear that there was no effective communication between LSAs and class teachers. It may be that the class teacher and the LSA simply have not thought through their roles sufficiently to see the need for effective communication. It may also be that there is that awareness, but it is left to the people involved to find the necessary time to do so in extremely busy schedules.

Summary of observations

During my observations I came to the conclusion that little thought had been given to the support role or the longer term implications of the training needs of the LSA and class teacher. The assumption appeared to be that the presence of extra adults is necessarily a good thing. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, based on my observations, that the status quo is at best inefficient, and at worst directly counterproductive as far as individual children are concerned, both socially and academically.

The way forward: some suggestions

Having observed a number of LSAs in the classroom, it is now a great privilege to be involved with the training of LSAs working within the area of mathematics at the University of Leicester. Aspects of the training include: first, a consideration of what mathematics actually is and the way in which it permeates all aspects of everyday life; and second, to bring out into the open LSAs’ own feelings towards mathematics – these may not always be entirely positive. Lastly, LSAs are introduced to the range of approaches now used in the teaching of numeracy, and the different roles that can be adopted by support staff. These are discussed in the light of the LSA’s own experience.

The role of senior management teams in schools

In considering the content of such courses it is important to take account of the role of senior management teams. Taking the lead, and sending out clear signals as to what is important within a school is crucial.

In consultation with the SENCo, the senior management would need to arrange a thorough audit of the special educational needs provision for the children in the school. The following questions must be addressed:

• How many children are there with statements?
• What are the resource implications of the statements?
• Given the range of types of support available, what forms are appropriate for each child?
• What are the particular strengths of the current support staff, in terms both of personal qualities and curriculum knowledge?
• What curricular training do support staff need and how can this training need be met?
• How are LSAs supported?
• What are the training needs of classroom teachers, and how can these needs be met?
• Is the purpose and nature of the support clearly understood by the school community including parents, children and all members of the multidisciplinary team?
• Are there clear plans, understood by all interested parties, to withdraw the support from the child and to encourage independent learning?

Class teachers

It has increasingly been the case, over the last twenty years, that class teachers have become accustomed to working with other adults in the classroom: school governors; inspectors; advisors; line managers, as well as support staff. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that there are still teachers, particularly those who have been working for some considerable time, who feel uncomfortable when there are other adults present. Clearly it is difficult to adapt to a changing workplace, but it is surely incumbent on all teaching staff to work constructively with those providing support for the benefit of the children in their charge.

It is frequently the case that support staff bring considerable experience, skills, and knowledge of the children with them into the classroom and provide information on how children are responding and understanding. These qualities can, and should, be drawn upon to the benefit of all parties involved.

Conclusions

From my discussions with LSAs it appears that in schools in which the issues surrounding learning support have been worked through thoroughly, LSAs have time to plan with class teachers and their opinions and judgements are valued and taken into account. My research, however, found that there are many schools in which LSAs work in classrooms in isolation, without a clear idea of their roles and responsibilities. Despite major research projects such as Farrell et al. (1999) necessary changes are not realised quickly. It is time that each school reviewed its own practices to ensure that policy and practice really benefit children with special educational needs.

References


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