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# How 'Supportive' is Learning Support?

Kevin Jones &  
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## INTRODUCTION

When we encounter someone who is 'in difficulty', the natural inclination is to 'do things for them' rather than helping them to confront the problem for themselves. With a similar sentiment, teachers and parents can easily take over the task of learning for pupils with special educational needs, rather than helping them to develop their own learning and problem-solving skills (Jones, Bill & Quah 1996). The results of research recently undertaken in Singapore and the United Kingdom (Jones & Quah 1998) reveal three qualitatively different levels of 'learning support' which are described below. Each level appears to have a different potential for empowering pupils to manage their own academic and social learning.

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## LEVEL 1 – ADULT-DOMINATED SUPPORT

Many teachers, with good intentions, try to help pupils who encounter learning and/or behaviour difficulties by providing them with 'fail-safe' activities and worksheets which maximize their chances of success and minimize the likelihood of failure. There is little doubt that such activities can boost pupils' confidence. However, despite the fact that many pupils produce correct responses and remain on-task during these activities, they are usually restricted to the revision and recall of already known facts. Very few of these activities teach failing pupils how to learn.

Similarly, some parents take over the learning task when their offspring encounter difficulties in learning, as illustrated in this comment from the mother of a 15-year-old boy:

*He doesn't enjoy it (reading) because he feels he can't do it, so he'd rather us read to him than him read a book on his own.*

Westwood (1993) is critical of adults who encourage pupils to be dependent upon them, fearing that dependent relationships will reinforce pupils' beliefs that they must rely upon the support of others rather than realizing that their performance is also attributable to their own actions. If pupils are to become effective and independent learners, they need to know:

- how to organize their own materials;
- what to do when work is completed;
- when to seek help of peers/teacher;
- how to check their own work;
- how to maintain attention to task; and
- how to observe rules and routines.

Similarly, a predominance of negative feedback from teachers or parents is unlikely to help pupils manage their own behaviour, because the adult is in control and the pupil mostly learns what not to do, rather than what to do. As Temple (1996: 90) states, "just telling troubled children how they should behave in a certain situation will not necessarily help them to behave appropriately in all other situations." She suggests that, at best, it provides an answer for that occasion and explains that "because each human situation is always slightly different, what might work in one situation, won't necessarily work in the next" (p. 90).

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## LEVEL 2: LEARNER-EMPOWERING SUPPORT

Supportive practices which can be categorized as 'learner-empowering' are those which help pupils with special educational needs to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes which will allow them to take a more active part in the management of their own learning.

At a fairly basic level, the provision of certain kinds of resources, such as finger blocks (which go onto a pencil to enable the child to adopt a triangular grip), calculators and some computer programmes, can help children to take greater control over their learning. Similarly, the utilization of pupils' interests and the provision of first-hand experiences often results in greater learner autonomy, as evidenced in one of the parent's comment:

*Cos [sic] Christopher was going to Snooker the school encouraged us to buy as many books on snooker as we could and he would spend hours in his bedroom and now, he can read fluently, normally.*

Support founded on 'positive teaching' can also empower pupils to take more responsibility for and control over their own learning. This is particularly evident in the following comments from a 28-year-old school leaver:

*When I encounter any problems, I will usually ask help from the training officer and they will guide me and correct my mistake. Sometimes, they also give me encouragement which will make me feel better and motivate me to work harder. I feel happy when they praise me for being hard working and doing my work well."*

The above comments show that positive teaching techniques can help pupils take more control of their own learning (an 'internal' locus of control). Similarly, 'supportive' practices which help children to organize themselves, to clarify task requirements, and to develop their concentration can also empower them as learners, as illustrated in the following teachers' comments:

*I felt that ... (child's name) ... was particularly good in Home Economics. She could work quite independently. Quite good at organizing herself, in spite of the fact that her communication skills aren't quite that good.  
..... getting it written down isn't the easiest thing for him, but he's got this ability to actually get on with the job. His concentration is quite good once he knows what the task is, gets his head down and gets stuck in and he's quite motivated to do that independently.*

As pupils develop more 'internal' control for their own learning and actions, 'supportive' adults can increasingly 'let go' of their control, thus empowering them to utilize their new-found self-management skills.

Similarly in the teaching of reading, teachers can either organize activities so that pupils become dependent upon them, or they can give them control over the 'learning to read' process. For this reason, Quah (1982) advocates the use of the language experience approach with a beginning reader as it is the only one that allows a child to begin reading where the child is in terms of his/her ability to think with words. In this approach, the level of language at which the beginner functions is not highly significant. His/Her progress in language development is an individual matter, which is gradually nurtured as the teacher helps

him/her develop a wider and deeper skill with words. Jones, Charlton & Whittern (1996: 229-30) describe how the adaptation of a procedure developed by Brennan in 1978, can be particularly effective in helping failing readers overcome their difficulties. This strategy also uses the language-experience approach, in which the child's own interests and vocabulary are used to generate material for reading and writing. From stage 5 onwards, this procedure helps children to take more control over their own reading development. The main stages of this approach are described as follows:

- The pupil chooses a topic for the beginning of 'interest' book work. Discussion and conversation establish and exercise the vocabulary which will be converted into writing when work starts.
- The pupil begins work on his/her interest book. Classroom material is searched for appropriate illustrations which are pasted into the book. Teacher-pupil interaction and discussion continues to concentrate on appropriate vocabulary. At a relevant time, the pupil offers a sentence about the illustration which the teacher writes in plain, clear script below the illustration. Once this is done, discussion continues, establishing and reinforcing its connection with the illustration and its context. The object is to relate the words and the illustration in order to provide as many clues to recall as possible.

During this phase, the pupil will read the sentence written by the teacher (by repeating it after him/her). The 'reading' is immediately reinforced by praise. This so-called 'reading' should help establish an efficient, correct response to the written word.

- The pupil now firmly establishes his/her 'reading' of the sentence by tracing over the teacher's copy, copying the sentence onto separate papers, copying it in different colours and so on, with frequent attempts to write the sentence by recall without copying.

After each activity, the pupil must attempt to read the sentence to the teacher, with praise for good attempts and positive support for failed attempts. The work, at all times, must be surrounded by continuous discussion which keeps the sentence rooted in meaning and in its richly cued context.

- Further illustrations are now used to secure the repetition of basic words.

- The pupil can now 'read' with reasonable accuracy a number of sentences which are directly related to the illustrations. A piece of paper is stapled over the illustration and the pupil now 'reads' without the former cues. This should be presented as a stimulating challenge. If the pupil cannot read it, the teachers encourages him/her to look for relevant 'cues' (e.g. to uncover the illustration to reveal the picture cues). In other words, the teacher encourages the pupil to take more personal control over the 'learning to read' process.
- When the sentence is 'read' successfully without the help of the illustration, the teacher prepares a sentence card which is kept by the pupil in a suitable box or file. The pupil now attempts to read the sentence strips, a situation still further removed from the original presentation. Reinforcement can also occur by copying the sentences.
- Once the pupil can read sentences independently of illustrations, another process begins. It is introduced at failure point. When pupils fail to read a sentence strip, he/she goes back to his/her interest book and, by matching, find the sentence there. If despite the cues offered, he/she still fails to 'read' it, the teacher encourages him/her to go back through the various 'cue' levels (e.g. pictures or context) rather than simply telling him/her the word, the teacher is helping him/her to find out for himself/herself.
- At this stage, supplementary activities, such as matching games, are introduced.
- The teacher now prepares duplicate sentence strips, which the pupil reads and then cuts into individual words. Lots of matching type activities are introduced, using the pupil's stock of words. If the pupil unable to read any of the words, the teacher asks him/her how the pupil could find out. Hopefully, the pupil will begin to learn that he/she can go through the matching stages, as outlined in the previous phases, until he/she find sufficient cues.

This particular approach to the teaching of reading introduces pupils to various types of cues which can help them to read (pictorial, graphical, phonetic, semantic and syntactic). By encouraging them to search independently for cues when they are 'stuck', the teacher gradually hands more and more control for the 'learning to read' process to the pupil, thus empowering them as a learner.

Certain behaviour management strategies can also be described as learner empowering. For example, some teachers try to help pupils exercise greater self-control over their social behaviour by involving them in the formulation of rules. In this respect, a strategy referred to as Rules, Praise and Ignoring (RPI) has been extensively used, with good effect, as a positive classroom management procedure. RPI was originally devised in the United States by Madsen, Berker & Thomas (1968). In brief, it requires the teacher to negotiate a set of three or four short, positively phrased rules, covering acceptable classroom behaviours. These often take the form of simple declarations of intent, such as 'we try to get on with our work quietly' or 'we put up our hands when we want to ask a question'. Rules act as a kind of prompt and teachers are encouraged to draw attention to them regularly, preferably when pupils are clearly keeping, rather than infringing them. Teachers are required to praise pupils for keeping the rules and ignore infractions of them. Praise may be addressed to the whole class, or to individuals, but should refer specifically to behaviour in keeping the rules.

The RPI strategy clearly involves pupils more actively in the management of their own behaviour through the formulation of rules. However, adults are still firmly in control of the monitoring of behaviour and there is scope for further pupil involvement in that aspect of the procedure.

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### **LEVEL 3: SUPPORT FOUNDED ON TEAMWORK**

Supportive practices which are categorized at Level 3 further empower children and adult learners through their involvement in teamwork.

Various writers have drawn attention to the support which pupils can get from their peers (see Charlton & Jones 1996; Jones & Wakefield 1998). As well as preparing them for co-operative working and social roles (Galton 1994), peer support can also lead to more effective learning. Some writers (e.g. UNESCO 1993) go as far as to suggest that support received from other pupils can be equally, if not more, effective than that provided by adults. They suggest that this may be due to pupils' tendency to be more directive, their familiarity with the material being taught, their understanding of the other children's frustrations, or because they use more meaningful and age-appropriate vocabulary and examples.

In Singapore, a number of primary schools have instigated a peer-buddy approach to help pupils who experience difficulties with reading. Good readers volunteer to 'adopt' a peer who is experiencing difficulties in reading. They coach, read to and read with their 'buddy' with the aim of helping him/her to improve in reading and other school-related activities. One learning support co-ordinator (see Quah & Jones 1997) described the benefits of peer support as follows:

*R's buddies help her to get started on work. They don't do it for her, but help her to establish some sort of routine. They also help her to organise herself, so that she can get dressed for P.E. They also help R to voice concerns, and celebrate her success.*

Pupils can also support each other through collaborative group work. At its best, this form of peer support enables children to share their resources of knowledge, experience, social relationships and their capacity to support and stimulate one another through shared interests. However, a supportive atmosphere for learning will need to be created and opportunities for collaboration sought. Teachers will have to reinforce the need for pupils to listen to one another, to show interest in what each other has to say, and to respect another's views (Jones & Quah 1998).

Pupils can also become involved in teamwork at the level of curriculum development and school governance. Lewis (1996) claims that, under the right conditions, pupils can provide useful insights into important matters which affect their learning. By listening to pupils, teachers can gain information which helps them to understand those factors which influence their learning (Cooper 1993; Wade & Moore 1993; Cooper & McIntyre 1993; Jones, Charlton & Whittern 1996). Similarly, Cooper (1996) discusses the advantages which have been derived from teamwork involving pupils and teachers in special school settings. Pupils who were considered to be uncooperative and a threat to the school community from which they were referred showed that they could responsibly participate in governing their own schools.

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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 'support' which is offered to pupils with special educational needs should be analysed according to the extent to which it empowers them to take greater responsibility for the management of their own social

and academic behaviours. Many statements concerning the special educational needs of children and adult learners refer only to the 'quantity' of support which is required, rather than the 'type' (or quality) of support.

The provision of some types of support can create additional barriers to learning, whilst others have the potential to help learners overcome the difficulties which they encounter. Many supportive practices which fall into Level 1 (Adult dominated support) are of dubious educational value. They include practices in which adults take over the learning task or provide predominantly negative feedback. In contrast, other types of support are associated with more desirable outcomes. At 'Level 2' (Learner empowering support), the main aim is to provide conditions under which children and adults with special educational needs can play a greater part in the management of their own learning. Supportive practices which fall into this category are concerned with the provision of a foundation of skills, knowledge and attitudes which foster independence, the modification of the learning environment, the provision of positive feedback, the encouragement of an internal locus of control, and helping learners make choices. An even greater degree of empowerment occurs at 'Level 3' within which learner independence is encouraged through involvement in teamwork. This has important implications for teachers, who should be encouraged to critically evaluate the types of 'support' which they offer, or plan to offer, with respect to the extent to which they empower, or dis-empower learners.

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