Critical Thinking for Pupils with Special Education Needs: Indulgence or Necessity?

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During the last decade, the role of the self-advocate has gained popularity among people with learning disabilities. In Great Britain, a number of self-advocacy groups exist and voluntary organisations such as The Standing Committee of Voluntary Organisations in Wales (SCOVO) produce journals which keep people with learning disabilities and their families abreast of new projects and developments in the field, welcoming and promoting their contributions. Schools for pupils with special educational needs are also trying to encourage individuals to take control over their environment. The Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998, p.39) cites Ashley Special School, Widnes, as an example of good practice. The school has a council which is central to the life of the school and, in 1995, pupils voted to change the name of the school to Ashley School in honour of Jack Ashley, a Member of Parliament and supporter of people with disabilities. The sculptor, David Gross, worked with pupils who have met with politicians in the Houses of Parliament and Brussels, to produce a work of art that represents the values of the School Charter, 'commitment to justice and global citizenship.' The general philosophy is therefore one of encouraging people with learning disabilities to take control of their own lives. However, if people with learning disabilities are to be true self-advocates, capable of making decisions about important life issues, then they will need to be involved in a teaching programme that, over time, develops their skills in thinking, reasoning and argument. This paper examines the ways in which this might realistically happen.

Proponents of thinking skills programmes have often faced opposition (both within and without the teaching profession) from those who are unwilling, or unable to view children as being capable of, for example, quite sophisticated logical, moral or philosophical reasoning, despite the fact that research, has confirmed the existence of these capabilities in children of varying academic abilities (e.g. Costello, 1995) and with learning disabilities (e.g. Feurstein, 1980). The latter is cited by Burden and Florek (1990, p.74) as having 'the belief that all humans, however severely disabled for whatever cause, can become fully effective learners'. Feurstein argues that all children can be taught thinking skills through a programme he has developed known as Instrumental Enrichment. The programme places a great deal of emphasis on 'mediated learning' where the mediator plays a key role, in helping the child make sense of the world around him/her. Preston (1997, p.24) states that this is contrary to what is usually seen in British

schools, where 'we have viewed the role of the teacher more as one of facilitator, setting up the learning situation rather than standing between the child and the world.'

In the early years of education for a child with severe learning disabilities, parents and professionals do have a tendency to fall into the trap of becoming a facilitator, rather than a mediator, when they are faced with the task of devising numerous individualised education programmes based on the acquisition of basic skills. They spend their time teaching the young child to hold a spoon, drink from a feeder cup and use the toilet appropriately. The work is often so intense and at times even frustrating that often there is little opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation with the child or to offer any choice. Two-way communication might also be unintentionally overlooked due to the fact that the child does not have any expressive language. I would argue that it is vital that this pre-verbal stage is not overlooked. This stage in development does, in fact, correspond with stage one and two of a model of argument put forward by Andrews, Costello and Clarke (1993, p.50) where stage one 'is evidenced in struggles or fights to make a point, defend a position or assert a right' and stage two involves ways of communication, such as crying. It is at this early stage, therefore, that the teaching programme should begin, otherwise there could be a tendency for carers and professionals to indoctrinate with the best possible intentions in future teaching. As a result, in later years, when the person with learning disabilities is placed in an unfamiliar situation with a decision to make, they may be left feeling confused and frustrated and the consequence of that might be an impulsive or unsuitable reaction.

The resultant behaviour does not always have disastrous repercussions. For example, a teenager with severe learning disabilities, having lunch at his college, may choose to have fries every day for lunch because he/she is confused by the range of options available and would not be prompted into enquiring about alternatives. This behaviour could lead to the teenager in question not having a suitably varied diet and

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therefore to potential health problems for that person. On the other hand, such a lack of thinking and reasoning skills could contribute to more dangerous outcomes. The same teenager approached in his/her college by a sexual abuser might not think to question this advance and so might comply with the wishes of the perpetrator. It is this latter scenario which points to the need for people with learning disabilities to have the opportunity to develop their skills in thinking, reasoning and argument. The remainder of this paper makes suggestions as to ways in which this might be done.

It is my view that useful vehicles for discussion can be found in stories, videos, television programmes and pictorial representations. Children and adults of all ages enjoy listening to stories, hence the growing popularity of the novel, or story book recorded onto tape. Sometimes in listening, rather than concentrating on the written word, we can more easily identify with a character in the plot and feelings that we can not easily express are evoked in relation to that character. Listening to stories gives us a greater insight into personalities and relationships and the opportunity to explore both real and hypothetical situations. The fact that the story depersonalises an event or scenario might assist in helping a youngster to discuss a very sensitive issue. The examples given here relate to bullying and divorce. In the case of bullying, a child might be afraid to talk for fear of further ill treatment; in the case of a divorce, the child might not have been given the opportunity to discuss feelings and anxieties because the adults in his/her life are pre-occupied with the emotional and financial implications of their situation. When used appropriately, short stories with a clear message can help children to reflect upon their life and practice the skills of decision making. The following two stories (Bowen and Costello, 1996, 1997) with questions, demonstrate how this might be done:

A FRIEND IN NEED

(Bowen and Costello,1996)

Brian had always enjoyed school. He got on well with his teacher and had many friends in his class. He also had a brother and sister, Adrian and Stephanie, who attended the same school. He would meet them at break and lunch times for a brief chat before joining members of his own year group to play football. One day, at morning break, he saw Stephanie standing in the corner of the infants' playground crying quietly to herself. Although children from the juniors were not suppose to go into the infants' playground, Brian went over to his sister and asked her what was wrong. 'It's that girl over there', she sobbed, 'she keeps calling me names'. 'There's no need to cry about that', said Brian, 'names can't hurt you'. To cheer Stephanie up, Brian gave her a packet of sweets and said that he would see her lunch time.

The morning passed quickly and Brian's class had worked very hard. As a reward, his teacher allowed them to go out to play five minutes early. However, another class of older children were using the playground for a games lesson. When the teacher told her group to go inside and change for lunch, one of the bigger boys pushed past Brian and said, 'Get out of my way, stupid'. Without thinking, Brian pushed him back. The teacher saw this and told Brian off. When she had gone the older boy came back and said 'I'm going to get you later'.

Brian was a bit scared even though the boy was not much bigger than him. Suddenly, he felt a hand pulling at his sleeve - it was Stephanie. 'Brian, that girl's asked for my sweets and says that if I don't

give them to her, she'll tell my friends that I have been saying nasty things about them'. Brian forgot his own problems for the moment and urged his sister to tell one of teachers. At that moment the deputy headteacher came out onto the playground. 'Brian', she said, 'you know that you are not allowed up here'. 'I know, Miss,' Brian replied, 'but a girl in Stephanie's class is bullying her and she has come to tell me about it'. 'We can't have that, can we Stephanie,' said the teacher. 'Come with me we'll soon sort this out'. Stephanie walked away holding the deputy head by the hand. She looked back and waved to Brian, a smile lighting up her face.

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Suddenly, Brian felt a sharp pain at the back of his head and found himself on the ground. The older boy had changed out of his games kit and was standing above Brian with a smirk on his face. 'I told you I'd get you, stupid', he said quietly. One of the midday supervisors saw this and came running over. 'You boys stop fighting!', she shouted. 'Sorry Brian, it was an accident', said the older boy who then walked off. One of Brian's friends, Graham helped him to his feet. 'You'll have to tell someone, Brian', he said, 'otherwise he'll keep on doing it.»I can't, otherwise everyone will call me a tell-tale'. As the boys walked off together, Brian glanced towards the infants' playground and saw Stephanie laughing and playing with her friends.

A teacher may decide to read all of the story at first and then read it again in smaller sections, interspersed with some questions for group discussion. Pupils could be encouraged not only to discuss the relationship between bully and victim, but also to think about their rights as individuals. The following questions could be used to instigate such a debate:

If a person calls someone names, is this an example of bullying?

Do you agree with Brian when he says that names do not hurt you?

Was Brian right to push the older boy?

Are bullies always bigger and older than you? Was what happened to Brian an accident? How do you know?

There is no doubt that some issues are not easy to talk about. Fear, as in the case of bullying and emotional suffering, as in the case of bereavement or marital breakdown could be reasons for this. The next story could be used to help a child speak about a family situation in an objective way. The story and the questions that follow are concerned with the issue of the re-marriage of a parent which can sometimes be met with mixed emotions by both the children and the adults concerned.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION (Bowen and Costello, 1997)

Molly stared through her bedroom window at the rain outside. As the raindrops trickled down the window pane, tears were falling down her cheeks. She was so confused! Her mum had told her that she was

going to marry her boyfriend, Pete. Molly liked Pete but she did not like his daughters Jamie-Lee and Kylie. At the moment, she did not have to see the girls very often, but when Pete and mum were married, she would have to see them in the school holidays and even, perhaps, share her bedroom with them. She had heard Pete and her mum talk about having a baby and was worried that once her mum had another child to look after, she would not have time for her. It was not as if she could talk to her dad very easily. He lived some miles away with his girlfriend, Anne and her two boys. She only got to seem him for parts of the school holiday and even then, they did not get much time together, because dad was always playing football with the boys. 'No-one cares about me!', Molly sobbed.

Molly's mum came into the bedroom. 'What on earth is the matter?, she said. 'I hate to see you crying'. Molly was afraid to tell her mum the truth in case she got angry. Eventually, Molly's mum said, 'Are you worried about what will happen when Pete and I get married?' Molly began to cry again. 'Oh, Molly', her mum said and gave her a big hug. 'It'll be O.K., you'll see. It may take a little getting used to at first but I'm sure we'll be a happy family. I expect that Kylie and Jamie-Lee are worried too'. 'I suppose so', sighed Molly. 'You won't stop loving me if you have a new baby, will you, mum?» Of course not, you silly thing, you'll always be special to me. Come on, let's think what we are going to wear for this wedding. I'd like you to be my bridesmaid'.

Questions to discuss:

Why is Molly feeling confused?

What do you think that Jamie-Lee and Kylie think about Molly?

Should Molly's dad play football with the boys when she visits?

Should Molly's mum marry Pete if it is going to make Molly unhappy?

Why do you think that Molly's mum said that the new situation might take a little time to get used to?

What can Molly's mum and Pete do to make sure that the girls are happy together?

Is Molly silly to think that her mum will stop loving her if she has another baby?

Should Jamie-Lee and Kylie be bridesmaids too?

Video recordings and television programmes can be realistic and true to life, easier to follow than the spoken word and helpful in demonstrating the importance of body language. They can be used to promote discussion on a range of issues. One such issue could be related to the definition of a stranger and how we might relate to him/her. In our interactions with children, there is a tendency to label strangers as potentially dangerous individuals who, given the slightest opportunity, will whisk us away to some foreign land! It is perhaps interesting to note, at this juncture, that Turk and Brown's (1992) community study of the sexual abuse of people with learning disabilities (cited by Hollins, 1993) found that the smallest group of perpetrators were, in fact, strangers. This suggests that it is familiar adults that we should be warning children about! To what extent therefore is it right for us to indoctrinate children with the idea that strangers are dangerous individuals? Indeed, we are all strangers to someone. However, as we grow older, we learn to distinguish between the range of relationships we have with those people around us and some people who were once strangers to us are now our good friends. Making subtle distinctions between relationships might not be so easy for the person with learning disabilities and so it is important that they are given the opportunity

to learn about and discuss the range of relationships that exists. In the video-course, *Taking a Look at Relationships* (Bowen, 1995), two situations involving interaction with strangers have been recorded for discussion. The first shows a car stopping and the driver asking the passer-by for directions and the second involves a young man being threatened by another young man in the toilet area of a youth club. Both show varied locations where a stranger might appear, but perhaps the most important fact that these scenarios illustrate is that there are dissimilarities in the tone of conversation and body language in each case. For example, the car scene shows that, in this particular case, it was safe to talk to the driver of the car; he listened politely to the instructions and drove away. However, in another set of circumstances, having received the instructions from the person as before, he might then command the person to get into the car and show him the way. This behaviour could have led to some very different consequences. Home-produced videos of this type might therefore be used to encourage philosophical enquiry that could be potentially life-saving.

Lastly, pictures and photographs are a useful resource to foster debate in the classroom. The fact that they are non-verbal might be of importance to the child with either limited receptive language skills or a poor attention span. Pupils can be persuaded to comment on the pictorial representations at a number of levels, ranging from single word responses, or pointing, to full verbal explanations. Published material can be used, or individuals might construct their own book for discussion, using favourite magazine cuttings and personal photographs.

As Turk and Brown (1992) indicate, people with learning disabilities are vulnerable and so I would argue that it is essential that they are educated in a way that will help them cope in a world that will not always be kind to them. As educationalists, we need to ensure that their contribution to the community is not tokenistic, but of real value to them and to those they wish to represent. As the British Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, points out (1998, p.2): 'The education of children with special needs is a key challenge for a nation. It is vital to the creation of a fully inclusive society, a society in which all members see themselves as valued for the contribution they make. We owe all children, whatever their particular needs and circumstances, the opportunity to develop to their full potential, to contribute economically and to play a full part as active citizens'. There are a variety of ways in which the person with learning disabilities can be taught the skills of reasoning and argument, all of which can be differentiated to meet individual needs, age and ability levels. Teaching critical thinking skills to pupils with special educational needs is not an indulgence, but a necessity if they are to become active citizens within our society.

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