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## Labour Policy for Lower Achievers, Special Needs and Disabilities

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**ABSTRACT** This article notes that the attempt to include all young people in education, an aim of Labour governments over the years, still relies on an expanded and expensive special educational needs 'industry'. How to include all lower attainers and those with disabilities in the education system and the economy is a political issue for a Labour government. A start should be made on changing a competitive, hierarchical system that relegates many working-class children to lower levels of education and enhances middle-class fears for their 'less able' children.

Education systems in developed countries expanded from the later nineteenth century, and from the mid twentieth there was a rapid expansion as groups previously excluded or given only minimal education were drawn into lengthened formal systems. Extended institutional arrangements with increased funding, and professional personnel employed in public and private capacities, now deal with large numbers of children and young people variously described as lower achievers, or having special educational needs (SEN), disabilities, learning difficulties, disaffection or disengagement. Characteristics of those drawn in at lower levels were that they were predominantly from lower social classes, with more males than females, and with an over-representation of racial and ethnic minorities. By the twenty-first century there was increasing concern from middle-class parents whose children, designated 'less able', were unable to progress in the competitive markets in schooling with their constantly raised 'standards'. This led to an increased demand for resources under an expanding variety of labels.

A majority of lower-attaining young people and those with disabilities are incorporated into mainstream schools and colleges. Others are in segregated or partially segregated facilities. An expanded and expensive 'SEN industry' (Tomlinson, 2012) now co-exists with what is termed 'inclusive education', which is served by an army of special educators of all kinds, including teaching

assistants, SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators), behavioural specialists, and psychological, medical, therapeutic and administrative personnel. Governments of all political persuasions have acquiesced in the expansion of this industry, conceding its importance in dealing with groups who, while being offered some education and training, may be surplus in 'knowledge economies' and/or in need of social control. Governments are, however, caught between the market consequences of offering more 'choice' to parents and also attempting to keep costs down.

The last Labour Government worried that under a 2001 Code of Practice some 900,000 children were identified as being at the School Action level (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DfCSF], 2010), a designation which gained additional funding, with numbers of children requiring expensive Statements of special educational needs rising. The Coalition Government noted that by 2011 claims for funds for special education had risen, and although nationally some 21% of young people were identified as 'having SEN' (3% with Statements) there was a wide variation between local authorities. This government promised a radically different system of identifying special needs. It proposed to abolish existing stages of support and 'perverse incentives to over-identify children as having SEN' (Department for Education [DfE], 2011, p. 9), replacing them with one school-based category and an Education, Health and Care Plan for those requiring statutory assessment. A third Code of Practice, 280 pages long and with many references to previous legislation, especially the 2014 Children and Families Act, took effect in September 2014.

Duties and responsibilities to identify children and young people for Plans are placed on local authorities, while funding is reduced. There is a requirement to work closely and harmoniously with a variety of partners to provide Joint Strategic Needs Assessments. Local authorities must publish Local Offers setting out what is available for 0-25 year-olds with SEN or disabilities, and young people and their parents must be consulted in assessment. Parents with a Plan have a right to request a Personal Budget which may include direct payments by which parents may 'purchase' services from public, private and charitable organisations. Personal Budgets are expected to help create a market in services (DfE, 2014, p. 49).

All this refers to around 3% of children and young people whose Statements of special need will be transferred to a Plan, and to future claims for Plans. The majority of schools with children regarded as having SEN or additional educational needs (AEN) will continue to receive their delegated budget from the local authority and be expected to deal with their lower achievers, and those with learning difficulties and troublesome behaviour. Familiar pressures on teachers will continue as they are urged to 'raise standards', and are thus made more likely to press for troubled and troubling children to be removed into behavioural and guidance units, pupil referral units, alternative provision, and permanent exclusion. Yet more 'reforms' to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) will create more failures at higher levels. Some schools will continue to find ways of not admitting children

with various special needs, while other schools will take the children and then be penalised for lower results in league tables. The numbers of private associations, institutes and certifying bodies will expand and many more professionals will earn a living dealing with difficult children either in special or in mainstream schools. More private and 'free' special schools will be set up.

What should a Labour government do in a situation where few politicians actually understand the chequered history and politics of dealing with those designated as having special educational needs and/or disabilities, or who in the current dispensation are likely to be lower achievers? These children too will need education, training and employment if social and economic order is to be maintained.

Firstly, such a government should realise that an increase in the recognition, administration, funding and educating of all young people regarded as lower achievers, or as having special needs and/or disabilities, or learning difficulties, or troublesome behaviour, is primarily a consequence of Labour ideals, expressed most eloquently by R.H Tawney in the 1920s. Tawney (1922) wrote: 'What wise parents would want for their children, a nation should want for all its children'. Additionally Labour needs to hold on to the notion that neither economic stability nor social justice is served by working-class and disadvantaged families being relegated to lower levels of education. Labour should recognise the disability movement's demand that all young people be included in school and society.

Secondly, Labour should realise that teacher education, reduced to 'training' by previous governments, really does need extending and reforming to allow all teachers to understand and take responsibility for the education of all children. All intending and serving teachers need an education in child development and in the conditions that impede learning. Organising the school system in a way that allows teachers to think that other professionals will deal with children who have learning problems and difficulties is more expensive than ensuring that all teachers accept responsibility for educating all children.

This leads to the third requirement, namely that Labour bravely takes on the consequences of the competitive marketisation of schooling. This has put parents in competition with each other to demand resources. Labour must support genuine comprehensive schools that include all children and young people. This should lead to another brave requirement: that the GCSE, a competitive public examination at age 16, be ended, and all young people be required to stay in education or training until age 18. This should remove an expensive examination and hopefully, the intense competition between schools for students who will enhance a school's league table position. At the very least, a Labour government should instantly remove the proposed 'reform' that GCSE should be measured in numbers 9-1 rather than current letters A\*-G. A majority of the children and young people referred to here would figure in the lower numbers!

Labour will have to address the problems that centre on how economies can employ all lower attainers and the 'special' with less paternalism and

denigration than at present, and provide the means of independent living for those unable to work. A constant focus on individual deficiencies and reducing funding is no substitute for building a society that really does care about all its children.

### References

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