# SUBJECT MATTERS

**Computers have two distinct roles to play within the school system. As well as the study of computer science itself, we can consider the computer as a teaching aid — especially where it is used as an interactive textbook. Many educational publishers are now producing software specifically designed to cover examination syllabuses.**

In 1980 the government of the United Kingdom launched a scheme designed to encourage computer literacy in both primary and secondary schools. Known as the Microcomputers in Education Project (MEP), it was set to run for six years with an overall budget of £21 million. It is perhaps unfair to divide this sum by 25,000 (the number of primary, middle and secondary schools in England alone), and thus assume even distribution of funds. The machine most strongly recommended was the BBC Microcomputer, which sells for £400. The second choice, Research Machines' 380Z, costs some five times as much. It is quite obvious that the budget for the project was hopelessly inadequate, and schools were forced back onto their own resources.

By 1983, midway through the scheme, the Minister for Information Technology was able to boast that all the secondary schools in the country (4,553 in England) had a computer, as did more than half the primary schools. However, much of the credit for this must go in fact to parents' associations, charitable trusts and not least the schoolchildren themselves, whose fund-raising efforts were considerable.

Rather than update the school curriculum and increase its relevance, the government initiative appears to have exacerbated existing problems. The need for expensive equipment has increased the frustration of teachers and pupils alike. There is now a keen awareness of the widening 'advantage gap' between children from comparatively wealthy backgrounds, who have more money to contribute to projects like this, and those from less well off families. Due to the small number of microcomputers available in any one school, the 'average' pupil is unlikely to have access to a machine for more than 15 minutes a week — which is hardly enough time to make a

**Starting Right**
Many home computer owners express their aspirations for their children's future, in the purchase of educational software. For young children there is a wealth of material available to start them off on the learning process, and for the student sitting GCE and CSE examinations a greater number of very specific curriculum-based revision packages for a variety of microcomputers



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