

**"My opinion of inclusion is that it doesn't work... It's a disaster building to a catastrophe. At one school we discovered Olivia was excluded during the Ofsted inspection. The next school became fixated on the fact that she didn't write."**

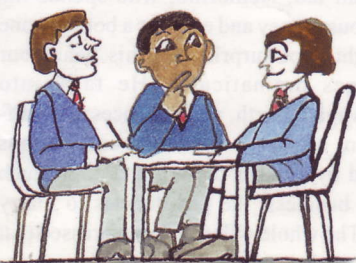
(Lady Liz Astor, mother of an autistic child, *The Times*, December 2001).



If only we could have a different kind of inclusion. If only full-size special schools (including dyslexia schools) could be built next door to selected mainstream schools so that special children could be included, each according to his needs, while the haven of their small, specialised classrooms, expert staff and adapted curriculum was there to return to at the appropriate times. If only the Government could stop thinking of children as a financial drain and start thinking of them as the only really important investment for this country's future.

#### Facts

- 1 in 5 adults read less well than an 11-year-old; 2 in 5 adults are not functionally numerate (Moser Report, 1999).
- 75% of our prison population have a reading age under 10 years. The majority of permanent expulsions are of pupils with a reading age under 10 years (HM Inspector David Moore, Nasen conference 1997).
- It costs £20,000 a year to educate a child in a special school or pupil referral unit as opposed to £5,000 a year to educate a child in mainstream: a quarter of the price (Educational Psychology Services).



# In the name of Inclusion

In the summer of 2000, after a decade of teaching in London mainstream schools, special schools and pupil referral units, I resigned from my post as special needs co-ordinator. A headteacher's decision to prevent 60 of my pupils being withdrawn to learn to read, on the grounds that it wasn't in the spirit of inclusion, left me with no choice but to leave. I am now a dyslexia specialist in an FE college and I look back on my days as a teacher with a

mixture of horror and thankfulness that they did me no permanent emotional damage.

Most people have no idea how bleak life is in state schools for the 50% of pupils who do not make it into the top sets. Literacy levels have fallen so badly that now over two-thirds of bottom-set pupils in London still have reading ages under 10 years by their GCSE year. The frustration of everyday failure for these pupils manifests itself in noise, fear and violence.





Far from addressing this problem, the government has made it worse: the Special Educational Needs and Disability legislation has already begun to speed children from special schools, including children with Down's Syndrome and autism, into bottom-set classrooms.

The very word inclusion, used in the context of education, is dishonest. High achievers are safely creamed off into top sets while a typical bottom-set has the world-weary atmosphere of a war zone: pupils either internalise the frustration of not being able to read their worksheets (a quiet boy I knew ate his) or there is uproar (I've seen a pupil bite mouthfuls out of his book and spit the contents out like confetti).

Break is also a time of fear for pupils, and violence takes up increasing amounts of teaching time, although teaching loads are heavier than ever. Here is an account of a typical lunch hour I spent as assistant year head in 1998. During those 60 minutes I was required to: negotiate with a boy who had stolen wire-cutters from his technology class and had been seen using them to cut through the school fence; investigate a game of touch football that had led to one boy being beaten up by eight others; find and deal with the boys behind two separate muggings of Y8 children, one in the local park and one in a nearby side-street, and deal with a tearful

Y8 boy who had caught the attention of some Y10 boys who had trodden him, his bag and its contents into the mud.

The first two incidents took up the lunch hour. Then, in order to deal with the mugging and the football incidents, I had to leave the children I was scheduled to teach with an assistant and interrupt other lessons to take statements; if I'd asked the pupils to see me after school their only response would have been surprised amusement.

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For years now local education authorities have been ordering mainstream teachers to teach permanently excluded pupils from neighbouring schools. My last, co-ed school teaches a boy excluded locally for rape. The steady stream of such pupils has become a torrent over the past two years as more pupil referral units have been replaced by cheap, in-school behaviour units run by bewildered teachers whose remit is to deliver the national curriculum to one room full of

angry, disturbed children from a range of age groups and abilities. The demand for the restricted number of places means they are soon returned to the hated bottom sets from whence they came and the cycle of disruptive behaviours begins again, but more desperately each time.

Beatings, extortion, muggings and defacement of each other's belongings are now such everyday occurrences that they no longer warrant permanent exclusion. The only consolation for teachers for the extended reign of terror these pupils have is that many choose to truant from school. It is good of Estelle Morris to promise to expel knife-carriers, but can she persuade the government to stop the relentless closure of pupil referral units? Without them, excluded pupils will join the queues for neighbouring schools, as they have for years, and languish at home watching x-rated videos while they wait.

As SENCo I was regularly presented with pupils whose stated aim was to be permanently excluded. Their attempts included: starting fights in the presence of inspectors, setting off fire alarms, setting off indoor fireworks, ringing the head to say there was a bomb, fusing lights in a corridor by thrusting a screwdriver into a socket, throwing a brick into the girls' enclosure (with girls there) and setting light to paint



while spraying it (again, indoors).

In my last school I taught more than 60 pupils whose reading age was five years lower than their chronological age. I had just been employed to run the Special Educational Needs Department by a head who was genuinely concerned about them. We were going to withdraw them from French for two terms, teaching them to read using a fast-track method that made use of the pupil's own voice on tape and enabled a teacher and an assistant to cope with ten pupils at a time.

The pupils threw themselves enthusiastically into their lessons which began soon after the autumn half-term. Most of them had a reputation for being disruptive but, in their reading lessons, they were co-operative and hard-working. Within weeks, over 50 of them brought in their parents for training in the method so that they could continue their work at home. For the first time in their lives they wanted to do homework. The educational psychologist wrote a paper on it.

In the spring term a new head took over. She forbade withdrawal of pupils from their lessons. It was against the spirit of inclusion, she said. All reading lessons were abolished. I am reliably informed that, to this day, none of those children have been given any alternative reading help. By abolishing their

reading classes and redeploying me as an English teacher, the head saved money but denied these pupils two term's specialist help (the minimum statutory requirement for them to reach Stage 4 of the Code of Practice which would have brought them nearer to a statement and additional funding).



The schools I have referred to are ordinary mainstream schools. All passed their last inspection and all will have reaped large (if temporary) financial rewards for opening their gates to the more severely affected pupils from special schools. These pupils will have joined classes of 30, although they are used to classes of 12.

David Blunkett was a special school pupil and yet his rhetoric is responsible for most of the rose-tinted takes on inclusion. He believes he would not have needed to attend evening classes if he had been educated in a

mainstream school. Presumably he thinks that, today, he would have been placed in a top set. If so, he has less understanding of how schools manage money than most teachers. Blunkett's visual impairment would have brought his school enough money to buy him a full-time assistant. A budget-conscious school is duty-bound to share an assistant with those pupils who cannot read and need their worksheets read to them. This would mean putting Blunkett and his assistant in the same classroom as theirs: a bottom set.

Admittedly, it has always been expensive to keep special schools and pupil referral units open; their closure represents a significant saving for education authorities. But how fair is this on the child? And how fair is it to include 30 children with such impossibly varied needs in one bottom-set classroom? Will the money saved from closing special schools and pupil referral units be spent on any real improvements for children with special needs, or go to funding more 'good ideas' dreamed up by the armchair strategists (*Special Children*, Feb. 02).

**Esther de Burgh-Thomas has written a similar article to this for *The Sunday Times*, 5 August 2001.**

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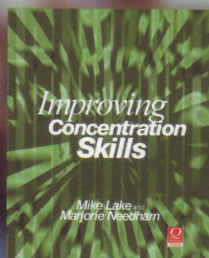
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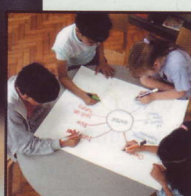
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