

“Special Needs” – Overused Term!

By labelling so many children as 'special needs',
we betray those who really do need help ([LINK](#))

By [Christopher Stevens](#) Daily Mail, UK, May 25, 2012|

Yesterday’s shocking news that 21 per cent of British children have been labelled with ‘Special Educational Needs’ disguises the real problem.

In truth, too many are wrongly diagnosed while those most deserving of help often find it hard to get proper support.

With such a broad category of ‘special educational needs’, headteachers are able to mask failings in their own classrooms and to hide the gaping cracks in the education system.

And what failings! According to the Ofsted ([LINK](#)) inspectors’ report that triggered the Government’s decision to order the biggest shake-up in the system for 30 years, special needs pupils are much more likely to be absent from school, are at greater risk of exclusion and face a much bleaker future than their peers.

After they are 16, young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are among the least likely to stay in education, find employment or get training.

As the parent of a severely autistic son, I am well aware that this is a betrayal, both of the many children who are mislabelled ‘special needs’ and of the much smaller percentage who really do have special needs and their families, who require the most intense support.

Special Educational Needs (SEN) is a vacuous piece of jargon.

Recent figures have shown that almost half of those classed as ‘special needs’ have ‘moderate learning difficulties’ or a behaviour problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Only about eight per cent have serious medical conditions such as autism or hearing and sight difficulties.

Many parents of ‘special needs’ children know what often happens when they first go to school. Those who can’t keep pace are left with a colouring book and a packet of crayons while the rest of the class are taught to read and do sums. And if they can’t keep up aged six, they are certain to be far behind at 14.

For the child, a lifelong problem looms. As for the teachers, labelling troublesome children ‘SEN’ might even be advantageous: such pupils can handily be omitted from league tables, making overall exam results seem more impressive than they actually are.

Cynicism

Also, an army of ‘special needs’ counsellors has been spawned with schools able to swell their budgets if they have more pupils who are diagnosed as ‘special’.

For a fifth of the country’s children — a total of 1.7 million — to be categorised as SEN

is iniquitous. It mocks every part of the phrase ‘Special Educational Needs’. How can their individual needs be met, in that immense melting pot?

How dare schools call it educational, when for so many it’s a dumping ground? And what bitter cynicism to say they are special, when that simply means ‘expendable’. The reforms announced yesterday by Children’s Minister Sarah Teather could, at last, change all that.

As well as tighter rules on which children can be identified as having SEN, parents should find it easier to get help for their children.

These changes could mean teachers will be more able to treat every pupil as an individual. As many as 450,000 children will be taken off the SEN register.

The Ofsted report found that many of the children identified as having Special Educational Needs ‘were underachieving sometimes simply because the school’s mainstream teaching provision was not good enough, and expectations of the pupils were too low’.

Inspectors observed that some schools ‘identified pupils as having special educational needs when, in fact, their needs were no different from those of most other pupils’.

What is most worrying is that, as the ‘SEN’ category fills up, the number of children identified as having the most profound needs has fallen by ten per cent in the past decade.

It is appalling, for instance, that many parents of such severely ill children have to fight for up to three years to obtain an autism diagnosis for their child — a truly horrific fact revealed this week by a survey for the National Autistic Society.

I know the agony of fighting for years to get such a diagnosis. For such children, there must be no upper limit on the amount of intensive care available to them. At the extreme end of the spectrum, autism prevents a child from communicating.

They can't process information, they can't express their needs and fears, they can't even tell what's going to happen next. As a result, they rely desperately on routine.

That is utterly different from a learning difficulty — having trouble with reading, for instance, or needing to have lessons repeated.

Children who are slow learners are the last kind of pupils who should be lumped in with children who have severe educational needs.

Cruel

Such a policy is worse than misguided — it's cruel.

Instead of assuming that all pupils with learning difficulties are the same, it is vital that we seek out their differences and treat them all accordingly.

Instead of lumping them all together and dropping our expectations for a fifth of all children, we ought to be relishing the challenge and the opportunity they present.

In far too many cases, the pupils with SEN labels are simply non-conformists — the day-dreamers and the eccentrics, the innovative and the bloody-minded.

The ones who, if they survive their schooldays, will go on to be creative and successful members of society. This country was built by them.

Take, for example, Winston Churchill — so dyslexic that, in one school entrance test, he was only able to write his name on the top of the paper.

He required three attempts to pass the exam for the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.

Similarly, Agatha Christie's dyslexia was so pervasive that she gave up on punctuation altogether, leaving her editor to deal with the petty details of full-stops and commas. She became the best-selling novelist of the 20th century — only the Bible sold in greater numbers.

These famous names are not exceptions. A recent survey found that successful entrepreneurs were four times more likely to be dyslexic than the average office worker.

They were also more likely to have endured a tough childhood, come from a poor background or be children of immigrants.

In other words, the very characteristics that can underpin success have been crassly equated with under-achievement and failure

Scandalously, the Special Educational Needs system has been used as an excuse for poor teaching and low expectations.

It was telling that the Ofsted inspectors concluded that as many as half of all pupils identified as having special educational needs would not have been 'if schools focused on improving teaching and learning for all, with individual goals for improvement'.

The truth is that one powerful way of raising teaching standards would be to be as imaginative with mainstream lessons as teachers have to be at special needs schools.

When children can't talk, it takes a teacher of real talent to get the message across - and yet they succeed.

The method that opened the door for our son, David, was music therapy.

Although he cannot process language, his musical intelligence is undiminished.

He has perfect pitch, and an unfailing memory for a tune.

Powerful

By teaching him to associate songs with certain moods, one brilliant teacher unlocked a doorway to the world for David.

When he was hungry, he crooned one tune; when he wanted to go to the shops, he sang another. We quickly discovered we could tell him it was bath-time, or the school bus had arrived, or a hundred other things, by linking tunes to events.

And by copying the sound of words in the songs, David even learned how to speak. Quite literally, he was using a different part of his brain.

Such a powerful technique ought to be available to every student, of any ability — whether they're struggling with basic maths or cramming for Oxbridge.

The tragedy is, though, the educational establishment has blighted the chances of a generation of children with learning difficulties by treating them all the same, and shamelessly pandering to a culture of low expectations.

LISA Comment: Those with 'Special Needs' is certainly a very broad term throughout Australia. Clearly, we need to be alert to these UK findings in all sectors, especially the forthcoming NDIS service assessments.

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