

All Children Can Learn

Teachers with high levels of 'special needs' students should change their teaching approach.

By Minette Marrin

What proportion of primary school children would you expect to have special educational needs, as reasonably understood? I mean children who, for some special reason, cannot cope with ordinary classes in the ordinary way and find it significantly harder to learn than their peers. Common sense suggests that, across the population, such children would be fairly rare.

For instance, across the population, you would expect to find only about .33 percent of children between five and fourteen with a mental handicap or intellectual disability, according to figures from the Office of Populations, Censuses and Surveys. Only two to four percent of people suffer from dyslexia, as strictly defined, according to the Dyslexia Institute. Less than .01 percent of people suffer from autism. Attention deficit disorder is notoriously difficult to define, but it probably does not affect more than five percent of children, if as many. Then there are serious psychological problems, visual handicaps and disabling medical problems. All of these disabilities add up, but to what?

It is astonishing to discover that there are many primary schools across the country where 40 percent of the children are registered as having special educational needs. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, for instance, there are only six schools that have fewer than 20 percent of children registered with special needs. Twenty-four schools have more than 20 percent of children with special needs, 18 schools have 30 percent or more, seven have well over 40 percent, and one has 55 percent. Tower Hamlets is not alone in having these astonishing proportions of special needs children. Britain lists far more than other European countries, as the Department for Educational and Science admits. Clearly, in this country, all too many teachers think that special educational needs are not special at all, but more or less normal.

One might argue, and people do, that Tower Hamlets has particular problems — poverty, overcrowding, and children who do not speak English as a first language. However, the Government's special needs code of practice specifically says that a child must not be regarded as having a learning difficulty solely because the language of his home is different from the language in which he will be taught.

And there is no reason to suppose that Tower Hamlets children have more disabilities than other children, or that special needs are genuinely so common. Ruth Miskin is the head teacher of the Kobi Nazrul school in Tower Hamlets, and she apparently doesn't believe it either. Most untypically, she has registered only five pupils (three percent of her school) as having special needs. Yet her children are not selected in any way. They come from exactly the same catchment area as the Tower Hamlets schools that have registered 30 to 40 percent of their children. There is no special selection.

Nearly 80 percent of the children at Kobi Nazrul are Bangladeshi; some children arrive at school not speaking any English. In 1997, 63 percent of the pupils qualified for free school meals, a clear indication of poverty. The average class size is 27.5. Seventy-five percent of the children in the local ward live in overcrowded households, according to the latest census.

Yet these children have consistently done extremely well; they scored above the national average in reading, writing and maths in the recent government tests. They scored easily the highest in Tower Hamlets in reading tests and got an excellent report from the inspectors. All the seven-year-olds at Kobi Nazrul, without exception, can read.

Something stands out a mile here: a negligible rate of special needs seems to go with a very high rate of reading success. That is because Ruth Miskin

and her staff are passionately interested in literacy. They believe that every healthy child can learn to read — and particularly in a rigorous system of phonics. Properly taught, a comprehensive phonics system enables children to learn very fast, with great confidence. This means they avoid the sense of failure and frustration of poor readers, and the disruptive behaviour that goes with it, which leads to special needs registration.

Effectively, phonics keeps children off the special needs register. On closer inspection, it emerges that an enormous proportion of special needs children, perhaps as large as three quarters, are labelled that way simply because they cannot read, or cannot learn to read. That is not because something is wrong with them. It is because there is something wrong with the way they're taught.

The perversity of this is hard to believe, but perverse it is. Above all, there is a perverse incentive to register lots of children as having special educational needs, inasmuch as it provides an excuse in advance for any failure. It must be tempting to attach the failure to the child, rather than to the teacher or the school or the teaching method. The absurdity is that, being registered with special needs does not mean that the child will get any special attention, other than meetings with parents and special needs coordinators.

Very often it is not much more than a label of failure and a list of unambitious targets; real personal help is rarely forthcoming. Instead, a good start would be to assume that where a child cannot learn to read, it is probably the teacher who has a special need — a difficulty with understanding the value of phonics and a slowness to understand that almost every child can learn to read.

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